

EXCERPT



From Plato to Christ

How Platonic Thought Shaped the Christian Faith

August 3, 2021 | \$28, 256 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5304-5

Christians throughout the history of the church and even today have inherited aspects of the ancient Greek philosophy of Plato. To help us understand the influence of Platonic thought on the Christian faith, Louis Markos offers careful readings of some of Plato's best-known texts and then traces the ways that his work shaped some of Christianity's most beloved theologians.

Plato's Christian Legacy

As a member of the Manichaeans, the young Augustine believed that the flesh was irredeemably corrupt and had to be escaped from and transcended. The Manichaeans taught that, in his struggle against the dualistic forces of corruption, the incorruptible God had sent forth an offshoot of his substance to do battle. This substance was man's soul; however, in its struggle with corruption, "it had been taken captive, made impure, and corrupted, while the Word of God, which was to come to its assistance, was free, pure, and incorrupt. Yet if this was so, the Word of God must also have been subject to corruption, because it came of one and the same substance as the soul."

While Augustine the Manichaean understood the problem that the soul faces if it is to achieve salvation and liberation, he soon came to realize that the teachings of the Manichaeans could not effect the salvation they called for. That is why, in the second sentence of the above quote, Augustine makes use of a Socratic *reductio ad absurdum* to show that, if the Manichaeans are correct about the inherent corruption of the flesh, then any attempt on the part of God to enter our world and rescue the soul would be doomed from the outset. For the next several chapters, Augustine continues to expose the contradictions at the heart of Manichaeism, until, in chapter nine, he comes to the writings of the Neoplatonists, particularly Plotinus, and there finds the bridge he needs to cross the Tiber.

In "the books of the Platonists," Augustine explains, he found it written that the Logos was God, that the Logos had come to his own, and that the Logos had brought light and life (Jn 1:1-5, 9), but he did not find it written that all those who believed in his name were given the right to be called children of God (Jn 1:12). Likewise, although "in the same books I also read of the Word, God, that his birth came not from human stock, not from nature's will or man's, but from God [Jn 1:13] . . . I did not read in them that the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us [Jn 1:14]."

Continuing on in the same chapter, Augustine then makes a third distinction between the teachings of the Neoplatonists and the teachings of the New Testament—namely, that while the Neoplatonists accept the first verse of Paul's great incarnational passage (Phil 2:6) and teach that "God, the Son, being himself, like the Father, of divine nature, did not see, in the rank of Godhead, a prize to be coveted," they deny that the Son "dispossessed himself, and took the nature of a slave, fashioned in the likeness of men, and presenting himself to us in human form [Phil 2:7]." What is at issue here is what Paul refers to as the *kenosis*, the teaching that the divine Logos, in taking on humanity, emptied himself of the full glory and prerogatives he shared as a member of the Godhead and made himself, to quote the author of Hebrews, "a little lower than the angels" (Heb 2:7).

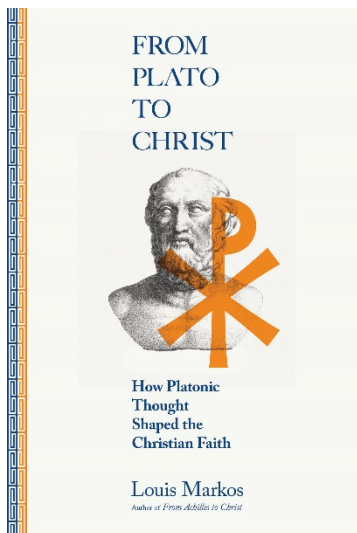
Though Augustine here exposes errors in the Neoplatonists, he does so in a far different manner than he did with the Manichaeans. Whereas the Manichaeans led him astray, the Neoplatonists helped set his feet on the proper road toward



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truth. Indeed, Augustine ends chapter nine by invoking the same biblical metaphor that he does in the passage from *On Christian Doctrine* quoted above:

It was from the Gentiles that I had come to you, and I set my mind upon the gold which you willed your people to carry away from Egypt for, wherever it was, it was yours. Through your apostle you told the Athenians that it is in you that we live and move and have our being, as some of their own poets have told us [Acts 17:28]. And, of course, the books I was reading were written in Athens. But your people had used the gold that was yours to serve the idols of the Egyptians, for they had exchanged God's truth for a lie, reverencing and worshipping the creature in preference to the Creator [Rom 1:25], and it was not upon these idols that I set my mind.

