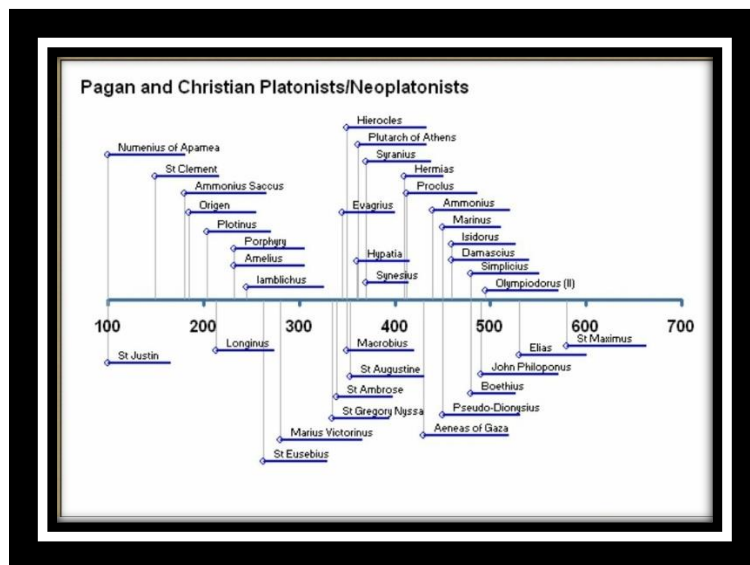


# Hermeneutics – Platonism



Clement > Origen > Plotinus > Porphyry >  
Eusebius > Victorinus > Ambrose > Augustine

## Origen and Clement

"The great Greek fathers of Alexandria, Clement and Origen, firmly grounded in Scripture, were also influenced by Platonism and Stoicism."

— Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 69.

"Allegorism enabled the Alexandrian Jews to make Moses speak the beautiful philosophy of Plato and other Greek sages."

— Paul Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Rockville, MD: Assurance, 1988), 47.

"However, his [Origen's] exegetical methodology was profoundly influenced by the intellectual climate in which he grew up. The Greeks had used allegorism to make the mythical content of ancient works, such as those written by Homer and Hesiod, acceptable to readers with a more philosophical turn of the mind. Origen was also influenced by the example of Philo, a first century Alexandrian Jew who had interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures allegorically in order to make them harmonies with Platonism."

— Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the development of Christian thought* (Rome: Istitutio Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), 86. Inserted [Origen's]

"Allegory by no means sprang from spontaneous piety, but was the child of Rationalism which owed its birth to the heathen theories of Plato. It deserved its name, for it made Scripture say something else than it really meant.... Origen borrows from heathen Platonists and from Jewish philosophers a method which converts the whole Scripture, alike the New and Old Testament, into a series of clumsy, varying, and incredible enigmas. Allegory helped him to get rid of Chiliasm and superstitious literalism and the 'antitheses' of the Gnostics, but opened the door for deadlier evils."

— Farrar, loc. cit., cited by Payne, op. cit., 81.

"Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-216) was influenced by Philo and proposed a system of interpretation where any passage of the Bible might have up to five meanings. Thereafter, Origen, who studied Platonic philosophy and is thought to have been a pupil of Clement, went so far as to say that Scripture itself demands that the interpreter employ the

allegorical method.”

—— Bible Study Tools, 7.3. The Rise of Allegorical Interpretation.

“Gentile Christianity absorbs much of the [Platonic] attitude, which is easily converted into a flaunting of the spirituality of the New Israel over the carnality of the old. And yet, the Jewish dimension of the Church never disappears. Modified by the gentile Greek consciousness, severed from its roots in the Hebrew and Aramaic of Jesus and the apostles, estranged from the land of Jesus, head-quartered at the old central office of the Roman Empire, the Church clings to the Hebrew Bible, even as it proclaims it superseded and fulfilled in the New Testament. And above all, the Church clings to the crucifixion and the resurrection, and later comes to define the incarnation, all carnal conceptions rooted in the Judaism of its origin.”

