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Mysticism and *Theosis* in pre-Plotinian times?

With Special Reference to the *Ascent of the Soul*

The problem of the contemplative traditions of Late Antiquity is a complicated one, even if we have at our disposal a great variety of studies dedicated to this topic. The scholar who tries to analyse the so-called „mystical” testimonies of Platonism, Judaism, Gnosticism and other philosophical and religious movements of the ancient Mediterranean world has to face the difficult task of reconstructing a puzzle which lacks some important pieces. Unfortunately, the texts that survived in history do not offer a direct or complete picture concerning the supposed mystical techniques of their authors.

Even if the imagination of the scholars is still seduced by the classics of the past generations, their theories seem to be more and more doubtful. Thus, André-Jean Festugière¹ stated that the entire Platonic tradition encapsulated a certain contemplative practice which had its roots in Plato, and found its most refined expression in the Plotinian mysticism. In an important book, Erwin Goodenough² considered in his turn that Philo was primarily a mystical thinker. Regarding Judaism and its apocalyptic literature, Michael E. Stone³ suggested that many of its narratives were fictionalized versions of the authors' own visionary experiences. Jean Daniélou⁴ was also convinced that ancient Christianity contained a secret mystical doctrine, which

had originated in apostolic times, regarding celestial topographies, whose knowledge was essential for the free ascent of the soul through the planetary spheres. The Romanian scholar Ioan Petru Culianu⁵ expressed the hope that one day we would discover the ritual and mystical dimensions that lie behind Gnostic texts. Although these theories still constitute important points of departure for future research, I think that they must be judged *cum grano salis*.

The desire to become united with the deity, the search for *unio mystica*, implies a conception of the divine as well as of the human person, and a certain complicated relationship between them, which is not found in all stages of religious thought. For example, early Judaism lacks such a concept of consubstantiality between the human soul and God. In a wonderful article, Arthur H. Armstrong argues that “Plotinus’s mystical experience is an isolated case among Hellenic Platonists”, even if his thinking is “undoubtedly the final product of a long and very complex metaphysical development”.⁶

The only thing about which we can be sure is that in Late Antiquity the limits between men and gods were conceived as permeable. This fact is illustrated by the vast majority of the testimonies of that period, be these Platonic, Jewish, Greek, Christian, Hermetic, or Gnostic sources. It is nonetheless difficult to decide whether the



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texts are describing real visionary experiences or if they are mainly literary *topoi* circulating freely between various philosophical and religious circles in Late Antiquity.

Some scholars have argued that a mystic doctrine is already present in Plato's philosophy. For example, in his classical study, Andrew Louth states that:

"It could be argued that mystical theology, or perhaps better, a doctrine of contemplation, is not simply an element of Plato's philosophy, but something that penetrates and informs his whole understanding of the world."⁷

Maybe Louth's statement is slightly exaggerated, but it is certain that some passages in Plato played a central role in later mystical speculations. Thus, the well-known Socratic advice from *Theaetetus* 176B, according to which one must "fly from this world and become like God as far as possible", was often connected in ancient times to an interesting passage from *Timaeus* 90 A-D:

"We are creatures not of earth but of heaven, where the soul was first born, and our divine part attaches us by the head to heaven, like a plant by its roots, and keeps our body upright ... A man who has given his heart to learning and true wisdom, and exercised that part of himself, is surely bound, if he attains truth, to have immortal and divine thoughts, and cannot fail to achieve immortality as fully as is permitted to human nature; and because he has always looked to the divine element in himself, and has kept his guardian spirit in good order, he must be happy above all men. There is of course only one way to look after anything, and that is to give it its proper food and motions. And the motions in us that are akin

to the divine, and are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe. We should each therefore attend to those motions, and by learning about the harmonious circuits of the universe repair the damage done at birth to the circuits in our head, and so restore understanding and what is understood to their original likeness to each other."

This passage is also important because it shows how contemplation of the cosmos leads the soul to God, an idea that occurs very often in Christian and Platonic mysticism. As we will see, in Origen for example, the contemplation of the Creation of Father leads our *nous* to God. Thus, the contemplation of the cosmos is the first step of the ascent of the soul.

