


Platonism and the Bible(s)

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A relatively recent development in Septuagint studies is a focus on the alleged influence of Platonism on the Bible(s) (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the Septuagint). This article argues that Hellenism did in fact have an impact on Judaism. There are basically two groups of views on this issue. The first is that of the so-called minimalists, who make practically no allowance for freedom by the translators, and the second is that of the so-called maximalists, who believe that translators are relatively independent authors and interpreters. As far as the relationship between Judaism and Platonism is concerned, some scholars think Greek thought, specifically in the form of Platonism, had a determinative influence on Judaism, but others are not convinced. This article opts for a middle of the road point of view. It accepts that Hellenism had a definite impact on Judaism but it was not as extensive as stated by some.

Contribution: This research fits into the scope of *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* because it has made a study of the alleged impact of Platonism on Judaism. It finds that this impact is based on speculation, especially, by two authors: Evangelia Dafni and Russell Gmirkin.

Keywords: Platonism; Septuagint; Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; maximalists; minimalists.

Introduction

When I was a first-year student way back in 1971, I thought there was no relationship between the Greek world of antiquity (Greek 101) and the Semitic world (Heb 101). The teachers hardly ever referred to the other academic subjects in their courses. In fact, I detected an inkling of animosity between the departments. Later, I became more enlightened and realised that there is a relationship of sorts between these cultures, but what exactly the nature of that relationship was still seems to evade us today. Scholars still hold divergent views on this issue. There are, on the one hand, minimalists such as Pietersma (2006:33–47) and Sollamo (2012:1–22), who are unwilling to accept the possibility that any scribe would have the freedom to interpret his parent text freely. On the other hand, some scholars accept that scribes could be deemed authors/interpreters in their own right (Cook 1995:1–12, 2002; Rösel 2006:239–257; Schaper 2006). One way to arrive at a solution to this problem is to determine the translation technique of a translated unit, as has been suggested by Tov and Wright (1985:149–187) and elaborated on later, *inter alia*, by Ausloos, Lemmelijn and Kabergs (2012:273–294). It should be remembered that all translation is interpretation.

As far as the relationship between Judaism and Hellenism is concerned, scholars still differ. Concerning the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, two books included in this corpus according to various scholars reflect Greek philosophical influences. These are the Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs) and Kohelet (Ecclesiastes). On the way this could have taken place, one school of thinking is that the Archaic/Ancient Greek authors such as Homer, Hesiod and others, including the early biblical authors, drew from a common source (eds. Thompson & Wijdenbaum 2014:7). This explanation did not satisfy all scholars and Thompson et al. suggested new avenues. These new perspectives were documented in a ground-breaking collection entitled 'The Bible and Hellenism: Greek Influence on Jewish and Christian Literature' edited by Thomas L. Thompson and Phillippe Wijdenbaum in 2014.

Hebrew Bible and Platonism

Various scholars trace a direct relationship between the Hebrew Bible and Platonism. Niesiołowski-Spanò endeavoured to demonstrate that the primeval history echoes Plato (Niesiołowski-Spanò 2007:9). According to him, the notion of humans breath corresponds with the notion of the soul as expressed by Plato in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*. In his opinion, the Genesis story is a

Note: Special Collection: Septuagint and Textual Studies, sub-edited by Johann Cook (Stellenbosch University).

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reiteration of Plato, with the latter being the more scientific account. I find these points of view speculative, to say the least.

Whereas some scholars have argued that earlier sources should receive pride of place, later sources became the focus of other scholars. Russell Gmirkin (2006, 2017, 2022) has recently published rather extensively on this issue. He follows the research of Lemche (1998:287–318) and Thompson (2014:102–116), who on their side have opened new avenues to investigate. One is the late date of the Pentateuch. Gmirkin was one of the first scholars to argue for a Hellenistic dating of the Torah in his 2006 book *Berosus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus*. There Gmirkin points out that there is no clear evidence of the existence of Pentateuchal writings before their translation into Greek during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus. He indicates that the earliest fragments of the Hebrew Bible date no earlier than the late third century BCE (Gmirkin 2006:241). He, furthermore, demonstrates that the books of Genesis and Exodus rely on the Greek-language histories of Berossus (278 BCE [Gmirkin 2006:90] and Manetho (285–280 BCE) (Gmirkin 2006:189) and therefore must have been composed after both of them.

