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Plato's Influence on Early Christianity and St. Paul

by Bro. Anthony C. Parete, S.M.

In the limited yet extensive intricate network of early philosophies, the queries often posed are: who influenced whom, who had the original concept, who borrowed, who borrowed and built on, who assimilated and purified or enhanced? Now, as for the present purpose of this treatise, the question raised is: what influence or magnetism did Plato's theory of Body and Soul have on early Christianity and the writings of Saint Paul? For there are those who would maintain the Platonic influence immeasurable:

“. . . attempting to establish the divinity as well as the immortality of the soul. In this he (Plato) anticipates Christianity, and his influence on Saint Paul and the early Church is immeasurable.”¹

On the other hand, there are those who would maintain that, on grounds of Biblical semantics and linguistics and the consequence of these on the philosophical and theological thought found in Sacred Scripture, the Platonic influence on Saint Paul and the early Church was negligible if not nil:

“In the New Testament we find the same expressions and the same coincidence on meaning . . . (but this) . . . must not be interpreted in terms of Platonism . . .”²

The diversity of opinion would then center about the Greeks and the Hebrews, for the early Church, the initial core, was Hebrew — Hebrew in its culture, its history, its philosophy and theology. The first consideration then is to determine whether or not the Greeks and the Jews shared anything in common. The first similarity noted is that both the Greeks and Jews intellectualized faith in God; however, the Greeks were the first to determine a soul as distinct from the body as far back as the sixth century B.C. and this springing not from a philosophical spirit but from a religious movement.³ The second consideration would concern itself with the possibility of any cultural influence or exchange taken from the view of travel, trade, commerce, possible intermarriage . . . etc. It can readily be stated that such contact between the two nations was an established fact and, for the purpose of this treatise, strong enough to warrant at least the possibility of some philosophical and theological dialog. Scripture serves up the significant fact that affixed to the cross Christ was crucified

on “. . . there was also an inscription written over him in Greek and Latin and Hebrew letters, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’ ”⁴

In light of these two considerations, namely, intellectualism and cultural contact, the next step is to determine if there was any philosophical and/or theological exchange. The approach used in this treatise will be the examination of the semantics and linguistics of Plato’s theory of dualism of Body and Soul as found in his *Phaedo* and the view of the same Body-Soul concept as found in Sacred Scripture. The whole of the argument will be based essentially on but six words: three from Hebrew and three from Greek. On the strength of these six words it is hoped that it can be determined whether Plato’s dualism did, in fact, influence Hebrew thought or whether the Hebrews maintained a non-dichotomous view of Body and Soul.

Six key words under consideration: (Greek and Hebrew script will be used throughout this treatise).

ENGLISH	GREEK	HEBREW
(Body – corpse)	Soma σ ὤμα	Gouph גוף
(Body – flesh)	Sarx σὰρξ	Basar בשר
(Soul)	Psyche ψυχή	Nephes נֶפֶשׁ

The main strength of Plato’s theory for the immortality of the soul rests on his strong and outspoken position of the secondary role of the body. Throughout his *Phaedo* references to the body as something separate and distinct demonstrate Plato’s theory of dualism. It is significant to note that throughout, his word for BODY is the Greek word SOMA (σ ὤμα), and that for Plato there seems to be no real distinction in the use of this word over another, between the body as a body, living, dead, fleshy, or sentient. Thus Plato speaks in his *Phaedo* of:

“. . . release of the soul from the chains of the *body* (soma) . . . ”⁵

“. . . as long as we live we will be closest to knowing when, as far as possible, we have no association or trade with the *body* (soma) except as necessity compels, when we are no longer contaminated by its nature but purified of its contact . . . attaining purity at last in separation from the *body*’s (soma) madness . . . Is not the exact meaning of the word death that a soul is unbond and set apart from a *body* (soma)” #67 a-d

“. . . when the soul emerges from the *body* (soma) the wind may really puff it away . . . ” #77 d

