

The First Christian Platonist?

In the fourth century BCE, the Greek philosopher Plato introduced a two-tiered scheme of reality that appears to have been influential for the author of Hebrews. Plato claimed that the world of "ideas" is the most real and true world and that the physical world in which we live contains only representations of those ideas that are in some sense less real and less true.

Jews who were attracted to this notion often translated it into a contrast between what was heavenly and what was earthly (though that is not exactly the same thing). The writings of Philo of Alexandria, produced around the same time as the Letter to the Hebrews, provide illustrations of Jewish Platonism. Philo read Genesis 1:26–27 as reporting the creation of the "idea" (or "ideal form") of humanity and Genesis 2:7 as reporting the creation of a material representation of this idea (a physical man formed from the dust of the earth).

Likewise, the author of Hebrews has sometimes been called "the first Christian Platonist." He argues that the Jewish tabernacle is only "a sketch and shadow" of a heavenly sanctuary in which Jesus exercises his office as high priest (8:5–6; cf. 9:23; 10:1). The earthly sanctuary made by human hands is only a material representation of the more real, heavenly sanctuary, which was not made by hands.

Obviously, a more true and more real salvation is to be obtained in the heavenly sanctuary than in the earthly one. Notably, Hebrews does not denigrate what is physical as evil or wrong: the contrast between earthly and heavenly is not between "bad" and "good" (as it would be in gnosticism); it is between "good" and "better."