'IDEA' AND 'MATTER' IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS OF THE FIRST WORDS OF GENESIS

A Chapter in the Encounter between Greek Philosophy and Christian Thought

'Footnotes to Plato'

In a book published in 1929 the English philosopher Whitehead made a pronouncement on European philosophy that has become famous. He claimed that this philosophy can best be characterized as a series of 'footnotes to Plato'.\(^1\) Such generalizing pronouncements may give rise to serious objections. In this case one might wonder whether justice is done to more than twenty centuries of intellectual effort when it is described as (mere) footnotes. In my view, however, Whitehead's pronouncement contains a deep truth. It is a fact that, up to the time of the existentialist movement, Plato's thought has determined the course of European philosophy.

When we speak of 'Plato's thought', we mean first and foremost 'the theory of ideas'. This doctrine states that our world of change and limitation does not constitute true reality. That reality is to be located in the 'ideas', the eternal unchanging forms.\(^2\) This true reality is knowable for us human beings, because there is something in us that is related to that reality, namely our soul, which 'in itself'\(^3\) has the same characteristics as the ideas. The ideas are exemplified in the material things of the realm; our soul is located

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2. It is important to remember that the word ἰδέα in Plato does not mean 'idea' in the sense of a concept. In his *Lexique de Platon* E. des Places states: 'Pas plus que pour εἶδος le sens de 'concept' n'existe pour ἰδέα' (p. 260).
3. In his dialogue the *Phaedo*, which bears the subtitle περὶ ψυχῆς, Plato is greatly taken with the "discovery" of the ideas and their recognition by the soul. He also talks about the soul "on its own", by which he means the soul in its pure state. In the *Phaedrus* he later distinguishes between different parts of the soul: λογιστικόν, θυμοειδές, ἐπιθυμητικόν. The soul "on its own" in the *Phaedo* corresponds to the *logistikòn* in the *Phaedrus*. At a later stage the highest part of the soul will also be referred to as the νοῦς (intellect). In the (Ps)-Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades* I (130c3) we find the formula that was to exert great influence on Platonic philosophy: "man is none other than his soul" (cf. J. Pépin, *Idées grecques sur l'homme et sur Dieu*, Paris 1971, 71).
in the body. Just as the ideas exist at a higher level of reality than what is derived from them, so the soul is more than the body.

By means of this doctrine Plato created a view of reality and of man which dominated western philosophy for more than twenty centuries. Of course, it is a fact that Aristotle, his most celebrated pupil, did away with the ideas. He regarded this 'super-structure' as unnecessary for the explanation of reality. But this disagreement did not prevent him from approaching reality in terms of intelligible forms that are present in the things themselves as objects of knowledge. He did away with a separate world of ideas, but retained forms as universal objects of thought. He remained 'Platonic' to the extent that he continued to take the essence as starting point, even if he did not locate it in a separate higher reality. This basically Platonic approach was maintained right up to the time that the question of 'existence' became a central object of philosophical discussion.

One of the reasons that Plato's philosophy retained its dominance in western philosophy has to do with the subject of this paper, namely the encounter between Christianity and Greek philosophy. In that encounter the philosophy inspired by Plato played a central role. I wish to illustrate how this took place by examining the interpretations given by early Christian thinkers to the first words of the first book of the Bible, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth'.

_Praenotanda_

But before I commence my discussion of this exegesis, it is first necessary to make a number of general remarks.

It might be thought remarkable that the Bible and philosophy are brought into contact with each other in this way. Are these not separate magnitudes that can hardly fit in the same frame of reference? This may be how we regard the matter today, but during the period when the texts under discussion were written it was viewed quite differently. When early Christian thinkers were engaged in the study of the Bible, both they and their opponents were convinced that they were engaged in philosophy. Philosophy is the quest for wisdom. This wisdom, according to the philosophical views of the time, could be sought along differing paths. In addition to the path that was usually regarded as typically Greek, i.e.