“. . . as soon as the tension of our *body* (soma) is lowered or increased beyond the proper point, the soul must be destroyed . . . ” #86 c

“. . . the reason why I am lying here now is that my *body* (soma) is composed of bones and sinews . . . ” #98 c

“ . . . it is only my *body* (soma) that you are burying, and you can bury it as you please . . . ” #115 e

Plato's SOUL, as separate and distinct from the body, is the only true principle of life, is something immortal, is pursuing true wisdom, and, as seen in the quotes on the BODY, is deceived and hampered by the BODY. It is also in the *Phaedo* that the topics of eating, drinking, and dressing are attributed to the sentient body only and are incompatible with the true nature of the SOUL. Plato's word of SOUL is the Greek word PSYCHE (ψυχή), and never is this word used with any indication, reference, or connection to the BODY other than being something distinct and separate.

“ . . . when you say that on the man's death his *soul* (psyche) lives on and still has some powers . . . ” #70 b

“ . . . the *soul* (psyche) seems to be something immortal . . . ” #73 a

“ . . . the common fear that man's *soul* (psyche) may be disintegrated at the very moment of his death . . . ” #77 b

“ . . . that our *soul* (psyche) existed before it took on this present shape is perfectly satisfying — I might even say convincing.” #87 a

“ . . . the *soul* (psyche) must be proved to be indestructible and immortal.” #95 c

“ . . . in which a man can be from all anxiety about the fate of his *soul* (psyche)—if in life he has abandoned bodily pleasures . . . ” #114 d

A striking linguistic usage is found in the synoptic writers. Each writer had a different audience in mind: Matthew the Jews, Mark the Romans, Luke the Gentile converts, and John, everyone who had read the other three. The burden, therefore, of translation and proper usage of words and their meanings was an important task. Mark, Luke, and John wrote in Greek and Matthew wrote “for his countrymen of Palestine in his native Aramaic, the ‘Hebrew tongue’ mentioned in the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel was soon translated into Greek — possibly during the lifetime of St. Matthew or a little later; certainly before the close of the first century. The original has been lost in the course of time. The Greek text, however, is in substantial conformity with the original.”⁶

Now from the Biblical point of view it can be said that “language itself often has metaphysical implications.”⁷ The first implication, consequential in itself, is that in Hebrew there is no word as such meaning BODY. The only words referring to the BODY in Hebrew are GOUPH (גֹּחַל) and BASAR (בָּשָׂר), the former meaning literally “corpse” and the latter “flesh.”⁸ In this denotation, therefore, when the Hebrews spoke of the living body, the body shaped by God in the womb, they

used the word BASAR (בָּשָׂר) “flesh.”⁹ The Greek word SARX (σὰρξ) is used for the Hebrew counterpart BASAR (בָּשָׂר), SARX meaning the flesh or fleshy parts of the body.¹⁰

“ . . . the spirit is willing but the *flesh* (sarx) is weak.”¹¹ Matt. 26, 41

“ . . . and the two shall become one *flesh* (sarx).” Mark 10, 8

“ . . . the word was made *flesh* (sarx).” John 1, 14

Also, the Greek word SOMA (σῶμα) is used for its Hebrew counterpart GOUPH (גֹּוֹי), SOMA meaning the human body as (alive or) dead.¹² The significance of this usage demonstrates that the Hebraistic notion of body is not the same and can not be interpreted in the same terms of Plato’s view of body.

“ . . . went to Pilate and asked for the *body* (soma) of Jesus.” Matt. 27, 58

“ . . . Joseph of Arimathea . . . went in boldly to Pilate and asked for the *body* (soma) of Jesus.” Mark 15, 43

“ . . . Jews therefore, since it was the Preparation Day, in order that the *bodies* (soma) might not remain upon the cross.” John 19, 31

Again, turning to Scripture it is discovered that by force of words the Hebrew considered this BODY, this tangible, sensible, expressive, and living reality that is man, as the SOUL—showing that they were unhampered by a body-soul dichotomy.¹³ The Hebrew word for SOUL is NEPHES (נֶפֶשׁ) and denotes the principle of life. In Genesis, then, the Hebrew is not speaking of the creation of a BODY, but of the creation of man BODY and SOUL.