The first century BC Neo-pythagorean philosopher, Eudorus of Alexandria, provides an interesting interpretation of the above mentioned passage from *Theaetetus*. He establishes 'likeness to God' as the *telos* of human life. Eudorus' formula, extracted from *Theaetetus* 176B, marks a return to Plato and the adoption of a spiritual perspective regarding the means of philosophy. In Middle Platonism, this becomes a central concern, even if its meanings are not obvious in every case. Eudorus refined the *Theaetetus* precept by teaching that to become like God *kata to dunaton* meant not "as far as possible" but "according to that part which is capable", that is to say, it was only the *nous* or highest part of the soul which could become like God and flee to the other world. The irrational soul must be trained to accept the guidance of reason.

These considerations have led Louth to say that Middle Platonism was essentially "mystical" because "it was concerned with the soul's search for immediacy with God, a concern which was intensified with Plotinus and Neoplatonism".⁸ Or, as R. E. Witt puts it, the Platonism of the period "was characterized by its predominantly



religious and theocentric world view... This age was attracted not so much by Plato the ethical teacher or political reformer, as by Plato the hierophant who (according to an old legend) had been conceived of Apollo and born of the virgin Perictione ... Second-century Platonism is theological and other-worldly.”⁹

The supposed mystical character of the Platonic tradition has led some scholars to argue that, in fact, Christian mysticism represents only an appendix of Platonic speculations regarding *unio mystica* and the vision of God. In an important work by A.-J. Festugière, he affirms that, “When the Fathers ‘think’ their mysticism, they platonize. There is nothing original in the edifice”.¹⁰

In what follows, we will try to survey briefly the various sources that were quoted by some modern authors as true mystical testimonies of Late Antiquity. After examining the *fontes* we will see that this idea was often inferred too easily. As we shall try to argue, the only possible competitor of Plotinian mysticism could be the Alexandrian Christian theologian Origen. In his surviving works, the ascent of the soul is described as an inward process, an *enstasis* or a progressive way through the noetic levels of the divine.

Jewish Apocalyptic Literature

Beginning with the fourth century BC, certain circles in Palestine had been responsible for populating the heaven with angelic orders, and asserting the participation of the elect in a new exalted life beyond the grave. These are the developments that we encounter in apocalyptic literature and the sectarian writings of Qumran.

Apocalyptic literature originated in the age of the Second Temple (Middle Judaism). In this period, the main forms of

the Palestinian Judaism were the Zadokite and the Enochic. In what follows, we will focus on the Enochic type of Judaism, since this was often suspected to imply mystical elements. The name Enochic has been given to it because of the importance attached to the Biblical character Enoch, who becomes now a mediator between heaven and earth. There must be some connection between the Enochic literature and some of the writings from Qumran. For example, several fragments of 1 Enoch were discovered in the caves of Qumran.

In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the mediatory role of angels was expanded further. Enoch, Moses, and other heroes of the faith were represented as ascending to heaven to participate with the angels in the heavenly liturgy. Ezekiel and Daniel are also models for later apocalyptic writers of scenes set in the heavenly court. The mysterious figure of Enoch, who was rapt to heaven in Gen. 5:24, came to play a central role in this kind of literature. In the Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1-36), he is portrayed as lifted up to heaven into the presence of Merkabah to mediate not only between angels and men, but also between God and his angels. At the end of time, seated on the throne of his glory, Enoch will judge both angels and men. In other texts, different patriarchs and heroes will also have thrones in heaven.

In the apocalyptic literature, it is not only the great men of the past who are assigned heavenly thrones. Enoch says that each of those who love God’s holy name “will be set on the throne of his honor” (108:12). Admitted to the heavenly court, the righteous will also be enthroned with the patriarchs and heroic figures of Israel. It is however difficult to decide if this “transmutation” to heaven represents a mystical doctrine, since the souls of the



righteous have access to heaven only after physical death.

