BOEKBESPREKING


In a paragraph of a letter about the use of pagan literature and philosophy, the *saeculares litterae,* Jerome, having respectfully spoken about the learnedness in this respect of the Jewish writer Flavius Josephus, continues with these words: ‘What shall I say about Philo, whom the critics proclaim a second or a Jewish Plato?’ *(Quid loquir de Philone quem uel alterum uel Iudaem Platonem critici pronuntiant?* – Hieronymus, *Ep. 70.3*). These words are meant to express admiration for Philo’s philosophical expertise, but the same author could also strike a wholly different note concerning Greek philosophy: ‘What has Aristotle to do with Paul? Or Plato with Peter?’ *(Quid Aristoteli et Paulo? Quid Platoni et Petro?* – *Adu. Pelag. I 14*). These rhetorical questions testify not merely to Jerome’s inconstancy – as an accomplished polemist he did not eschew opportunism –, but also to an inner tension between love for the attainments of pagan culture and the aversion from all pagan ideas. Jerome himself was not primarily an expert in philosophical matters, but those patres who were, faced the problem how they had to judge pagan philosophy, especially its main representative, Platonism, which seemed to have so many points of contact with Christian doctrine, but which all the same remained pagan. During his stay in Milan the young Augustine was much influenced by the Neoplatonizing atmosphere which also manifested itself in the sermons of bishop Ambrose, but later in the 10th book of *De ciuitate Dei* he clearly pointed out the shortcomings of the Platonists, finally reporting that Porphyry – a philosopher he quite respected – had been unable to find the universal way of salvation *(uniuersalis uia animae liberandae).* Jerome’s questions, when stripped of their use as cris du coeur, are in fact pertinent: what has Greek philosophy to do with the Bible?

Put in these terms, the problem concerns Jewish intellectuals no less than their Christian colleagues. In his *De uiris illustribus* Jerome devotes a page to Philo, concluding this paragraph with these words: ‘In Greek circles it is generally said about him: either Plato “philonizes” or Philo “platonizes”, that is to say, either Plato is following Philo, or the other way around: such is the likeness in contents and style’ *(de hoc uulgo apud Graecos dicitur: ἡ Πλάτων φιλονιζει ἡ Φίλων πλατωνιζει, id est, aut Plato Philonem sequitur, aut Platonem Philo: tanta est similitudo sensuum et eloquiui. – De uir. ill. IX;* the Greek ‘proverb’ can also be found in Photius, *Bibl.* 105 (86b 25-26) and in a slightly different form in Suidas I 10.16 Adler).

Philo’s dates are approximately 20 aCn-45 AD, some four centuries after Plato, and it seems a priori likely that the contemporary philosophy in
Alexandria, where Philo was living, was not the same as when Plato wrote his dialogues in fourth century Athens. This is indeed the case. Philo's age saw the first developments – unfortunately not very well documented – of Middle Platonism, a rather dogmatic school of thought (not in the literal sense of an organized institute), the representatives of which aimed to provide a faithful and authentic interpretation of Plato's thoughts. A correct reading of Plato, and certainly not any revolutionary correction of his philosophy, was their purpose. But in the first place they introduced quite a few elements from other schools and secondly their Plato was reduced to a selection of mainly some of the more famous ‘classic’ dialogues. Among the last-mentioned the *Timaeus* takes prime place, it pervades the corpus of Middle Platonic texts so thoroughly that at times its explanation and the doctrines derived from it dominate everything else. Middle Platonism could even be called ‘Timaeism’. Perhaps that is put too strongly, after all some other favourite passages chosen from Plato’s oeuvre played a large part, but in any case ‘Plato’s Cosmology’ (the title which Cornford gave to his running commentary on the *Timaeus*) supplied the Platonists with the materials for a large number of their doctrines.

Philo was an energetic student of Plato too. Many references and quotations testify to this fact and in the predilection for the *Timaeus* he held his own with the Platonists. ‘The fact that Philo quotes and paraphrases the *Timaeus* more often than the rest of Plato’s works put together is a clear indication of the dialogue’s central role in his reading of Plato’ (323). It pervades the whole of his oeuvre, for ‘with all due allowance made for areas of special concentration, there remains a surprisingly uniform spread throughout the whole corpus’ (329). Does this mean that Philo was a (Middle) Platonist himself, as Jerome had suggested and was recently argued by John Dillon in a substantial chapter of his fine book *The Middle Platonists* (London 1977)? In other words, should the Alexandrian Jewish scholar and exegete of the Bible not be called Philo Iudaeus, but rather Philo Platonicus?

The complex of problems alluded to in the foregoing have inspired Dr. Runia to take a deep look at Philo’s usage of Plato. He refrains from any rough, superficial or eclectic examination, but sets himself the task to study this matter, so to speak, from the inside. This has prompted his decision to examine all passages in Philo’s writings where the *Timaeus* is in any way used and to present this material in the order of Plato’s dialogue as a kind of running commentary on Philo’s use and interpretation of it. This ‘Analysis’ (48-317) takes the lion’s share in the vast and learned study here under review, from which some references and quotations were already borrowed in the preceding text. The analytical work has been done very thoroughly by the author, who in a number of cases does not shun the detailed hard-work of a philologist, where necessary treating questions of textual criticism as well. At first sight the method sketched seems to suffer from ‘Platonocentrism’ and thus to prejudice a correct view of Philo’s thoughts, since the latter’s treatises and exegetical commentaries on the Pentateuch seem to be subordinated to the structure of the *Timaeus*. But that is not the case, one might even suggest that it is the other way around, for it is not so much Plato’s text itself on which attention is centered, but rather Philo’s reception of it.