In a somewhat cryptic manner, Augustine here explains that his pilgrimage to Christ did not proceed by way of the Old Testament (the Jews who misused the gold they despoiled from the Egyptians to make the golden calf), but through the writings of the Greek Neoplatonists (the Gentiles, who had access, through the mines of divine providence, to real truth). To complicate the primary analogy a bit more, Augustine makes a secondary analogy between his own journey to faith and Paul's speech in Athens: just as Paul helped build a bridge between the Stoicism and Epicureanism of the Athenian elite by quoting a verse from the Greek poet Epimenides (Acts 17:28), so Augustine found his own bridge in the philosophical writings of Plato and his heirs.

As Augustine makes his slow transition from the partial truth of the Neoplatonists—who knew the eternal Word (Jn 1:1) but could not conceive of the incarnation (Jn 1:14)—to the complete truth of Christ, the Bible, and the church, he describes the process by way of a Platonic metaphor of ascent from the physical to the spiritual: “So, step by step, my thoughts moved on from the consideration of material things to the soul, which perceives things through the senses of the body, and to the soul's inner power to which the bodily senses communicate external facts.” In the end, Augustine makes clear, it was his direct encounter with the incarnate-resurrected Christ, and not with Plato, that saved him. Nevertheless, Plato prepared the way by taking him to the first rung of the ladder and pointing his gaze upward: “By reading these books of the Platonists I had been prompted to look for truth as something incorporeal, and I caught sight of your invisible nature, as it is known through your creatures [Rom 1:20].”

Interestingly, as Augustine winds down his discussion of the role that the writings of the Neoplatonists played in his conversion, he suggests that the deeper problem with the Neoplatonists was not their intellectual errors but their spiritual pride:

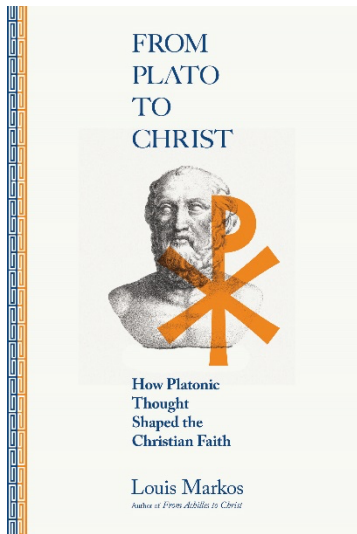
How could I expect that the Platonist books would ever teach me charity? I believe that it was by your will that I came across those books before I studied the Scriptures, because you wished me always to remember the impression they had made on me, so that later on, when I had been chastened by your Holy Writ and my wounds had been touched by your healing hand, I should be able to see and understand the difference between presumption and confession, between those who see the goal that they must reach, but cannot see the road by which they are to reach it, and those who see the road to that blessed country which is meant to be no mere vision but our home.



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The heirs of Plato knew the goal (the Beatific Vision) for which the soul was to strive, but they did not know the proper road to get there, for they presumed they could get there by their own effort and their own wisdom. Their *desires* were right, but they lacked the humility to see and confess their need.

And something more. Only once he embraced Christ did Augustine realize that the true telos for which he was made transcended Plato's vision of the Form of Goodness. Enlightenment is a good thing, but the proper end for which we were made is far more personal and intimate. The end of the journey is not a universal principle to contemplate but an eternal home to dwell in. So it is that Augustine prays to God in the famous opening paragraph of *Confessions*, "You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."

—Taken from chapter ten, "Plato in the West: Augustine, Boethius, and Dante"



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