A number of eight Jewish and Christian apocalypses discuss the problem of the transformation of visionary in angel, this transformation being taken often as a transformative spiritual process by some modern authors. In chronological order, the texts are: the Book of Watchers (1 Enoch 1-36); the Testament of Levi; 2 Enoch; the Similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 37-71); the Apocalypse of Zephaniah; the Apocalypse of Abraham; the Ascension of Isaiah; and 3 Baruch.¹¹ Insofar as we can use the term “deification” or *theosis* with regard to this literature, it always expresses the assimilation of the elect to the life of the “gods” of the heavenly court. However, in these texts there is no innate divinity in the human person simply waiting to be discovered, in contradistinction with Greek philosophy, which elaborated a concept of the soul as detachable from the body in a state of ecstasy. For Jewish thought, we are nothing more than clay and dust. Moreover, as Martha Himmelfarb has shown:

“...the apocalypses are literary documents in which the depiction of the hero’s experience needs to be understood as an act of imagination, with its specifics determined by the author’s manipulation of conventions, rather than as a literary representation of the author’s own experiences.”¹²

In contradistinction with her statement, some scholars believe that they could isolate certain mystical elements in apocalyptic literature. Thus, in an important monograph, Christopher Rowland suggests that many passages in the apocalypses are based on the author’s ecstatic experiences as he contemplates particular scriptural passages,

as for example in Daniel 9.¹³ Elsewhere, Rowland argues that:

“It seems to be the case that we are so used of thinking the apocalyptic in terms of the imminent winding up of the present world-order and the establishment of a new age that we miss the repeated emphasis in much apocalyptic literature on the revelation of things *as they actually are* in the heavenly world. Hence in certain parts of apocalyptic it is not so much the description of the last stages of the historical process which is to the fore but a mystical insight into another world and the perception of its secrets.”¹⁴

Michael Stone has also argued that the possibility of actual visionary experience behind the apocalypses must be taken seriously¹⁵. He suggests that ascetic practices described in some of the apocalypses reflect the practices of actual visionaries, while the physical reactions of the heroes of the apocalypses to the awesome sights revealed to them reflect the reactions of the authors of the apocalypses to the visions they experienced.¹⁶

It is of course true that the eight apocalypses that we have quoted previously describe the transformation of the visionary in angels. However, there is no decisive proof that the belief concerning this “angelification” was shared by the readers that used these writings. It is true that Enoch for example suffers a process of transformation:

“And the Lord said to Michael, Take Enoch and take off his earthly garments, and anoint him with good oil, and clothe him in glorious garments. And Michael took off from me my garments and anointed me with good oil. And the appearance of the oil was more resplendent than a great light, and its richness like sweet dew, and its fragrance like myrrh, shining

like a ray of the sun. And I looked at myself, and I was like one of the glorious ones, and there was no apparent difference.” (2 Enoch 9:17-19)

But when analyzing the dynamic of the text, it seems however that Enoch became an angel because it is the only way for a human being to receive divine revelations.

The only “personal” testimony in Judaism concerning human transformation in an exalted state appears in a small fragment from Qumran, edited by Morton Smith.¹⁷ Smith has argued that the content of this little and fragmentary text indicates a human speaker, a member of the sect living around the turn of the era, rather than an ancient hero:

“[El ‘Elyon gave me a seat among] those perfect forever,

a mighty throne in the congregation of the gods.

None of the kings of the East shall sit in it

and their nobles shall not [come near it].

No Edomite shall be like me in glory.

And none shall be exalted save me, nor shall come against me.

For I have taken my seat in the [congregation] in the heavens,

and none [find fault with me].

I shall be reckoned with gods

and established in the holy congregation.”¹⁸

However, it would not be very careful for us to reconstruct mystical practices among the members of apocalyptic circles starting from an isolated and fragmentary text.

Philo

Philo elaborates a chain of being that bridges the gap between God and man, introducing the possibility of the ascent of the soul to God even in this life, through the practice of philosophy. As with the pagan Platonists, however, this ascent is not called deification, because man does not become a god in any real sense.

