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#91 Tom's problems with Platonism

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

NT Wright frequently mentions the problem of Christianity being infected by Platonism. But what does that mean? And what about parts of the New Testament that seem quite... Platonic? Tom answers listener Qs on the subject

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome. I'm Justin Briely, Premier Theology and Apologetics editor once again bringing you the show where I get to sit down with renowned New Testament scholar NT Wright and the show brought to you as usual in partnership with NT Wright Online and SBCK. Today on the show, Platonism.

It's a term Tom often uses in a not so positive way. So what is Tom's beef with Platonism? Well your questions on that are coming up today. I just want to say thanks to Zach who got in touch about last week's episode about Tom's New Galatians commentary.

He said such a phenomenally helpful episode to highlight some of the soteriological differences between Tom and Luther's respective conceptions of works of the law. Thank you for hosting. Thanks for getting in touch, Zach.

If you do enjoy the podcast by the way, rating and reviewing it wherever you're listening to it helps others to discover the show as well. If you want more from the show including regular updates, bonus content and more then do sign up at [AskNT Wright.com](http://AskNTWright.com). So now on to today's show. Welcome back to the show.

We're going to be talking about Platonism today. Now that's a phrase that crops up

reasonably frequently in our conversations, Tom, but not everyone may be entirely familiar with what you mean by it. So first of all, very quick primer on who Plato was and what you mean when you use the term Platonism.

Oh my goodness. Yes. This is really important.

Plato himself lived from 429 BC to 347 BC and he lived in Athens and he was a disciple of the great teacher Socrates. Socrates, so far as we know, never wrote anything. Plato was one of those disciples who actually wrote up a great deal that Socrates had done.

There's an awful lot of debate as to how much in Plato is actually what Socrates said and how much is Plato ruminating on it and producing a cleaned up version as it were. But we're in touch with some of the great minds of the ancient world when we're reading Plato. Plato wrote a lot of things.

What we have of his, because of course, like most ancient literature, a lot of it has disappeared with the passage of time alas, but what we have of his are what are called dialogues where he has a conversation between Socrates and one or more other people on particular topics so that Plato's Republic is basically about justice. So it covers all sorts of other things and the Mino is partly about the theory of knowledge and so on and so forth. And actually from where I'm sitting here, you can probably see behind me, there's some little green volumes at the top of the shelf there and some of those are volumes of Plato's dialogues.

And then Plato was sort of standard curriculum teaching in the roughly in the time of Jesus and Paul around the Greek world. We often say that the Greek world had its Old Testament in Homer, the Odyssey in the Iliad, and then had its New Testament in Plato. And of course, it's not really like the Old and New Testament, but that's a way of saying this is the stuff that an awful lot of people who knew anything at all would know about and school boys, it would usually be boys because girls usually weren't educated in the same way.

School boys would know roughly what Plato's ideas were about. By the time of Paul, there were plenty of other philosophical options as well, which had grown up after the time of Plato, although sometimes with earlier roots. So the Stoics and the Epicureans, particularly and the cynics who basically said a plague on all your houses.

And then in the early church period, what we have then is what is known in the trade as middle Platonism. That's rather odd, it's rather like the Middle Ages. Nobody in the Middle Ages thought they were in the Middle Ages, it's only a later perspective.

But by the fourth or fifth century, we have something which is known as Neo-Platonism, a kind of a rebirth of Platonism. And in between the original Plato and the Neo-Platonism, we have the middle Platonists of people like Plutarch, famous biographer and

philosopher and a priest at the Shrine of Delphi, interestingly. And also the Jewish writer Philo, who was steeped in the Old Testament, but also steeped in Plato and probably in some of the Stoics and things as well.

So it's a rich mixture of all sorts of things. But at the heart of it is the idea that reality is what we would call spiritual, have to be awfully careful with that word. It was ambiguous in that day as well as it is in our own day.

But that reality is more than and other than what we can touch and see and put into our pockets or into way in the scales or whatever. And that we have to penetrate through the appearances of this world, which are just shadows and dancing lights as it were, smoke and mirrors, as we might say, to the reality which lies behind it. So that people often call Platonism actually realism in the sense of penetrating through to the real, the form, the ultimate reality of goodness or justice or whatever, behind the shadowy bits and pieces of it that we know in this life.

Now that comes out in a variety of different ways, but particularly in middle and then neo-Platonism. It affects the way that in the third and fourth centuries and beyond the early Christian theologians were rereading the New Testament and indeed the Old. And they often did so by means of allegory, which is what Plutarch did with Homer as well, that they looked at the Old Testament and they knew that this was somehow their book.

But it seemed to represent all these people doing very strange and dark things. And so they said, this is an allegory of the real truth. We have to penetrate through this to see the reality beyond.

And the problem then is that Jesus came, he said explicitly, to talk about and to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven. Jesus did not say you have to penetrate through earth to see the heavenly reality. And he certainly didn't say that one day we will leave earth and go to heaven instead.

That is the common misunderstanding that many, many modern, probably most modern Western Christians have, which is why it would make no sense for Jesus then to say, blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. You might say, well, surely they should pass through the earth to the heavenly reality beyond. Certainly what Plutarch would have said, certainly what many contemporary Christian theologians are trying to say.

But it's that sense that the present world is really secondary, second rate, sometimes shabby. And then that degenerates further into what we call agnosticism, where the present world is actually dark and mean and evil and it's out to get you and you have to shun it entirely. That's not authentic Platonism because for Plato, the present world is quite a good place.