—— Wyschogrod and Soulen, *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, 97.

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#### Ambrose and Theodorus

“It is not surprising that Ambrose and Theodorus could be found speaking with one voice, for they were inspired by a common source: the pagan philosopher Plotinus (d. 270), who was born in Egypt and wrote in Greek. Scholars today generally label Plotinus the founder of ‘Neoplatonism’, but for the intellectuals at Milan the movement was simply Platonism. These intellectuals saw a basic harmony between the wisdom of the pagan Platonists and the truth of Christianity.”

—— Brian Dobell, *Augustine’s Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge Press, 2009), 11.

“In other words, interpretation is carnal when one fails to see that the thing signified by a sign is itself a sign of something higher. To read spiritually is to recognize that the things referred to by the literal sense themselves refer to something higher, namely, the things of God. Ambrose had freed Augustine from his difficulties with the OT by showing that many of its stories, while distinctly unedifying on the literal level, carried a higher, spiritual meaning.”

—— Kevin Vanhoozer, *Language, Literature, Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology: What’s Theological About a Theological Dictionary?* in Willem A. VanGemeren, *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), 16.

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#### Augustine’s Platonic Influences:

“If those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it.”

—— Aurelius Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 2, Chapter 60 & 61

“It is evident that none come clearer to us (Christians) than the Platonists.”

—— Aurelius Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 8, Chapter 5.

“All philosophers, then, who have these thoughts concerning God, whether Platonists, or others, agree with us.”

—— Aurelius Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 8, Chapter 10.

“Augustine’s sympathies towards Neoplatonic thought is a fact that hardly needs comment. Against this background, his occasional departures from Neoplatonic thought is a subject that probably needs more comment than it often receives.”

—— F.B.A. Asiedu, *Augustine’s Christian-Platonist Account of Goodness: A Reconsideration*. *Heythrop Journal* 43, no. 3 (July 2002): 328-343.

“although Augustine follows the Stoics and Neoplatonists in distinguishing moral evils from others, he insists that the others are really evils...that the fallen world had indeed become a place of suffering.”

—— John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 261.

“It is true, Augustine often reproaches the Neoplatonists, who he held to be the philosophers par excellence, for their

hubris, for not acknowledging the incarnation, and therefore for not directing their will unambiguously toward God as the highest good. He does not doubt, however, their metaphysical teaching of God, but rather learns from them about the truth of God and of the world in order to be able to finally overcome Manichaeism.”

—— Johannes Brachtendorf, *Orthodoxy without Augustine*, *Ars Disputandi* 6 (2006).

“It will be helpful for readers to know that I am among those scholars who think Augustine is very deeply Platonist indeed. As a result, I avoid several strategies of interpretation that serve mainly to minimize the appearance of Augustine’s Platonism, which are so common in modern writing on Augustine that some readers may be slightly confused by not finding them in this book.”

—— Philip Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul*, (Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

“The inwardness of Augustine’s doctrine of grace, therefore, is of a piece with his Platonist criticism of the Jews, which makes it difficult for him to make sense of key biblical themes such as the presence of God working powerfully through particular bodily things such as Temple and Torah, word and sacrament, and the flesh of Christ.”

—— Philip Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul*, (Oxford University Press, 2008), 22.

“Thus, by examining Augustine’s background & training in Greek philosophy & Neoplatonic thought, his interaction with and evaluation of Platonism & Neoplatonism to Christianity in his own writing, and the parallel between Neo-Platonic philosophy & his philosophical theology, it is easy to conclude that his philosophical theology of original sin, free will, and the nature of man was influenced by Neoplatonism.”

—— Jeremy Livermore, *Augustine’s Philosophical Theology & Neoplatonism*, December 12, 2009.