For Philo, God stands apart in an absolute transcendence. As E.R. Dodds has shown, this doctrine could be traced back to Speusippus¹⁹, Plato’s nephew and his immediate successor as the head of the Platonic Academy. It is almost certain that Philo was not original in this regard, and a passage from *Somn.* (1.184) constitutes an important testimony concerning the fact that thinkers contemporary with the Jewish philosopher postulated the full transcendence of God, and, at the same time, man’s ignorance regarding his true nature: “Others again affirm that the uncreated God resembles no created being whatever, but that he is superior to everything, so that the very swiftest conception is outstripped by him, and confesses that it is very far inferior to the comprehension of him”.

In several places Philo affirms that God is *apoiios* (*LA* 3.36; 1.36; 51; 3.206; *Deus* 55-56; *Cher.* 67). Our predications about him are not derived from his essence, which is beyond comprehensibility, because God does not share his essence with creatures. In his mercy, he made himself perceptible for humans only on two inferior levels: as *Logos*, who is God’s image²⁰ and constitutes the *cosmos noetos*, and in the creation (*cosmos aisthetos*), which is in its turn an image of the *Logos*²¹. Thus, though the essence of God remains hidden, its manifestations may be perceived.

Because God’s existence remains veiled for the human experience, even in the





state of mystical vision, he is completely unknowable:

“And the Father pitied its sincere desire and eagerness to see, and gave it power, and did not grudge the acuteness of the sight thus directed a perception of himself, as far at least as a created and mortal nature could attain to such a thing, not indeed such a perception as should show him that he exists; for even this, which is better than good, and more ancient than the unit, and more simple than one, cannot possibly be contemplated by any other being; because, in fact, it is not possible for God to be comprehended by any being but himself” (*Praem.* 39-40).

We can hardly believe that Philo betrays any mystical features, since according to the Jewish writer the knowledge of divine reaches only the level of Logos. He is the Divine Mind, the Idea of Ideas, the first-begotten Son of the Un-created Father, the man or shadow of God, and even the second God, the pattern of all creation and archetype of human reason. We are his sons:

“In reference to which I admire those who say, “We are all one man’s sons, we are men of peace” [Gen. 42:11], because of their well-adapted agreement; since how, I should say, could you, O excellent men, avoid being grieved at war, and delighted in peace, being the sons of one and the same father, and he is not mortal but immortal, the man of God, who being the reason of the everlasting God, is of necessity himself also immortal?” (*Conf.* 41).

Or again:

“For it was indispensable that the man who was consecrated to the Father of the world, should have as a paraclete, his

son, the being most perfect in all virtue, to procure forgiveness of sins, and a supply of unlimited blessings” (*Mos.* 2.134).

Human intellect is a fragment of this divine Logos. To the uninitiated mind, God appears as a triad constituted by himself and his two potencies, the Creative and the Regent Powers, whereas to the purified mind he appears as One (cf. *Abr.* 119-123).

The kinship which the human soul enjoys with Logos, the emanation of the divine glory, enables the devout to attain intimacy with God. Logos makes us “friends of God”. For the just man, union with Logos makes him a “throne-partner”. “Throne-partner” is also used to express Logos’ relationship with God, implying that the righteous man who has united himself with Logos can take his place in the divine council. However, Philo says nothing about the final union with the One.

As for many other Platonic philosophers, for Philo the rational part of the soul is “a holy image of all images, the most godlike” (*Fuga* 69; *Spec. Leg.* 1.329; *Opif.* 137). This is the image of the Logos, “a fragment of the divine and blessed soul” (*Det.* 90; *Opif.* 146). However, according to David Runia²², Philo reflects a lack of clarity endemic in contemporary Platonism – only with Plotinus, Runia believes, is there the question of whether the rational part is related to the divine in a model/copy or part/whole relation’ finally resolved. But there is a gulf between the human and the divine which is never fully overcome in Philo. The soul is not the same thing as God but simply “of near kin to the Ruler, since the divine spirit had flowed into him in full current” (*Opif.* 144). As Runia puts in, “it is not easy for him (i.e., for Philo) to give a clear indication of where God’s true divinity ends and man’s derived divinity starts”.²³