“ . . . God formed man from the dust of the ground and He blew into his nostrils a breath of life; and man became a living *soul* (nephes).” Gen. 2, 7¹⁴

And again the Hebrew uses indiscriminately the term SOUL — NEPHES (נֶפֶשׁ) or the term FLESH — BASAR (בָּשָׂר) for the living man.¹⁵

“Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my *flesh* (basar) also shall rest in hope.” Psalm 16, 9

Consider now St. Paul who, a Jew by birth and educated in Jerusalem, wrote his epistles in Greek and was also faced with the task of translation, meaning, and usage of words. For the word SOUL he uses the Greek word PSYCHE (ψυχή) for the Hebrew counterpart NEPHES (נֶפֶשׁ). When reading his epistles, the

same expressions of SOUL and FLESH are found along with the same apparent coincidence of meaning:

“Tribulation and anguish shall be visited upon the *soul* (psyche) of every man who works evil.” Rom. 2, 9

“Let *everyone* (psyche) be subject to the higher authorities . . .” Rom. 13, 1

And again:

“ . . . to walk not according to the *flesh* (sarx).” Rom. 8, 4

“ . . . to live according to the *flesh* (sarx).” Rom. 8, 13

If FLESH were taken in the Platonic sense, St. Paul would have meant strictly: to satisfy the desires of one's body. However, at the same time St. Paul, with exactly the same intent, uses the expressions: “ . . . to walk according to *man*.” 1 Cor. 3, 3 and “ . . . to walk not according to the *flesh*.”— to say —“ . . . are you not *carnal*? ” he just as willingly writes: “ . . . are you not *men*? ” 1 Cor. 3, 3, using in the Greek the word FLESH — SARX (σάρξ)¹⁶ with the variant MAN - ANTHROPOS (ἄνθρωπος).¹⁷ Nowhere is there found the word FLESH used to convey what is meant by BODY as understood in Platonic terms.¹⁸

Because of the Hebrew's non-dichotomous body-soul view, the SOUL — NEPHES (נֶפֶשׁ) is often attributed with bodily functions¹⁹ — for the Hebrew the SOUL was hungry, dry, had its thirst quenched, desired food and drink, and was the seat of emotions. The importance here is not so much the use of words as it is in the meaning and context in which they are used; the inconsistency to Platonism is very clear.

“ . . . that my *soul* (nephes) may bless you before I die.” Gen. 27, 4

“But now our *soul* (nephes) is dried away.” Num. 11, 6

“ . . . because thy *soul* (nephes) longeth to eat flesh.” Deut. 12, 20

“For he hath satisfied the longing *soul* (nephes), and filled the hungry *soul* (nephes) with good.” Psalm 107, 9

“I shall give water to the thirsting *soul* (nephes), and I shall satiate the languishing *soul* (nephes).” Jer. 21, 15

In the New Testament the word SOUL — PSYCHE (ψυχή) is used for its Hebrew counterpart NEPHES (נֶפֶשׁ) in exactly the same non-dichotomous manner²⁰ by the synoptic writers and St. Paul:

“Therefore I say to you, do not be anxious for your *life* (psyche), what you shall eat . . .” Matt. 6, 25

"You will find rest in your *souls* (psyche)." Matt. 11, 29

"My *soul* (psyche) is sad, even unto death." Matt. 26, 38

"I will say to my *soul* (psyche): *Soul* (psyche), thou hast many good things laid up for many years; take thy ease, eat, drink, and be merry." Luke 12, 19

"Now my *soul* (psyche) is troubled." John 12, 27

"Tribulation and anguish shall be visited upon the *soul* (psyche) of every man who works evil." Rom. 2, 9

Conceded, all this may be convincing; but how would certain passages be explained in which Platonic dualism is not only very strong but almost a direct echo of Plato's own theory as found in the *Phaedo*?

