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Platonist Ideas in the New Testament

This chapter sketches a short outline of how some important statements in the New Testament align with one of the central ideas about the nature of reality found in Plato's dialogues. In order to do this I will be "proof texting" both the New Testament and Plato. Whilst I hope this chapter will prove to be a useful contribution to the argument of this book, I am very aware that this exercise has some very clear limits and is fraught with perils.

The first reason why proof texting is of limited value here is that Christian Platonism is not actually closely tied to Plato's texts. The nature of the bond between Christian Platonism and Plato's dialogues is far deeper than textual alignment, and far freer than any tight doctrinal coherence between the dialogues and the New Testament. Indeed, getting to the underlying metaphysical commonalities that connect Plato to the New Testament worldview is what the following chapter is centrally interested in. Even so, there are some obvious textual alignments that are readily apparent, so we will tentatively explore one of them in this chapter.¹

Secondly, when comparing texts from different milieus that have both been translated and have both undergone long and separate processes of historical transmission, there is no end to how complex and speculative unpacking the simplest resemblance can get if you try and textually dig down to the supposedly original meanings. Thus, for the

1. There are also, of course, some obvious textual, theological, cultural, socio-sexual, and religious dissonances between Plato's dialogues and the New Testament. We shall not explore these dissonances here, but when we come to distinguishing between Christian Platonism and other forms of Platonism in the ancient world, the manner in which Christian Platonism does *not* align with certain features of the dialogues will be noted carefully.

sake of brevity and with a somewhat ironic nod towards Luther, I am going to proceed by assuming that there is at least an approximate and reasonable “plain meaning” that can be appropriated in both Scripture and Plato.² Yet an approximate and reasonable meaning is as far as I can go.

For thirdly, and most seriously, I am aware that proof texting the Bible to show a tight conceptual point is far more subject to distortion than proof texting Plato’s dialogues to unveil a contained doctrine of Forms (as deeply problematic as *that* is). For the whole council of Scripture is remarkably rich in its God-breathed depth. The Christian doctrine that the canonical Scriptures are inspired (which I accept) means that the living, divine breath of the Scriptures—the very Spirit of God—cannot, finally, be tightly captured in tidy conceptual formulations. In this sense Scripture and the core doctrines of the church are always prior to, and always exceed, our systematic theologies.³ This is not to say that clear truths cannot be drawn from the Scripture,⁴ nor is it to suggest that every

2. I say “ironic” here because interpretation is indeed a deep process, and it is a process often aided by a careful study of contexts and transmissions. Even so, and with Luther, but because of a theology of Christ as Logos, I do think that meanings are not endlessly looped in closed hermeneutic circles. If one takes reasonable care then I think it is not too problematic to discover a reasonably clear obvious meaning in most texts we read, including the Bible and Plato’s dialogues. The risk for the modern textual sciences of literary criticism and for certain irrealist flavors of postmodern sophistry is to find things so interpretively complex as to lose any clear meaning, and to make such extensive speculative projections from the slimmest of historical and stylistic indications as to end up with an interpretation that is completely defined by the lens of the interpreter. In modern literary scholarship, this lens also often assumes that there is no God-breathed process in any text or cultural production, that meaning *is* entirely enclosed in hermeneutic circles, and that one must assume a secular and functionally materialist metaphysics if one is to gain a “realistic” understanding of the meanings and modes of production and transmission of any text. I do not know of any compelling reason to take any of those interpretive assumptions as valid.

3. See Hamann’s “Biblical Reflections” in Smith, *J.G. Hamann*, 117–38. See De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 227–28.

4. I recall tutoring an undergraduate theology class in a subject titled “What Christians Believe.” This particular week we were reading a complex display of theological brilliance that endeavored to show us that the doctrine of the Trinity was all entirely rational. The previous week we had been looking at Jesus’ teaching on loving one’s neighbor. In comparison with our reading in high-powered theology, it was crystal clear what Jesus actually wants us to do in following him. In a flash of inspiration one of my students observed that “Christian teaching is very hard to do but easy to understand, whereas Christian theology is easy to do (anyone can sit down and crunch ideas) but very hard to understand.”

age does not need its systematic theologians. Yet complex and contextually provisional interpretive maneuvers are always required for the historically situated theologian to do her job well. So, with considerable trepidation, and without getting engaged in the many points of interpretive contention that could be brought up, let us briefly look at a few New Testament texts in order to show their broad sympathies with Plato.