In its turn, the doctrine of the

ascent of the soul brings no decisive data regarding Philo's mysticism. For the Jewish thinker, the ascent of the soul is quadruple: the religious, the philosophical, the ethical, and the mystical. According to the philosophical ascent (exposed especially in *On the Migration of Abraham*), the soul, rising from the sensible to the intelligible world will contemplate Him who Is. Through self-knowledge, the man will know God. However, the supreme being is too exalted to be reached by the powers of thought: "One would need to become a god – something which is impossible – in order to be able to apprehend God". The ethical dimension of the human life raises the intellect to God. But this participation in God does not imply becoming God, or even a god. The separate identity of the individual is retained through becoming *like* God rather than being changed essentially. This philosophical ascent through *analysis* is of course modeled on a similar idea found in Plato.²⁴ Plato believed that the dialectical reason (*noesis*) can arrive at the intuition of a First Principle by "treating its assumptions not as absolute beginnings, but literally as hypotheses, underpinnings, footings, and springboards so to speak, to enable it to rise to that which requires no assumption and is the starting-point of all, and after attaining to that again taking hold of the first dependencies from it, so to proceed downward to the conclusion, making no use whatever of any object of sense but only of pure ideas moving on through ideas to ideas and ending with ideas" (*Republic*, 511 BC). Cf. this with *Republic* 532 AB: "When anyone by dialectics attempts through discourse of reason and apart from all perceptions of sense to find his way to the very essence of each thing and does not desist till he apprehends by thought itself the nature of the good in itself, he arrives at the limit of the intelligible". The exact nature of this upward-downward dialectical path has been

much debated, but the most likely interpretation is that it involves a sudden intuition of the First Principle (cf. *Symp.* 210E; *Ep.* 7.341 CD) at the end of a series of analyses of various hypotheses, which then permits a downward series of deductions from that Principle.²⁵

The mystical ascent is expressed by Philo as an encounter between the human and the divine, which is possible only out of the body – in this life in a state of ecstasy, in the next when a person has become pure *nous*. What does ecstasy mean here? According to Philo, an intellect possessed by divine love forgets itself utterly (*Somn.* 2.232). The mystic is seized with a sober intoxication like those seized with Corybantic frenzy, and the eye of understanding opens. As the well-known passage in *Quaestiones in Exodum* puts it:

"When the prophetic intellect becomes divinely inspired and filled with God, it becomes like the monad, not being at all mixed with any of those things associated with duality. But he who is resolved into the nature of unity is said to come near God in a kind of family relation, for having given up and left behind all mortal kinds, he is changed into the divine, so that such men become kin to God and truly divine". (*QE* 2.29)

The supreme example of a man who has attained the *telos* and become "truly divine" is Moses. Having come into contact with "the unseen, invisible, incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things" he became himself "a piece of work beautiful and godlike, a model for those who are willing to copy it" (*Vita Moses* I.158).

However, Moses is not really a god. "He is more of a mediator, and this does not imply a kind of deification in



which Moses comes to share the same nature as God²⁶. Behind Philo's characterization lies probably the Stoic application of the term *theos* to the sage. According to Diogenes Laertios (*Lives and Doctrines* 7.117 ff.), among the Stoics the wise man was *theos kai basileus*. In conclusion, we may say that for Philo Moses is not a god except by title or analogy.

Clement

Let us say a few words about Clement and Alexandria and his treatment of deification²⁷. From the beginning, we have to keep in mind that Clement uses the Platonic precept from *Theaetetus* and he also knew Philo, quoting him in a few instances. Like the Jewish thinker before him, Clement sees the Forms as the thoughts of God. A man who separates himself from the corporeal world and contemplates the Forms therefore assimilates himself to God. For Clement, the Christian Gnostic becomes a god by controlling the soul's lower faculties, for in this way he comes to resemble Christ, who is "free from passion, from anger and from desire" (*Strom.* 4.151.1). The likeness of God means living according to virtue and we can resemble Christ by imitating his freedom from passion. For Clement, freedom from passion, *apatheia*, is a divine attribute. Only Christ, as the incarnate divine Logos, is absolutely without passion (*Strom.* 6.9.71).