To be sure, he also finds space for the LXX (Cook 2017:14) as the first significant source for the biblical studies under discussion. Yet, I have problems with some of his interpretations. One of my main criticisms concerns his view on the coming to be of the Hebrew Bible. He speculates that it was created in the Alexandrian library by the 70 persons mentioned in the Aristeas Letter (Wright 2015:1). This seems speculation to me. There is no historical reference to such a happening.

Genesis and external material

In his book *Berosus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch* (2006:249), Gmirkin deals with the relationship between Genesis and external material. He hypothesises that Berossus is a primary source (Gmirkin 2006:92) in Mesopotamian culture that influenced the early chapters of Genesis. Berossus was a Babylonian priest who wrote a history of Babylon from the beginning of time to the advent of Alexander the Macedonian. It was entitled *Babyloniaca*, and it was published in circa 278 BCE (Gmirkin 2006:249). According to Gmirkin, Berossus drew on the same Mesopotamian material that influenced Genesis, namely, the Enûma Elish, the Sumerian Kings List and a flood account of the Gilgamesh epic. The novel aspect of Gmirkin's proposal is that it opts for a later date for the sources of the Pentateuch, instead of the earlier date usually accepted by scholarship. Moreover, languages such as Akkadian and Aramaic are not used, but Indo-European languages, such as Greek. In this regard, Gmirkin thinks that the earliest reliable evidence of the Pentateuch is in fact the LXX, a Greek text. According to Stéphanie Anthonioz (2018), Gmirkin proposes that the laws of Plato constitute a new hermeneutical key for the ideology of the Bible in two steps: firstly the Pentateuch for all Israelites by the 3rd Century

BCE, but later also of the whole of the Hebrew Bible. As he links Berossus and Genesis, he also thinks that Manetho, the Egyptian priest, was a primary source for Exodus (Gmirkin 2006:77). According to this hypothesis, practically the whole of the Hebrew Bible was in fact construed in line with Athenian or, more specifically, Platonic literature. Gmirkin (2006:249) adopted the hypothesis that the final shape of most of the Hebrew Bible was forged in the library of Alexandria in the 2nd century BCE after the split between the Samaritans of Shechem (Gmirkin 2006:265) and the Jews, which, according to him, took place sometime after the Maccabean crisis.

Another problematic aspect of Gmirkin's approach is the role he ascribes to the Alexandrian library. He inferred that the Hebrew Pentateuch was written ca. 270 BCE (Gmirkin 2006:249), drawing on a variety of sources written in Greek and housed in the great library of Alexandria. This in turn led to the conclusion that the authors of the Pentateuch were the same group of 70 aristocratic, Greek-educated Jewish scholars that ancient tradition credited with having translated the Pentateuch into Greek at Alexandria at almost exactly (?) the same time (ca. 273–269 BCE) (Gmirkin 2006:249). The problem with this inference is that we have no primary evidence that this was indeed the case. It must be said that Gmirkin is not alone in this speculation, as Nodet (2014) holds a similar, or rather related, point of view.

According to Gmirkin (2006:250), the evidence that the Pentateuch was written by 272–273 BCE drawing on Greek sources being available at the library of Alexandria, virtually at the same time the Hebrew Pentateuch was translated into Greek, raises the possibility that the same team of Samaritan (sic!) Jewish scribes composed the Hebrew version and immediately translated it into Greek. In his opinion, this opens the possibility that the same number of bilingual scholars read the *Timaeus* and used these insights in both the Hebrew and Greek. However, I find it difficult to work out how this could have taken place. To be fair, Gmirkin offers an explanation, a compositional model, to make it possible. Yet, I must say this explanation is not convincing.

Criticism

To be sure, Gmirkin has been criticised from various quarters. Van Seters (2007) criticised Gmirkin's work in a 2007 book review, arguing that *Berosus and Genesis* is based on a straw man fallacy by attacking the documentary hypothesis without seriously addressing more recent theories of Pentateuchal origins. He also alleges that Gmirkin selectively points to parallels between Genesis and Berossus and Exodus and Manetho, while ignoring major dissimilarities between the accounts. Finally, Van Seters (2007:212) pointed out that Gmirkin does not seriously consider the numerous allusions to the Genesis and Exodus narratives in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, including in texts that are generally dated much earlier than his proposed dating of the Pentateuch (Van Seters 2007:212). Gmirkin (2018), by contrast, holds that those parts of the Hebrew Bible that allude to Genesis

and Exodus must be dated later than is commonly assumed (Gmirkin 2006:48).

Anthonioz (2018) made some criticisms of *Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible* in a 2018 book review. She argued that the lack of Greek loanwords in the Hebrew dialect used by the biblical authors must be considered as evidence against Gmirkin (2018) to be taken seriously. She is also not convinced by his interpretation of the role of the Alexandrian library.