The Apostle Paul on Seeing Reality through a Glass Darkly

In 1 Corinthians 13, the great love chapter of the New Testament, Paul explains that unlike knowledge, love is perfect.⁵ Paul explains that “Love never ends . . . our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes the imperfect will pass away” (1 Cor 13:8–10).⁶ The implication is that if we embrace the way of love now we participate in some partial manner in the abiding perfection of the Divine Love that has always fully understood us. Further, we have this hope that one day we too will be perfected in that Divine Love. The future horizon of perfection that Paul is here directing us to is what New Testament scholars call eschatological.⁷ That is, the Christian hopes for the end of the present age and for the arrival of a radically different world order to be established by the return of Christ at some unknown time in the future.

5. Paul uses the word *teleion* in 1 Cor 13:10 to express the perfection of love. *Telos* in Greek means completion, end, purpose. Whether Paul’s usage bears more resemblance to Aristotle’s understanding of teleology or to Plato’s understanding of teleology is a point worth considering. This cannot be explored here, but for historical and textual reasons I go with Plato here, as to him *telos* reflects cosmic order as governed by the Mind of God, in contrast to what he reads as the more or less mindless contingencies of merely physical causation. In Paul, along Platonist teleological lines, the perfection of love is that it realizes the eternal intentions of God for the cosmos in contrast to the knowledge that operates within the realm of mere contingency and flux, the realm that cannot reach such perfection, the realm of that which is transient and passing away.

6. All biblical quotes in this chapter are from the RSV unless indicated otherwise. Note here the priority of the ontological over the epistemological. This is a feature of the ancient worldview in general and of the New Testament and Platonist thinking in particular. This is strongly in contrast with the modern priority of epistemology over ontology, often to such a degree that metaphysics is replaced by epistemology.

7. The Greek word “*eschaton*” means “last,” as used in John 6:44 where Jesus explains that he will raise up those whom the Father has drawn to him on “the last day.” So the *eschaton* is the conclusion of this age and the beginning of a new age of eternal life to come, that very age Paul anticipates in 1 Cor 13:10.

There is a clear contrast here between the pre-eschaton and imperfect cosmic age in which we presently live (that is passing away), and the future arrival of an already spiritually abiding perfection, ushering in a new cosmic order of reality that will not pass away. Before the eschaton, then, two orders of reality are in current operation: the present, fallen, and passing age operating at one level, and the eternal, abiding, and heavenly reality of God operating at another level. These two orders are very different in kind, yet our transient and imperfect age is deeply dependent on eternal reality for its very existence and for the coherent harmonies and inherent meanings of its created nature. Indeed, these two orders are only apparently separated by the temporal sequence that distinguishes the present from the future as viewed from within the perspective of time. Notice how Paul describes the relationship between that which is temporal within the present age and that which is abiding in 2 Corinthians 4:18: “We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” As we see in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, Paul associates our mortal life with the realm that is seen, transient, and imperfect, and our future life, after we have physically died, with the realm that is unseen, perfect, and eternal. Even so the relationship between the temporal and the eternal is not one that is contained within temporality itself: to the contrary, time is enfolded within eternity.

Significantly, the Hebraic eschatological perspective of the New Testament does not denigrate time, even while it does find the transience that is now integral with fallen nature to be a corrupted feature of the cosmos. Time, as seen in the days of creation, is good, and on the seventh day—the Hebraic culmination of creation—time becomes the most holy sacrament of the eternal Shalom of God.⁸ In the narrative opening Genesis, the original creation is without death such that the disintegrative chaos of transience is inserted into time at the catastrophe of the Edenic fall. Thus, the eschatological Day of the Lord in the New Testament is not the abolition of time, but it does entail the redemption of time itself such that death with its sorrow and transience is removed from the redeemed created order (Rev 21:4). The New Testament vision of the final redemption of all things does indeed entail the annihilation of transience, but it does not entail our translation into a-temporal eternity.