"Likeness of God", as Philo saw it, could also refer to the biblical creation of man "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1:26). Usually Clement distinguishes between image and likeness, man being created in the image of God but only receiving the likeness when he has attained perfection. Thus, the Christian Gnostic is

not only the son of God but also a temple of God. However, the *theosis* is never fully completed. It is beyond the power of human beings to imitate the transcendent First Cause. The imitation of God is only the imitation of Christ.

For Clement of Alexandria the doctrine of *theosis* has a purely ethical dimension. Through the attainment of the likeness of God by ascetic and philosophical endeavour, believers reproduce some of Christ's attributes in their own lives by imitation, but a complete deification is nonetheless inconceivable for the Christian author.

Origen

For Origen, God is incorporeal (*asomatos*), mind, invisible (*aoratos*), one and simple, the good and he transcends being and mind. God is light and he argues that this light is the light "which lightens the whole understanding of those capable to receive truth". In this respect, he quotes Psalm 35:10 (LXX) "In thy light we shall see light". Moreover, God is spirit, and the spirit can be apprehended only intellectually. As in later Platonism, the process of knowing God is thus an intellectual process.

In an important study, Karen Jo Torjesen has shown that Origen's *De Principiis* constitutes a "philosophical handbook on the interpretation of Scriptures".²⁸ The philosophical doctrines of *De Principiis* correspond to the successive stages of spiritual insight which form Origen's concept of the soteriological process, and which directs his exegetical procedure. The knowledge of God is attained through allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures: "But if we turn to the Lord, where also the Word of God is, and where the Holy Spirit reveals spiritual knowledge, the veil will be



taken away, and we shall then with unveiled face behold in the Holy Scriptures the glory of Lord” (*De Principiis* I.1.2). The knowledge of God is mediated by the Son. In the first chapter of *De Principiis* he argues that the Son does not see the Father, but rather knows the Father, Christ being the model of human mind.

For the Christian theologian the divine and the world are hierarchically oriented, the supreme level being occupied not by the Trinity, but by the Father.²⁹ In Origen’s theology the process by which the soul comes to the saving knowledge of God takes place through a pattern of complementary movements in three stages. The threefold activity of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is followed by a corresponding threefold response of the soul in its journey to the knowledge of God. This pattern is present in *De Principiis* and runs as a *leitmotif* throughout his other writings. This idea forms his conception of how the Christian comes to the knowledge of God as Father. As we can easily observe, this interiorization of the ascent predates the similar idea found in the *Enneads* of Plotinus.

Origen believes that a well-trained mind has the ability of a direct and immediate knowledge of God³⁰, being capable of returning to that original society of rational souls which are engaged in an enraptured contemplation of God. In this sense, *De Principiis* and *Commentary on the Song of Songs* exhibit “the soteriological process by which the soul assimilates, or is assimilated to the knowledge mediated by Logos”.³¹

In *De Principiis* I.3.7-8 he identifies three levels of the contemplation: (1) the first stage of the ascent is the Holy Spirit. This constitutes a preparatory level: it purifies the soul because the Holy Spirit is the principle of holiness. While contemplating the Holy Spirit, the soul itself becomes holy. (2) At the second level, the soul receives the wisdom and knowledge of

Christ. Since Christ, as Logos, is wisdom and knowledge, the soul receives wisdom and knowledge contemplating Him. (3) The third stage of this soteriological process is participation in God, the Father, in other words, the complete deification of the man.

In the light of Plotinian mystical philosophy, it is very important to note that for the Alexandrian theologian each stage of the contemplative ascent is an appropriate preparation for the next level in the ontological hierarchy. In *Commentary on John* XIX.6.33-8, Origen describes a similar sequence within the knowledge of the divine. The upward progression of the soul in the knowledge of God corresponds to a downward movement of revelation of the Trinity. This downward movement is prefigured in Origen’s doctrine of creation. In this, he is again very close to Plotinus. The way of the unfolding of the divine, is also the way of ascent to it.

