THE TWOFOLD WANDERINGS OF
SOPHIA: THE WAYS OF SOPHIA IN THE
ANCIENT CULTURES OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

To get closer to wisdom, to be fulfilled by wisdom, is probably a need felt by men of all cultures. A special role, however, was played by wisdom at that moment, beginning at the end of the fifth century, when speculative philosophical reflection and religious speculation penetrated and fertilised each other until, in the second and third centuries, they separated again into different phenomena, forming for themselves new continents of meaning, each of them claiming Sophia for itself. It is a journey full of tensions that Sophia makes between these spiritual continents, a journey which will be traced in this article. The philosophic-religious double nature of Sophia repeatedly caused offence in both directions, the religious and the philosophical, she was the object of suspicion for both of them and, at least in part, thrust aside, because for each of the developing spiritual continents Sophia was supposed to be restricted to the respectively favoured side of her twofold or even manifold nature.

The Hellenic side

Early Greek poetry, as well as the earlier books of the Old Testament, speak of wisdom; this wisdom, however, is not a figure of its own, but human knowledge, thoughtfulness, which everyone had to have. Thus Homer talks of the wisdom of a carpenter, Pindar of the wisdom of a meteorologist, and Heraclitus of “wisdom-loving men [philosophous andras] [who] must know many things.”1 Even the name the Sophists chose for themselves expresses this: with the name “Sophists” the men of the Hellenic enlightenment claim for themselves a specific reflective wisdom and the ability to decide wisely.

A radical change occurs in the Socratic-Platonic circle. In his self-characterization as a “philosopher,” Socrates formulates a complex interrelation: the place of the one who has wisdom, which means that within him is the aim of all efforts, is taken by one who pursues wisdom, who knows that he will never achieve it, because wisdom is realized only beyond the Own

1. Homer Ilias XV 411f.; Pindar Nem. 7,17; Heraclitus VS 22 B 35. The present text was written while the author was a research fellow at the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Sciences and Arts in Brussels, and given in a first version as a lecture at the University of Gent. I would like to thank Marc de Mey (Royal Academy), Danny Praet (Gent), Inigo Bocken (Nijmegen) and Francis Jarman (Hildesheim) for kind support.
in Truth \([\text{alethes}]\).\(^2\) Thus, man is confronted by wisdom as something superior, which becomes – against the background of the Platonic Theory of Ideas – a gestalt of its own, a category in close relation to Truth, so that, in a strict sense, wisdom belongs only to the gods.\(^3\) And yet wisdom relates to human beings, and therefore derives a function as mediator of Truth. So wisdom not only finds herself torn between the human on the one hand and the True, which is the divine, on the other, but also vacillates in her being: she is an instance of high rank and fixed through being bound to Truth, yet at the same time she is movable, gradually modulated, through her relation to humans, because she mediates.

For Plato, philosophizing, or “to be in love with wisdom,” is a conscious being between knowledge and ignorance,\(^4\) the consciousness of a deficiency of knowledge – regarding wisdom, which is absolute – a wisdom that is limited and goes astray, but which nevertheless has a dynamic towards absolute wisdom. Both aspects of Sophia remain important after Plato as well; indeed the gestalt of Sophia has lived from this ambiguity ever since.

On the one hand, and drawing on Plato’s view that only the gods are wise in the complete sense, in the Hellenistic period, Sophia acquires the character of a divine hypostasis. However, the paucity of surviving texts of Middle Platonism prevents a detailed description of this process. But the way in which Sophia appears in the Book of Proverbs (fourth and third centuries BC) can only be understood from the perspective of the Jewish reception of Hellenic metaphysics and Platonic ideas: there, wisdom occurs as generated by the Highest. In the Graeco-Roman world no further documentation can be found before Plotinus (205-270 AD). Setting himself against the disregard of the cosmos by the Gnostics, he points out the relation of the cosmos to the divine, to the immeasurable wisdom, and for him Sophia is the life of the \([\text{nous}]\).\(^5\) On the other hand, Plotinus recognizes an ability of men or a self-awareness of the soul, and so for him Sophia is an intellectual virtue of perfect \([\text{noesis}]\) on the way to the unification with the One.\(^6\) Sophia therefore moves in the space between men and the highest Truth. She possesses a double nature, to which she owes both her middle position and the mediatorship, since she is posed between the world of men and the true Divine.

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2. See Plato, \(\text{Apol. and Pol.}\), then \(\text{Prot.}\). The emergence of an independent Wisdom is given by Pythagoras (following Diog. Laert. \text{Vitae I} 12), but there wisdom functions in the sense of a contrast to the \(\text{sophoi}\), the mythic founders of states, poets, or the seven Sages.


4. Plato, \(\text{Lys.}\), 204b5.

5. Cf. Plotinus, \(\text{Enneads, II,} 9 (33) 8,13-16. \text{Enneads, V,8 (31) 4,36ff.}\) 31.

6. Cf. \(\text{Ibid.}, 1, 2 (19), 6,12ff; 7,3-9.\)