“Christian thought also came under the influence of Platonism, as scholars of the third century such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen mixed this Greek philosophy with their theology. In particular, Augustine’s interpretation of Plato dominated Christian thought for the next thousand years after his death in the fifth century.”

—— Gary Habermas, *Plato, Platonism*, 860.

“The Greek Fathers and Augustine drew most extensively on the philosophy of Plato and the Platonists.”

—— Allen Diogenes, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 63.

“we need only note that Augustine was strongly influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy and has even read Plotinus and Prophyry . . . This philosophy was highly spiritual and other-worldly, centered on the one and the eternal, treating the material and the historically contingent as inferior stages in the ascent of the soul to union with the one.”

—— Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, 52.

“The words were prophetic. Now a teacher of rhetoric in Italy, Augustine began to lose his faith in Manichaeism. Its pretensions to a perfectly rational worldview seemed hollow when compared to the higher and deeper philosophy of Plotinus, father of Neoplatonism—a reinvention of Plato that transformed his teaching into a mystical religious faith in a Supreme Being, “the One.” Plotinus introduced Augustine to a truer conception of God as the absolute spiritual entity, exalted far above space, time, and matter, whose image was reflected in the human soul. Intellectually liberating though this was, Neoplatonism did not challenge Augustine’s moral lifestyle.”

—— Nick Needham, *Augustine of Hippo: The Relevance of His Life and Thought Today*, 40.

“Platonism permeated the intellectual circles of Milan in the mid-380s. Augustine was being initiated into this exciting new world, a world in which the doctrines of his boyhood religion could somehow converge with the most sophisticated pagan philosophy. It was a heady time, and Augustine’s exuberance would soon reach fever pitch with his discovery of ‘certain books of the Platonists’.”

—— Brian Dobell, *Augustine’s Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge Press, 2009), 12.

“These writings present a significant challenge to anyone who wishes to take the conversion account in the *Confessions* seriously. Not only are these writings completely silent on the garden experience (as are all of Augustine’s writings prior to the *Confessions*), but they also serve up generous portions of Platonic philosophy with barely a smattering of what is distinctively Christian. Even the narrator of the *Confessions* is uncomfortable with the *Cassiciacum* works, admitting that they still bear witness to ‘the school of pride’ (*superbiae schola*).”

—— Brian Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge Press, 2009), 20.

"In fact, I would go even further than O'Connell. In my view, which I will elaborate and defend in this book, it was not until c. 395 that Augustine learned how to distinguish between 'Catholic truth' and the 'falsity of Photinus'. This is a significant claim. If it is correct, then Augustine would not have been intellectually converted to Christianity (on the terms set by the narrator of the *Confessions*) until c. 395. For about ten years (386–c. 395), Augustine would have been following the Platonic path of presumption rather than the Christian path of confession."

—— Brian Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge Press, 2009), 23.

"What should be noted is the essentially Platonist theory of meaning that under-lies Augustine's theory: As words signify things, so things signify higher things. Augustine's penchant for spiritual meanings and the general medieval tendency towards allegorical interpretation still work within a largely Platonic view of the language-world relation, where signs imitate things, and earthly things imitate heavenly Forms. Plato and Augustine serve as excellent illustrations of my working hypothesis that theories of interpretation presuppose theories of how God, world, and language are all interrelated."

—— Kevin Vanhoozer, *Language, Literature, Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology: What's Theological About a Theological Dictionary?* in Willem A. VanGemeren, *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), 16.

"Other tendencies of the Renaissance, partly derivative of Neo-platonism, would be picked up in the exegesis of Erasmus, accenting spiritual interpretations of the text. Such would be used to add further nuances to the way in which the Testaments were interpreted and interrelated, highlighting non-corpo-real, even a rationalist understanding of Scripture."

—— Rodney Petersen, *Continuity and Discontinuity: The Debate Throughout Church History*, in John Feinberg's, *Continuity and Discontinuity (Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.): Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*. 0 ed., e-book (Crossway, 1988), 26.