"Ever the soul is weighed down by a mortal body, earthbound cell that clogs the manifold activity of its thought." Wisdom 9, 15

". . . back goes dust to its parent earth, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." Eccl. 12, 7

The answer proposed would be: if it is held that Solomon wrote the Book of Wisdom and Ecclesiastes, then there would be ground to assert that Platonic dualism influenced Hebrew philosophy and theology. However, if the authorship is doubted, as it is by "Origen, Eusebius, Augustine, and Jerome because of the numerous typically Greek compound words which cannot occur in Hebrew and which are foreign to the Semitic spirit,"²¹ then these seemingly Platonic overtones could be attributed to a Greek-Jew author of Alexandria, a chief center of Hellenistic learning.²² In consideration of the latter, the content of the thoughts would not be of pure Hebraistic origin but of a slated or tinted view of a Greek orientated mind.

It may even be further contested that Platonic dualism — regardless of any combination of words — did in fact influence the Hebrew mentality. The many passages of the New Testament give apparent evidence of not only lending support to but even bolstering Plato's dualism, his mistrust in the body and things temporal, his striving to free the soul to return to a true state. Even in our modern era, when the Church's growing concern is the overly indulgence in materialistic prosperity, Plato's sophistic-philosophic doctrine seems to underlie and emanate from these very passages — the very words of Christ! — which the Church uses from its pulpits and sanctuaries to warn its faithful that:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . ." Matt. 6, 19-20

"The *spirit* (pneuma — O.T. *ruah*)²³ indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Mark 14, 38

“Not by bread alone shall man live, but by every word of God.” Luke 4, 4 (Deut. 8, 3)

“Therefore I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat; nor yet for your body, what you shall put on . . . (for after all these things the nations of the world seek) . . . seek the kingdom of God . . .” Luke 12, 22-31

In answer the truth must be conceded that perhaps, in attempting to safeguard the faithful and give them true incentives, too much stress is laid upon rhetorical devices to the extent that the spiritual message and interpretation of that message is obscured to the point where only CONTRAST remains: Body and Material World are Bad; Soul is the Only Real Concern! The philosophical distinction, however, is a simple one. The matter and content of such New Testament passages are not centering around Platonic dualism of breaking chains, stoical purgation or ultimate freedom of philosophic thought; it is not a question of BODY and SOUL — it is one of NATURE and GRACE.

Lastly, it might be contended that if these distinctions and counter-distinctions in philosophical thought and word usage do manifest a certain amount of veracity, then what place does Revelation and Inspiration have? These indubitably have an important place and must be considered; however, the events of the past decade and the resurgence of Biblical study as a key to a greater understanding and dialog among the various creeds and religious sects have put an awesome burden on Scripture scholars and those who would use Scripture as the major tool in apologetics and polemics. Before the scholar's eyes is a sacred book. God is the author, yet that authorship is also human. The word is God's word expressed in human language; in that expression there are mingled the mysteries of faith and human elements — both blended into a Single Revelation.

Inspiration means that God's mind has been expressed in human language. This language must be understood first, if one is to grasp the divine message. This is the guiding principle of Scripture Scholarship.²⁴ At the same time the human side of the inspired literary process is a factor. Here revelations (of a mystical type) can play a role; however, it is also possible that older traditions were simply taken over or that personal reflection and reasoning led to a particular statement. One cannot therefore immediately draw conclusions concerning the concrete origin of a Biblical text from the fact of Inspiration.²⁵ It is therefore necessary in Scriptural study to seek the true meaning of the text apart from its surface meaning and to keep a statement in its context, distinguishing literary form from poetic, history from ideology.²⁶