Now, God’s incorporeality makes possible the deification of the human being. When God “finds a suitable dwelling place in the soul of a saint (i.e., the one who has been purified) he gives himself up, if I might thus speak, abiding in it” (*Comm. Jn.* XIII.24.143). We can probably infer from this that the saint becomes in his turn *intellectualis natura simplex*. Only God is a *monas, henas* (Oneness), while the Logos (Christ) is multiple. As Robert Berchman showed, this vision of God is a combination in the Middle Platonic fashion of two separate concepts: the Aristotelian definition of God as self-thinking thought and the Neo-Pythagorean idea of God as *Monad*³².

The ascent and the deification are possible because, as Mind, God is the source of all intellectual existence, an idea which provides for a continuity of nature between God and man. In the first book of



De Principiis (I.1.7) he asserts that there is a “certain affinity between the human mind and God, of whom the mind is an intellectual image”, which, when it is “purified and separated from bodily matter” is able to acquire the perception of God. He quotes in this sense from the Gospel of Matthew 5:8: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”. The element which ascends is the mind which has found “a divine sense” (*aesthesis theian heurseis*).

In *Contra Celsum* VII.46, Origen describes again the stages through which we must progress in the knowledge of God, in terms of the Platonic doctrine of ascent (*Symposium* 210-212), a passage well-known in the Platonic tradition and quoted by Porphyry in connection with Plotinus’ own spiritual visions (see his *Vita Plotini*). Here, the ascent is more clearly represented, the first stage being the contemplation of the physical order:

“For the invisible thing of God, that is, the intelligible things, ‘are understood by the things that are made’ and ‘from the creation of the world are clearly seen’ [Rom. 1:20] by the process of thought. And when they have ascended from the created things of the world to the invisible things of God they do not stop there. But after exercising their minds sufficiently among them and understanding them, they ascend to the ‘eternal power’ of God, and, in a word, to his ‘divinity’ [Rom. 1:20].”

What is really striking is that Origen perceives the ascent through the mediating principle (Logos or Nous) as threefold, an idea occurring also in Plotinus. In *Commentary on John* XIX, Origen is commenting on John 8:19: “Jesus answered, ‘You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father

also.’” Only through the Son that one comes to know God. Our contemplation of the Son as *Logos* brings us to the contemplation of God. Our contemplation of the Son as *Wisdom* brings us to know the Father of Wisdom. And our contemplation of the Son as *Truth* brings us “to see being, or that which transcends being, namely, the power and nature of God” (*Comm. Jn.* XIX.6.35-7).

I would recall here that in the philosophy of Plotinus the second principle, i.e., Nous, has three levels: Being-Life-Mind, the intelligible triad of the later Neoplatonists. In Origen’s theology we could find the triad Truth-Wisdom-Logos as characteristic of the second hypostasis, the Son. In both systems, this triad is intellectually comprehended by the mystic. Maybe we can infer from this that a mystical approach of the divine has taken already place in the work of Alexandrian theologian. However, a more elaborate and careful study of his mystical theology remains a desideratum for a future research.

Notes

¹ André-Jean Festugière, *Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon* (Paris: Vrin, 1936).

² Erwin R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: the Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1935; repr. Amsterdam, 1969).

³ Michael E. Stone, „Apocalyptic – Vision or Hallucination?“, *Milla wa-Milla* 14 (1974) pp. 47-56; reprinted in Michael E. Stone, *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha. With Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991) pp. 419-428.



⁴ Jean Daniélou, „Les traditions secrètes des apôtres”, *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 1962, pp. 199-215.

⁵ Ioan Petru Couliano, *Expériences de l'extase: extase, ascension et récit visionnaire de l'hellénisme au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Payot, 1984).

⁶ A. H. Armstrong, “Platonic Mysticism”, *Dublin Review* pp. 130-143; a survey of the possible competitors of Plotinian mysticism in the Platonic tradition.