8. See Heschel, *The Sabbath*. See also Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*.

The passage in 1 Corinthians 13 that I want us to zone in on is verse 12: “For now we see in a mirror darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.” The *image* here is that we only see the coming eschatological truth of things—which is the sacrament of the real and eternal truth—indirectly in the mirror of immediate experience. By fixing our inner gaze on those eternal truths that are darkly indicated by the mirror of our tangible experience, we walk by faith, in the way of love, within this present and passing age.⁹ The kingdom of heaven in its cosmos-redeeming totality is not yet fully visible and has not yet fully arrived. However, being a function of the eternal perfection and unlimited goodness and power of God Himself, this unseen yet-to-be-revealed truth is actually incomparably *more* real than the realm of immediate experience, which is transient and passing away. Study 1 Corinthians 13, study 2 Corinthians chapters 4 and 5, examine Colossians 1:15–20 and Ephesians 6:10–12 and you will see that I am not reading anything into Paul that he does not actually say or imply. Paul really does think that there is a spiritual dimension to reality that is more real than the tangible realm manifest to our material and transient bodies. This eternal spiritual reality is primary and the transience of the present, mortal, and suffering¹⁰ order of the immediately experienced cosmos is a derivative and fallen product of that primary reality.

The relationship between the visible transient world and invisible eternal truth that Paul maintains here is common to all the New Testament writings and is not just a distinctive feature of Pauline literature. Hebrews 11:2, echoing the prologue to John’s Gospel, notes that “the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.” Jesus, talking to Nicodemus explains that “no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again . . . [because] flesh gives birth to flesh but spirit gives birth to spirit.” (John 3:3, 6, emphasis added, NIV.) Jesus uses parables because he wants us to see past the tangible and transient surface of things and to the spiritual and eternal truth that is partially embodied in material things. Jesus continuously challenges one and all to have eyes to see (Matt 13:15; Mark 8:18; John 9:39) and ears to hear (Matt 11:15; Mark 4:9; Luke 8:8) so that we might discern what he is really saying and understand the true meaning of what

9. Note 2 Cor 5:7, the walk of faith is not the walk of sight.

10. Rom 8:18–25.

we see him do. Clearly what Jesus means by this is that our vision of the glory of the Lord and our comprehension of the Word of God is manifest *through* what we see and hear, but only to those who are spiritually open to the ultimate truth, which cannot be contained within the immediate realm of direct tangibility. The eyes that see only the mirror of transient nature, the ears that hear only audible sounds, these are spiritually undiscerning eyes and ears that block the revelation of God from entering the inner spiritual sanctum of their being and filling them with the very life and truth of God. (See 1 Cor 2:14–16; Rom 1:18–23.)

For example, in John 9 Jesus heals a man born blind in order to manifest the abundant love and the healing grace of God, but all the religious authorities “see” is that Jesus breaks the Sabbath when he performs this miraculous work. Jesus notes, “For judgment I came into the world that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (John 9:39). We see here that the realm of transient tangible experience functions as a dark mirror through which the spiritually discerning eye can gain a glimpse of eternal and ultimate truths. Yet equally, the one to whom the Word of God comes, or to whom the glory of the Lord has been made momentarily visible, can refuse to see what the mirror of our tangible experience really indicates. We can choose to only see the reflecting surface itself or we can read the meanings found on the apparent surface of things wrongly. Particularly in John’s Gospel we notice that time and again the pattern of Christ’s preaching is that the word of God is spoken into someone’s life, and this word then becomes healing, spiritual transformation, and revelation to those who respond with belief, but judgment to those who respond with unbelief. The world of our tangible experience is such that it allows for both possibilities such that spiritual dynamics are the final matter concerning what people see rather than simply that which is immediately and demonstrably there. This is because to the New Testament outlook on reality, the realm of immediate tangibility is never just nature in the modern sense, it is always nature as reflective of a larger, more solid, more real spiritual realm. This in no way denigrates the material realm—indeed, the incarnation is the strongest affirmation of the goodness of temporal materiality it is possible to think of—yet there is a clear dependence of what is visible and temporal on that which is invisible and abiding.

The prologue to John’s Gospel reverberates on this point deeply; the eternal Word of the Unseen God is the most fundamental creative and sustaining origin of all that exists—be those existing powers and beings

visible or invisible. Here the visible world, which is physical and temporal, exists in a derivative relationship to the invisible world, which is spiritual and eternal. The unseen is more real than the seen.

