

## On Contemplation: Greek, Jewish, Christian<sup>1</sup>

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**T**heōria (θεωρία) figured in Greek Platonic culture as a way of seeking salvation by moral discipline and mental dialectic. Ritual became involved only later, when “theurgy” was practiced as a supplement to mental contemplation. Philosophy distanced itself from the rites of popular religion while retaining spiritual exercises of its own: Plotinus merged with “the God” no less than four times in Porphyry’s presence, and Porphyry himself testifies that “once I drew near and was united to [God].”<sup>2</sup> Apparently no prayer was needed for the union to occur.

It is striking that the Jews have no clear counterpart to θεωρία. Their religious concerns are put otherwise, as a few Hebrew words indicate. *Darash*: the verb means “to seek” or “to inquire.” Qoheleth tells us, “And I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with” (Ecc. 1:13). Elsewhere, the preacher uses *bigesh*, which also means “to seek” in the sense of intellectual inquiry: “I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness which is madness” (Ecc. 7:25). From *chashab*, “devising” or “planning,” we find a noun, *machashabah*, which can mean “thought,” as the Psalmist uses it: “the LORD, knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath” (Ps. 94:11). Perhaps the closest that Hebrew comes to Greek is in the verbs *siach* and *hagah*, “to muse” and “to meditate,” respectively. *Siach* is attuned to study: “May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD” (Ps. 104:34) and “Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97). *Hagah* is also oriented to study. Again, let us listen to the Psalmist who, this time, is speaking of the blessed man: “but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:2). *Hagah* often alludes to wordless sounds, like a lion’s growl or a human groan, and its association with meditation probably comes from the way in which someone brooding on a passage of Scripture will mumble its words over and over.

After Matthew Arnold and Erich Auerbach, we are well used to drawing a contrast between a Greek emphasis on the visual and a Hebraic accent on the aural, or, more recently, an affirmation of the Hebraic stress on the text as distinct from a Greek preoccupation with presence.<sup>3</sup> One should be

wary of overdrawing the distinction, for Christians can be as devoted to Scripture as Jews, and Jews have been known to gaze upon the divine, even given the dire warning, “you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). Jacob took himself to have seen God “face to face” at Peniel and was spared (Gen. 32:30). The Lord God pointedly says to Aaron and Miriam that with Moses “I speak mouth to mouth” (Num. 12:8). Isaiah saw the Lord God sitting on a throne, with seraphim above him (Isa. 6:1-4), and Ezekiel also saw the Merkabah, the throne of the Most High (Ezek. 1:4-26).

An interesting case of a Jewish vision of God is found in the story of Hagar, Sarai’s Egyptian maid, to whom Sarai sent Abraham so that he might have a son by her. The practice was common enough at the time and would have had no consequences for the nature of the child: the matrilineal line in Judaism started only in Mishnaic times, after the Babylonian captivity. Hagar was not a Jew, but she became a figure of the Jews. Her son is Ishmael whom Abraham sent away after Ishmael mocked Isaac, the son Abraham had later with Sarai. It must be said that Christian commentary on Genesis has been mostly slanted against Hagar. It begins with Paul interpreting Isaac and Ishmael allegorically in Galatians 4:21-31. Hagar, the bonds-woman, gave birth to one child, while Sarai, the free woman, gave birth to another, and each comes to represent one of the two divine covenants, Law and Grace. After Paul, it became an easy matter for the Jews to be associated with Hagar, and Christians with Sarai.

Philo reads the story of Hagar and Sarai in terms of study. Hagar is associated with προγυμνάσματα (progymnasmata), the preliminary rhetorical studies, and Sarai with virtue.<sup>4</sup> Didymus the Blind (c. 313-98), a Christian Alexandrian, follows his distinction.<sup>5</sup> In *De civitate dei*, Augustine links Hagar with the earthly city.<sup>6</sup> Aquinas follows Augustine, as do most commentators on the passage in Genesis in which Hagar appears.<sup>7</sup> And yet there is a moment when Hagar rises to be a figure of contemplation. This is not likely to be based on the Hebrew, for *Hgr* (the proper name) does not derive from *hgh* (the verb). In fact, as Jerome points out, the name “Hagar” would mean etymologically “‘sojourning,’ ‘wandering,’ or ‘tarrying.’”<sup>8</sup> In his commentary on Genesis, the German Benedictine Rabanus Maurus (c. 780-856) counters a long-established tradition of neglecting Hagar, or even being hostile to her, when he writes of her meeting with an angel. If one excludes Genesis 3:24, where no mention is made of Adam or Eve actually seeing the cherubim who are sent to guard the Tree of Life, it is the first time that anyone in the Bible sees an angel.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting, by way of background, that one of the main authorities on contemplation in the early middle ages was Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), whose weighty works on the topic are