In light of what has been presented, it may be concluded that the early Church and St. Paul, following the philosophy and theology of their own background and expressing this philosophy and theology via the written word, were not influenced by Platonic dualism. For although there seems to be a common bond in translating

the words BODY, FLESH, and SOUL from the Hebrew to the Greek, the fact is evident that the philosophical thought of Plato's dualism of BODY and SOUL—SOMA (σῶμα) and PSYCHE (ψυχή) do not correspond semantically nor linguistically to the Hebrew's BODY—GOUH (גֹּוֹי) and interrelated BODY-SOUL—BASAR (בָּשָׂר) and NEPHES (נֶפֶשׁ). And where Platonic influence does seem to manifest itself, care must be taken to search out and distinguish the philosophical from the theological, the literary from the poetic, the historical from the ideological, the revealed and inspired from the purely human; only in such discernment will scholarly investigation prove meaningful.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 J. D. Kaplan, *Dialogues of Plato*. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1950. p. 64.
- 2 Claude Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought*. New York: Desclee Company, 1960. p. 94.
- 3 Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*. London: Clarendon Press, 1947. p. 73.
- 4 (Luke 23, 38) , *THE NEW TESTAMENT*. New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1956. (Confraternity Revision)
- 5 (For the Greek text) John Burnet, *Plato's Phaedo*. London: Clarendon Press, 1959 edition.
- 6 , *THE NEW TESTAMENT*. *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- 7 Tresmontant, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
- 8 Ben-Yehuda, *Ben-Yehuda's Pocket English-Hebrew, Hebrew-English Dictionary*, New York: Washington Square Press Inc., 1964.
- 9 Tresmontant, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
- 10 Alexander Souter, M.A., *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.
- 11 (For the Greek text) D. Dr. Eberhard Nestle, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*. Stuttgart: Privilegierte Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1957.
- 12 Souter, *op. cit.*
- 13 Tresmontant, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
- 14 (For the Hebrew text) M. Friedlander, *The Illustrated Jerusalem Bible, Hebrew-English* (edited). Jerusalem: Jerusalem Bible Publishing Co. Ltd., 1884.
- 15 Tresmontant, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 17 Nestle, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
- 18 Tresmontant, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 21 Louis F. Hartman, C.S.S.R., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible*. New York: McGraw W-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963. p. 2590.
- 22 *Ibid.*

23 The distinction between PNEUMA (Πνεῦμα) and PSYCHE (ψυχή) is in accordance with O.T. usage, where RUAH (N.T. — pneuma) denotes the Divinely imparted principle of life and NEPHES (N.T. — psyche) the result of the impartation as also the principle of life for the natural man. The indiscriminate use of these two words to denote the same idea is found in IS. 26, 9 "With my *soul* (nephes) have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my *spirit* (ruah) with-me will I seek thee." — a parallel to which we have in the Song of the Virgin Mary in Luke 1, 46 "My *soul* (psyche) magnifies the Lord, and my *spirit* (pneuma) rejoices in God my Savior."

An interesting example of a subtle psychological distinction between PNEUMA (Πνεῦμα) and PSYCHE (ψυχή) is found in the personal expressions of Jesus with two distinct sources of trouble and sorrow: John 12, 27 "My *soul* (psyche) is troubled." and John 13, 21 ". . . (Jesus) he was troubled in *spirit* (pneuma)." that is, stirred to the very depths of His being.

James Hustings, D.D., *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*. (edited) New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909 Vol. II, pp. 671-3.

24 Eugene A. Fisher, "The New Approach to Scripture," *Catholic Digest*. (condensed from the *Lamp*. May, 1965) Vol. 29, No. 12, Oct., 1965. p. 54.

25 Norbert Lohfink, S.J., "Genesis 2-3 as 'historical etiology,'" *Theology Digest*. Vol. XIII, No. 1, Spring 1965. p. 11.

26 Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 55.