As far as Platonic ideas in Genesis 1 and 2 are concerned, Gmirkin (2017:34) found evidence of Greek cosmogonic perspectives and in the process disagrees with Rösel. I disagree with both these scholars (Cook 2020:25). Rösel (1994:68; 2018), cf. also Cook and Van der Kooij (2012:222) followed the view of Philo of Alexandria that Genesis 1 is a reference to the ideal world and Genesis 2 is a reference to the real world. As a basic principle of translation (translation technique), it must be remembered that the translator basically sticks to his parent text without extensive embroidering expansions, as one finds in the case of LXX Proverbs (Cook 2017:12). The translator of Genesis adopts a faithful approach towards his parent text (Hiebert 2013:32). In most cases, one, therefore, has to make deductions from individual words. A common interpretation by both these scholars is their understanding of the ambiguous phrase *ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος* in Genesis 1 verse 2. These words are practically *hapax legomena*; the first is also used in Isaiah 45:3 and 2 Maccabees 9:5. Moreover, even though the concept of the equivalent *invisible and unformed* is used in the *Timaeus*, the Greek words do not appear together in the dialogue itself. The nearest possible parallel is Plato's reference to a 'mother and receptacle', which he called 'a kind invisible and unshaped' (*ἀνόρατος εἶδος τί καὶ ἄμορφος*). I would be extremely cautious about directly relating this Platonic statement to the one that appears in LXX Genesis 1 verse 2.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is still no consensus on the question of whether Platonism had a fundamental impact on the Septuagint and on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. There are broadly speaking three positions in this regard. Firstly, there is a group of scholars who find practically no evidence of Platonic thinking in the creation stories, for example, Van der Horst (2015:5–7), Van der Meer (2016:37–57; 2017) and Runia (1996:37–57; 2001). Secondly, there is a group who can be deemed maximalists and who thinks that Platonic perspectives were applied not only in the Septuagint but in the Hebrew Bible as well. Gmirkin (2006:22) and Dafni (2015:1) fit into this group. Finally, there is a group of scholars led cautiously by Hiebert (2019:87) from Trinity Western University, who argued that the translator(s) of Genesis were immersed in the Hellenistic milieu in which they operated and were educated and employed *some* of Plato's ideas on creation as found in his dialogue, the *Timaeus*. It remains difficult to determine which ideas were in fact used (Rösel 2020).

In the final analysis, I conclude that there is a relationship between Judaism and Hellenism (Platonism). As far as the impact of Plato on Judaism is concerned, I have reservations. For one thing, I do not see how the same persons who created the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch also immediately translated it into Greek. I found no evidence of such an action anywhere. I miss a convincing historical perspective in this regard. This does not mean that there was no relationship between Judaism and Platonism. To be sure, I am of the opinion that there was a relationship of sorts, but that it was not as intense or pervasive as Gmirkin suggests. In my view, the creators of the Hebrew Bible did not have first-hand knowledge of Plato's writings, allegedly found in the great library of Alexandria (Gmirkin 2006:212). By saying this, I do not mean to imply that the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament shows no Hellenistic influence. The passage in Proverbs 31 verse 27 (given below) is a probable sign of direct Greek influence, as is the similarity of themes and patterns in the primary history of the so-called Deuteronomistic books and the histories of Herodotus as argued by John van Seters (2007).

As a matter of fact, there is evidence that Greek thought did have a direct impact on the Hebrew Bible. Camp (1985) had already argued that the final stage of the Book of Proverbs Chapter 1–9 and 31 has been added to the original proverbs collection (Chapters 10–30). It must be theoretically possible that it was formed under the impact of Greek thought. In this regard, an interesting reading occurs in Chapter 31 verse 27, which describes the bold woman as follows:

She looks well to the ways of her household,
And does not eat the bread of idleness.

צֹפִיָּה הַלֵּיכוֹת בַּיְתָהּ
וְלֶחֶם עֲצֵלוֹת לֹא תֹאכֵל

The lexeme צֹפִיָּה from צפה on the face of it looks just like SOFIA! One could naturally argue that this is a sign of Hellenistic influence, and the extent to which it is true remains to be determined.¹

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

J.C. is the sole author of this article.

1. Al Wolters discussed this phrase in JBL in 1985. However, in an exegetical commentary in the Septuagint Commentary Series (Wolters 2020), he does not refer to this article at all (see review of this commentary to appear in *Biblica* soon).

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards of research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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