commentaries on Hebrew Scripture: *Homilies on Ezekiel*, *Moralia on Job*, and *On the Song of Songs*. Christian theory of contemplation arises in large part from reflection on Jewish Scripture, the language of which does not have a word for it. Origen on the Cantic and Gregory of Nyssa on the life of Moses both come to mind, as does Richard of St. Victor on the Ark of the Covenant, but they are only peaks in an immense mountain range. And at the start of that range, one finds Philo.

Is Hagar a figure for *hagah*? Not quite, for Rabanus Maurus sees Hagar not as study or inquiry but as directly gazing upon the divine. His ground is Scripture itself. First, we are told of Hagar's encounter with an angel:

And he said, "Hagar, maid of Sar'ai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sar'ai." The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude." And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ish'mael; because the LORD has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." (Gen. 16:8-12)

And then Hagar reflects on what has happened:

So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "Thou art a God of seeing"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him [וַיֵּרָא]?" (Gen. 16:13)

Angels were taken to represent the divine, in both senses of the verb—to be messengers of God and to be phenomenalizations of God—and Christians often interpreted angels to be figures of Christ. For Rabanus Maurus, it is Hagar's gaze on the angel that encourages him to associate Hagar and contemplation. "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" she asks.

The Christianity that long took the figure of Hagar as one of its bases for superseding Judaism, seeing it as an "old covenant" with God, finally found another way of thinking of her, but only by associating Hagar with a non-Jewish notion of contemplation. The lesson is cautionary: Christians should not speak of contemplation without giving due weight to its religious particularity and to the abuses that have been performed in its name. God keeps his promises to the Jews. When he declares himself to Moses "I AM

WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14), he commits himself to be with them always and not to change his allegiance. God does not make promises to one religion and fulfill them in another. In electing the Jewish people, he says, in effect, "You are who you are." The religion he opens to those who follow Jesus does not replace Judaism; it continues that religion by other means, mostly by way of Greek philosophy and Roman law, reordering the Hebrew Bible in order to link the Messianic prophecies with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and finding self-understanding by re-interpreting it and adding to it. Judaism adds Talmudic commentary to the original revelation and passes from formative to normative Judaism. Christianity adds the definitive coming of the Messiah and thereby goes in another direction, although it keeps the animating impulse of Judaism. Christianity is always Judeo-Christian; it is nourished by the senior faith, sometimes rebuked by it when it makes exclusive claims about salvation and interprets its Scriptures in modest or extravagant ways. One of these extravagancies occurs by way of *contemplatio*.



"Contemplation" is a translation of several words that have been used with other senses and functions. It comes most deeply from the Latin *templum*, usually a rectangular part of the open sky selected and deemed sacred by an augur in order to determine an augury. The augur establishes his ritual space, his *auguraculum*, by aligning the cardinal points. He faces east: wild birds' entering the sacred space to the augur's left, the north, is an auspicious sign from the gods, while having birds enter the space from the right, the south, is a discouraging sign.

More directly, "contemplation" comes to us from the Latin *contemplatio*, first used by Cicero: "*Summa vero vis infinitatis et magna ac diligenti contemplatione dignissima est*" (The mighty power of the infinite deeply repays our loving contemplation).<sup>10</sup> In turn, *contemplatio* renders the Greek *θεωρία*, not only in its philosophical senses, as found in Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, but also in the sense of mental prayer that the Fathers and other early Christian thinkers were to give it. Origen tells us that the Canticle should be read last in a course of scriptural inquiry, "that a man may come to it when his manner of life has been purified"; only when he has become "competent to proceed to dogmatic and mystical matters" may he advance to the "contemplation [*contemplatio*] of the Godhead with pure and spiritual love."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa speaks in his *Life of Moses* of the need for the one who approaches "the contemplation [*θεωρία*] of Being" to be purified.<sup>12</sup> Contemplation is not open to everyone; it comes only after considerable study and spiritual discipline maintained by faith and

conducted in love. Augustine will be in accord. In *De Trinitate*, he tells us, “Contemplation in fact is the reward of faith, a reward for which hearts are cleansed through faith, as it is written, *cleansing their hearts through faith* (Acts 15:9).”<sup>13</sup>