⁷ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) p. 1

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. xiii.

⁹ R. E. Witt, *Albinus and the History of Middle Platonism* (reprint, Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert Publisher, 1971) p. 123.

¹⁰ A.-J. Festugière, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹¹ These texts are discussed as a body of literature by Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Himmelfarb denies that the apocalyptic writings betray a contemplative technique, treating the texts mainly as literary products, see *infra*.

¹² M. Himmelfarb, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

¹³ See Christopher Rowland, *Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

¹⁴ Christopher Rowland, “The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature”, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 10 (1979) pp. 137-154, here 138.

¹⁵ Michel E. Stone, art. cit. in note 3 supra. We are using the reprinting from *Selected Studies...*, pp. 419-428.

¹⁶ Daniel Merkur, an psychoanalyst from Toronto, discusses in his turn the practices and experiences of the visionaries from a psychological perspective; see his “The Visionary Practices of Jewish Apocalypists”, in L. Bryce Boyer and Simon A.

Grolnick (eds.), *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society* 14 (Hillsdale: The Analytic Press, 1989) pp. 119-148. Merkur makes an interesting statement which runs counter our argument, without adducing however decisive proofs: “In principle, it is possible for any person in any culture to experience any variety of alternate psychic states” (p. 120).

¹⁷ Morton Smith, “Ascent to the Heavens and Deification in 4QM”, in Lawrence H. Schiffman (ed.), *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The New York University Conference in Memory of Yigael Yadin* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) pp. 181-188.

¹⁸ M. Smith, *Ibidem*, p. 184.

¹⁹ E.R. Dodds, “The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One”, *Classical Quarterly* 22 (1928) pp. 129-142.

²⁰ Cf. *Somn.* 1.239: “for as those who are not able to look upon the sun itself, look upon the reflected rays of the sun as the sun itself, and upon the halo around the moon as if it were the moon itself; so also do those who are unable to bear the sight of God, look upon his image, his angel word, as himself”. Again, in *Conf.* 147: “For even if we are not yet suitable to be called the sons of God, still we may deserve to be called the children of his eternal image, of his most sacred word; for the image of God is his most ancient word”.

²¹ Cf. *Opif.* 25: “[man] was made in the image of God – and if the image be a part of the image, then manifestly so is the entire form, namely, the whole of this world perceptible by the external senses, which is a greater imitation of the divine image than the human form is. It is manifest also, that the archetypal seal, which we call that world which is perceptible only to the intellect, must itself be the archetypal model, the idea of ideas, the Reason of God”.



²² David Runia, "God and Man in Philo of Alexandria", *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 39 (1988) pp. 48-75.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 73-74.

²⁴ For a useful survey of the relevant sources, Platonic and Christian, see C. W. Macleod, "ANALYSIS: A Study in Ancient Mysticism", *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 21 (1970) pp. 43-55.

²⁵ See Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953) pp. 156-79.

²⁶ D. Runia, "God and Man", p. 69.

²⁷ The only study dedicated to this subject is that of G. W. Butterworth, "The Deification of Man in Clement of Alexandria" *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1916), pp. 157-169, but its conclusions would need a serious update.

²⁸ Karen Jo Torjesen, "Hermeneutics and Soteriology in Origen's *Peri Archon*", in Elisabeth A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica XXI. Papers presented to the Tenth International Conference on Patristic*

Studies held in Oxford 1987 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989) pp. 333-348, here 334. See also her excellent book, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Structure in Origen's Exegesis* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986) pp. 70-107.

²⁹ For an excellent survey of Origen's trinitarian theology and its Platonic implementations, see Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) esp. pp. 7-120.

³⁰ For an opposite view concerning man's possibility of knowing God in Origen's work, see John Dillon, "The Knowledge of God in Origen", in R. van den Broek, T. Baarda, and J. Mansfeld (ed.), *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988) pp. 219-228.

³¹ K. J. Torjesen, "Hermeneutics and Soteriology", p. 338.

³² Robert Berchman, *From Philo to Origen. Middle Platonism in Transition* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984) pp. 117-120.