In sum, the New Testament maintains that the Word of God is the non-material source of all that is tangible in the cosmos, that eternal realities are primary and material realities are derived from and dependent on primary reality for their existence, and that the realm of immediate tangibility is not the ultimate realm of reality. Thus, if we are to “see” reality as it really is, we cannot see it with our physical eyes. We must see it by a process of spiritual discernment which is a function of our receptivity to divine illumination.¹¹

Now let us turn to Plato. And recall, Plato writes four centuries before Paul.

Plato on Seeing Reality through a Glass Dimly

The *Phaedrus* is a dialogue of Plato’s which—in some regards like 1 Corinthians 13—is concerned with love¹² and with the unseen truth that is more basic than the appearances that are manifest to us by our sensory

11. Note the recurring theme of divine light and divine illumination particularly in Johannine literature; e.g., John 1:9 “[Via the incarnation] the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.”

12. Paul is explicitly concerned with *agape*—charity, selfless giving love—whereas in the *Phaedrus* Plato seeks to understand *eros*. *Eros* is sexual and desiring love, which, in the context of classical Athens, is typically homoerotic and pederastic. However, things are more complex than the jarring polarities that seem apparent between Plato’s *eros* and Paul’s *agape* that one first encounters when reading the *Phaedrus* if, like myself, you have a conservative Judeo-Christian understanding of sacramentally appropriate sexual relations. The kind of desiring love Plato thinks most fitting to the one who is interested in *eros* is to desire the highest things. Socrates as exemplifying this higher love is completely un-interested in physical eroticism, which is treated by Socrates as an insubstantial shadow of high *eros*. The potential to harmonize features of Plato’s teaching on *eros*—where the highest human desires are always for the divine realities and for the Good Itself (God)—with the New Testament understanding of *agape* are implied, for example, in Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. Note also, Catherine Osborne’s text on Plato’s *Symposium*, titled *Eros Unveiled; Plato and the God of Love*. This is a must read for anyone seeking to understand the subtle and insightful nuances of Plato’s explorations of *eros*. Overall, Plato profoundly appreciates the spiritual horizon to human sexuality such that any merely sensual eroticism is essentially unable to satisfy that which drives erotic desire and thus becomes sordid by stimulating ever more unsatisfiable need the more mere sensual desire is indulged. In our day of explicitly sensualized and relentless hyper-erotic stimulation, Plato’s insights into *eros* could arguably do us a lot of good.

appreciation of the world. In the central poetic image of this dialogue Plato depicts the soul as a charioteer driving two winged horses.¹³ Part of our nature—a noble winged horse—desires the high and glorious eternal realities it remembers from before it was embodied. The other part of our nature—an ill-bred winged horse—is not easily managed by the soul and in this mortal life it only desires shameless satisfactions for material needs and pleasures. Due to the combination of noble and base motivational powers the soul must master, the soul has quite a job in seeking to steer the chariot of his life in a manner that is worthy of an undying spiritual being. Even so, the soul will be judged after its mortal passage and if it has allowed its ignoble motive powers to over-ride its noble powers, or if it has never truly known the noble in its pre-born flight, then the passage of the soul within mortal embodiment will be a degrading voyage of spiritual poverty and that soul will be punished accordingly.

Bearing in mind Paul's description of us apprehending the true nature of reality through a dim mirror, note the below passage from *Phaedrus* 250b. Interestingly, whilst true reality is beyond the temporal field of transience for both Plato and Paul, in Paul there is a future realization for the eternal reality to be actively anticipated within time, whereas in Plato there is a pre-born vision of divine reality to be recalled and responded to in the here and now:

all [embodied] souls do not easily recall the things of the other world . . . they may have lost the memory of the holy things they once saw. . . . For there is [comparatively] no light of justice or temperance or any of the higher ideas which are precious to souls in the earthly copies of them: they are seen through a glass dimly; and there are few who going to the images, behold in them the realities, and these only with difficulty.¹⁴

I have used Benjamin Jowett's translation here because he used the phrase "through a glass dimly" which has obvious literary allusions to 1 Corinthians 13:12. But it is not the case that Paul is here quoting Plato.¹⁵ Even so, Jowett is not at all mistaken to use a turn of phrase similar to that used by the King James Bible in translating very much the same idea we

13. *Phaedrus* 246a–250c.