Augustine wrote these words long after experiencing failed Plotinian ascents as a young man. He tells us of them in book 7 of the *Confessions*. The first attempt ended in frustration, and he found himself “in the region of dissimilarity”; the second attempt was a success and “in the flash of a trembling glance” the power he found within “attained to that which is.”<sup>14</sup> Yet it was only a qualified success, for Augustine returns to his “customary condition.” His failure to reach God and to change for the better was doubtless one of the prompts he felt to embrace Catholicism. Sometime after baptism, while staying at Ostia, when he was finally able to touch God and to feel “bound to that higher world,” it was by way of an animated conversation with his mother, a woman of deep faith though little education, and it must be remembered that she too was able to encounter God. “And while we talked [*loquimur*] and panted after it, we touched [*atingimus*] it in some degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart.”<sup>15</sup> Intellect and faith were both needed for mother and son in this early Christian instance of raising the mind to God. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine reflects on the inadequacy of *scientia*, knowledge, as a means of reaching God; what is needed is *sapientia*, wisdom, which comes only through faith in the economy of salvation. If he is seeking to contrast Christian contemplation with Platonic θεωρία, he is shading a little too heavily. Plato argues that only those who have morally purified themselves through φιλοσοφία (philosophia) can discern the Forms. He is not talking simply of grasping universals, as a student does these days in a class in logic or metaphysics, but of perceiving Forms that are themselves illumined by the Good.<sup>16</sup> In Plato’s view, only like knows like.<sup>17</sup> Yet Augustine has reason to distance himself from Plato, for Augustine is animated by a concept the Greek did not have: original sin. For him, our gaze is impaired by sin, both original sin and actual sin, and while the atonement enables our salvation it does not repair our ability to see God.



As it passes from paganism into the new world of Christianity, θεωρία changes: it is folded into prayer and no longer abides simply in the disciplined attention to the primal order of the world; it aligns itself with wisdom in preference to knowledge, and directs itself to the God who created the heavens and the earth, who is beyond them while also within them, and whose perfect image is Jesus Christ, true God and true man. Wisdom

acknowledges our finitude and our sinful nature, and it grasps that original and actual sin have darkened our gaze. No longer regarded as the highest being in the κόσμος (kósmos), but as the One who creates it out of nothing, God cannot be reckoned in natural terms, no matter to what powers they are raised through metaphor or symbol. This should not be taken to mean that God transcends the world so as to form a contrast with it. God's reality does not diminish the reality of the created order, yet the divine being does not rely on that reality or suffer any modification of his being because of it. God transcends the world in such a way that he is free to enter it and to withdraw from it while also being beyond its limits. For Christians, God is "the most free," unconditioned by anything, and as we become like him we also become "the most free" in our own more limited sphere.

Our freedom is limited by our finitude in space and time, yet these restrictions are part of the excellences of creation. Our true experience of limitation occurs through the cramping of our condition that we call sin, which we encounter paradoxically as a relaxing or even severing of the relationship with God that God freely initiates, sustains, and reconstitutes when need be. I might say to myself in secret: without God, I can be free to do as I wish! Yet an educated Christian conscience will respond as follows: rather than freeing us, sin constricts us to a world that can be measured only by our minds and hearts and not by the One who created all these things. New horizons come, yet eventually they weary us, sometimes because they are alien to us, and sometimes because on inspection we find that it is we who project them. It is the story of Doctor Faustus as told by Christopher Marlowe or Goethe. More modestly, if at first we delight in finding that we ascribe meaning to phenomena, we eventually tire of discerning those meanings in ceaseless correlations of noesis and noema. We can regain our freedom only in finding the Creator and accepting the invitation to restore the relationship with him that we have let slide or have broken. Then we live in God's horizon, in the God whom we experience as the horizon of horizons, and as the One who can give fresh, inexhaustible meaning to our lives.