14. As translated by Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1, 456.

15. You can find the Greek original of the *Phaedrus* in volume 1 of Plato's dialogues in the Loeb Classical Library. In the Loeb's English translation by Harold Fowler, what Jowett renders as "through a glass dimly" is rendered by Fowler much more literally as "through the darkling organs of sense."

find here in Plato. For in Plato's analogy of the divided line (*The Republic* 509d–511e) the transient tangible world is seen as a dim reflection of eternal spiritual truths, and these higher truths cannot be apprehended directly by any tangible medium *because* these higher truths are *not* transient but are eternal. So the lower participates in the higher, but no knowledge of the higher reality underpinning all immediate perception can be had in the terms of our supposed knowledge of the transient realm of immediate sensation.

Plato and Paul use different images and different turns of phrase to say much the same thing about the spiritual nature of ultimate reality and the fragile and derivative nature of tangible reality. In this Paul is not plagiarizing Plato, rather this illustrates the fascinating fact that both Plato and Paul share the same basic outlook on the nature of reality. Walter Wink gives us a very helpful outline of what he calls “the ancient worldview”¹⁶ that is, I think, common to both Plato and Paul. Wink explains that the dominant, assumed metaphysical worldview of ancient times finds the immediate realm of tangible perception to be intimately entwined with the spiritual realities in which reality itself is grounded. So the tangible realm is seen as a partial reflection of the spiritual realm and hence all physical things are never simply physical, but are incomplete and passing functions of spiritual powers, intelligences, ideas, values, meanings, and authorities, which are the real source of the dynamics of our immediately perceive reality contexts. Significantly, this does not entail a dualism between the physical and the spiritual, for there is no possibility here of the physical being in any way viable without its dependent relation to the spiritual.¹⁷ To the ancient worldview, the material could not be comprehensible, ordered, or meaningful were it not for its participation in the spiritual. Plato is probably the greatest thinker

16. Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 3–10.

17. Note, Wink defines “the ancient worldview” as one where the physical is entirely integral with the spiritual. This is not the only spiritually orientated worldview of ancient and other times, thus Wink distinguishes “the spiritualistic worldview” from the “ancient world view.” The spiritualistic worldview sees spiritual reality as the only reality such that matter is either an illusion or inherently bad (opposed to and corrupting of spirit). Whilst Gnosticism and some forms of Neoplatonism certainly did embrace such an outlook, the outlook of Plato's dialogues to embodiment is far more subtle than any gnostic polarity between body and spirit can justly appropriate. Significantly, the New Testament outlook upholds the goodness of the body and of material creation, and thus sits within an ancient worldview rather than a spiritualistic worldview. Clearly, orthodox Christian Platonism also embraces this integrative understanding of the spiritual and the material.

of antiquity who most fully articulates this ancient spiritually dependent worldview, and he thinks its implications through very deeply. So the idea in 1 Corinthians 13 that eternal and unseen realities are more real than our knowledge of tangible things is not firstly a Platonist stance, yet it is a stance that both Plato and the New Testament accept.¹⁸

Moral Realism

Very briefly, another common outlook assumed by both Plato and the New Testament is that moral truths have a divine source. This stance maintains that even though normative customs and conventions vary with time, place, and culture, yet the source of what makes one act right and another act wrong is not ultimately culturally relative, but is derived from what C. S. Lewis calls “objective value.”¹⁹ As discussed in chapter 2 of this book, we saw that the *Republic* entirely rejects the idea that morality is simply a product of customs concerning which there can be no truth or error. In the metaphor of the sun (*Republic* 508a–509b) Plato draws a parable between eternal Goodness and the physical sun, for the sun is the tangible reflection of the Divine fount of all life and reality in our immediately sensed experience just as Goodness is the source of all life, being, and intelligibility in reality. To Plato morality is seen as of divine origin and of directly reflecting the divine nature. To the writers of the New Testament, the Law of God—which includes a clear moral code—is given by God, and as such this Law has great glory, and reflects the nature of God. So the mode by which what philosophers call “moral realism” (belief that moral truths are truths about reality, not simply socially constructed norms) comes to Plato and to the New Testament in different modes, and yet again, clearly both Plato and the New Testament are singing from the same song sheet concerning the grounding of morality

18. The Greek word for faith has—in general—a very different technical meaning in Plato than it has in the New Testament. In classical Platonist epistemology faith is a very low form of knowledge, tied to the realm of tangible reflections, and not a real knowledge of eternal truths. Even so, there is a lot more in common between the New Testament understanding of faith and the Platonist understanding of high knowledge than this terminological opposition would superficially indicate. Very briefly stated, the manner in which things not seen are considered to be *more real* than things immediately seen is common to both the New Testament outlook on faith and to the Platonist notion of high knowledge. Where they differ, however, is that history embedded in tangible reality is the chosen medium of divine revelation in Christianity and such a medium is somewhat disdained in high Platonist epistemology as inherently inadequate to the task of revealing eternal truths.

19. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 11.

in God. Plato and Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament writers all share the same sort of spiritually dependent and divinely given outlook on morality. Here the existence of eternal moral realities are more basic to reality than are the transient attempts to express those truths that different types of cultural norms produce.

Worldview Dissonance

It is worth considering how easy it is for modern readers of the New Testament to misread or simply miss the assumed metaphysics of the New Testament. Our modern worldview typically assumes that the physical cosmos is a self-contained and entirely material reality, sealed off from the discretely supernatural realm of the spiritual.²⁰ Functionally, within modernity, there is no practical difference between the assumed realisms of a materialist non-Christian and a “supernaturalist” Christian—to both the here-and-now world operates within an entirely natural, entirely non-spiritual realm as known by objective science. In contrast, Jesus, Paul, John, and Plato all consider the material world to be fundamentally dependent on eternal meaning (Logos) and value (the Goodness of God); for them it is simply inconceivable to consider it as a discretely and self-contained material reality.²¹ To Plato, the realm of tangible appearance would simply not be sensible or comprehensible were it not for eternal forms being transiently expressed in space and time. Further, to Plato, if we did not have minds wrought and formed of spiritual reality we would not be able to comprehend the ever-present traces of eternal Reason as expressed partially within time. To Plato

20. Wink finds two metaphysical outlooks to be at home within modernity. There is what he calls the materialistic worldview where the spiritual is considered non-existent, but there is also an outlook that Wink calls the theological worldview. This theological worldview maintains that there is a supernatural realm fully independent of the natural realm. According to Wink “Christian theologians . . . acknowledging that this supernatural realm could not be known by the senses . . . conceded earthly reality to modern science and preserved a privileged ‘spiritual’ realm immune to confirmation or refutation—at the cost of an integral view of reality and the simultaneity of heavenly and earthly aspects of existence” (Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 5). Wink’s book is fascinating in part because he sees the connections between our modern metaphysical and cosmological assumptions (which, by the way, are radically incompatible with biblical metaphysical and cosmological assumptions) and our operational assumptions about political power and day-to-day realism.

21. Interestingly, George Berkeley’s (1685–1753) disbelief in “pure matter”—matter without meaning, without value, without the sustaining and creative Mind of God to give it being—is in clear sympathy with the ancient worldview assumed in the Christian Scriptures.

what we now call scientific knowledge would not be possible without divine order and value being expressed in nature. Even so, the medium of time and matter is inherently transient, so the eternal and real truths partially and provisionally expressed through time and matter are not themselves temporal and material. To Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12, knowledge firmly situated within the tangible immediacy of the present age—compared to the eternal Love of God—is inherently transient, inherently provisional, and without ultimate signification. But to Plato, “knowledge” that is passing away is not actually knowledge—even if it is a provisionally useful and instrumentally powerful belief. For how could you really *know* something that is not eternally there to know?

If you think about the “grace and nature” controversies of modern theology you will quickly notice that these controversies could not arise within a broadly Platonist outlook on reality. In ancient terms one might think of nature as space, time, and matter and of grace as order, value, purpose, and meaning. In those terms nature is the medium for the partial expression of grace. But notice, within this outlook there is no way in which it is possible to conceive of nature as other than fundamentally graced. How could you have matter without form, how could you have facts without meaning, how could you have objectivity without value, how could you have time without eternity, how could you have thinking without reason? For to Plato, everything expressed in space, time, and matter is a derived and ongoingly dependent creation of the divine Reason that emanates from The Good.

To both the New Testament and Plato, the visible world, which is physical and temporal, exists in a derivative relationship to the invisible world, which is spiritual and eternal. Here the unseen is more real than the seen. Here the realm of the seen is only comprehensible and ordered because of its intimate yet incomplete and derivative dependence on the unseen. Bearing these commonalities in mind we will now look more closely at modern objections to the manner in which Platonist thought and Christian faith were developed together by some of the great thinkers in the early centuries of the church.