Christianity does not completely break with Greek paganism or with Judaism; it is perpetually transforming both, forming endless combinations of motifs from each that never quite resolve themselves into a stable pattern. This lack of resolution negatively marks the ability of Christianity to develop or regress, in the practice of the faith as much as in attempts to think of this faith in all its heritages, its contemporary facets, and its untold consequences. And this ability is positively marked by the faith's own logic as elaborated in theology, in philosophical criticism of its theses, and in its engagement with other world religions. The themes of freedom and relation that I have elaborated all involve contemplation either directly or indirectly.

The darkening of contemplation in sin is not merely a development within Christianity but essential to the Christian understanding of God (not that it is exclusively Christian; once again, one must acknowledge Philo as a forerunner.)<sup>18</sup>

Wisdom, as Augustine teaches us, consists in realizing that our knowledge is limited. Believe in order to understand, he stated time and again, with Isaiah 7:9 in the Old Latin translation of the Hebrew forever in mind (*si non credideritis non permanebitis*).<sup>19</sup> We come to the uncreated light only if we no longer rely entirely on the light of created reason. We pass from the visible to the invisible, to be sure, but in Christianity this distinction does not readily converge with that between the dark and the light. It does so if we allow Platonism to determine the course of Christian thought. Yet the only Platonism that can serve Christianity is a philosophy that has been thoroughly transformed by Christianity. Any classical philosophy that can be of use to a Christian *as Christian* must pass through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. One might begin with Genesis 1:1—"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"—as it has been read since the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* was proposed by Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian and much later deemed a dogma at Lateran IV (1215).<sup>20</sup>

The God who creates the heaven and the earth is outside or beyond both. He is otherwise than what he creates, and our human story is only a verse, perhaps a very short one, in his song. Yet we are not entitled to argue the stronger thesis that this God is unlike what he creates. The God of Genesis, worshipped by all those whose faiths come from Abraham, offers himself to us as radically unlike us, above and beyond the very distinction between created being and nothingness, while also like us in some respects. For this God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Gen. 1:26). We can draw two preliminary truths from these verses. First, God is darkness for us until such time as we are enlightened, and he is darkness because he radically transcends creation and hence our natural reason. Second, God gives us the opportunity to be enlightened. We do not have to look beyond the universe; we do not even have to look outside the window. All we have to do is find one or both of the image and likeness of God in ourselves. The great quest of human beings, Judeo-Christianity teaches, is to find where God has impressed himself on us. Plato taught us that we do not need to travel to find the truth, and the young Augustine could only agree.<sup>21</sup> In its own way, the Bible says the same. The difference is that, unlike Plato, the Bible says that we are to search for an image. But where can we find it? What will it be?

<sup>1</sup> This essay is an edited excerpt from the paper “Philosophia and Religions,” presented as a Gifford Lecture at the University of Glasgow on June 10, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Porphyry, “On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books,” in *Plotinus*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), vol. I, 71.

<sup>3</sup> See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, new intro. Edward Said (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), ch. 1, and, for example, Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 97–192.

<sup>4</sup> See Philo, “On Mating with the Preliminary Studies,” in *Philo*, 10 vols., trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), vol. IV, 3.11–12.

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament II: Genesis 12–50*, ed. Mark Sheridan (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 7 vols., trans. Philip Levine (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), vol. VI, pp. 417, 419.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. F. R. Larcher, intro. Richard T. A. Murphy (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1966), 135.

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 1.

<sup>10</sup> See Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 1.50. Also see Tacitus, *Annals*, 63.1.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. and annotation R. P. Lawson (New York: The Newman Press, 1956), 44. The translation is of Rufinus’s Latin translation of the mostly lost original Greek text.

<sup>12</sup> See Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. and intro. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, pref. John Meyendorff (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 92.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. and intro. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), I.17.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and intro. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), bk. VII, 10.16, 16.22.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. IX, 10.24.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 509b.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *De Anima*, 404b.

<sup>18</sup> See Philo, “Who Is the Heir of Divine Things,” in *Philo*, vol. 4, LI, 263–66.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Augustine, *The Trinity*, 7, 4.12.

<sup>20</sup> See Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Grant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), §10, and Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, trans. Ernest Evans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 39–54.



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<sup>21</sup> Augustine, “Of True Religion,” in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. and intro. John H. S. Burleigh, The Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM Press, 1953), 29.72.