It's just that it's not the ultimate reality and you must ultimately learn to pass through it and get to that ultimate reality. So the way it comes through particularly is this emphasis on going to, on souls, that's the only thing, souls going to heaven. Plato had a big theory of the soul.

Many Christians assume that that's a Christian doctrine. You do not find a Platonic theory of the soul in the New Testament. I think we'll come back to that in one of the later questions too.

Yes. Yes. Well, this is a little really helpful preparation for these questions because a lot of people want to ask, to what extent the scripture does or does not affirm some form of Platonism, i.e. some radical distinction between the spiritual life and the earth and so on.

So let's leap straight into Riker in Raleigh, North Carolina, who asks what to pull and the other New Testament Epistle authors mean, whenever they talk about the flesh, you often discuss how Christians add too much Platonism to the gospel, whenever we claim that our non-physical souls must shake off this mortal coil and escape to heaven. I agree. But what are we to make about Paul's mention of the flesh, especially when he contrasts it with spirit.

On first glance, it seems like he is denouncing the physical body and its desires. That is indeed the problem with all our translations, all our readings. Now, I have to say, as I said before in the previous question, the Greek word behind Paul's word, what we translate as spirit, is plume and plume was a very frequent word used by many different philosophical schools.

And you might have thought it was such a dodgy word Paul would have chosen something else, but it's actually coming at him from the Old Testament, this word plume. And the plume is God's breath. God breathes into human nostrils the breath of life so that humans become living beings in Genesis chapter two.

And then the days are coming, says God, according to the prophet Joel, when I will pour out my spirit, my ruach, my penuma, upon all flesh and Paul picks that up with his Pentecost theology and so on. So what he does is reclaim the language of spirit, but spirit for him is not spirit as opposed to materiality. It's the spirit which enlivens and enables the material world to become what it was really meant to be.

So when he talks about presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice, he doesn't say, Oh, forget the body. It's a silly stupid old thing. You've got to live in an entirely non-bodily way.

That's complete that will be a complete misunderstanding. This plays out in terms of his theology of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. But as for flesh, flesh is an interesting word for Paul, because it's basically a negative word.

It means that which is corruptible, that which belongs to the present world, which is heading for death. And so Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. In other words, the ultimate new creation leaves behind the corruptible physical world.

But it will be a new, incorruptible physical world, because for Paul, the word that makes this bridge is *soma*, which we translate as body, although actually *soma* means something more like what we mean when we say person. I don't say I saw a body walking down the street. I saw a person, a whole person with body and with mind and intentions and all the rest of it.

Soma is the whole person. And *sark*, flesh, is this person as somebody who is heading for death, as somebody who morally is heading for death as well. And then for Paul, it has the other connotation, very confusingly to us, of the Jews who are Jews, according to the flesh, marked out in the flesh by circumcision, which enables Paul to mount a critique and say, this is why Jesus is crucified and raised from the dead, so that everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, has to leave behind the world of the *sarks*, the corruptible physical and moral world.

And in the Messiah, come through to the new embodied world of the resurrection and anticipate that resurrection life in the present by the bodily obedience, which Paul speaks about in various places. So you have all these different terms, body, flesh, spirit. When he does say soul, which is very rare, he seems to mean simply our interior self-awareness.

It's not a platonic soul, but it takes quite a bit of teasing out, and it's made more complicated by the fact that not all translations of the Bible stick closely to the same scheme for how you're going to render the different words. So you just have to watch passage after passage very carefully. Well, from Paul to Peter, our next question is whether Peter was a Platonist.

This is from Andreas in Nuremberg, Germany, who says, should Peter have read some books by empty, right? Before writing his two letters. Having read first Peter this morning, I wonder what you would say to him about his concept of heaven and the soul. For instance, first Peter, and this is, I think, chapter 1, verse 4, into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, although he might have had also this idea of treasures in heaven in mind, whatever that might be. And again, chapter 1, verse 9, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. And Andreas goes on to say, if you take into consideration that according to the provinces mentioned in verse 1 that those people might have had a platonic background, I wonder whether Peter put those Christians on a wrong track, and it took 2000 years till Utahm had the chance to correct this misconception.

Thanks for addressing this topic. Yeah, so do you need to sort of reprove Peter on his theology? No, I don't. The trouble is that this is a classic passage which has been so often read in the usual platonic way that we now assume that must be what it really meant.

I have not done a major study of first Peter in the way that I have of, say, Romans and Galatians, but I would strongly recommend the commentary on first Peter by Paul Akhtemeyer, A-C-H-T-E-M-E-I-E-R Akhtemeyer in the Hemanier series, a very thorough and wise commentary and Akhtemeyer spent years and years and years doing this. And he navigates through chapter 1 and the whole letter extremely helpfully and very clearly. So if anyone really wants to go for it, that's a place I would recommend.

Let me say about each of these passages, just one thing. First, the idea of something being kept in heaven. You get that in Paul in 2 Corinthians 5 as well.

And the illustration I've used again and again is that if I have a friend coming round for the evening and I am likely to be out for a few minutes when they arrive, I might leave a message saying there's some beer in the fridge and the friend will come in and see, oh, there's some beer kept in the fridge. Does that mean the friend has to get into the fridge to drink the beer? No, of course not. It's kept safe there, so he can get it out of the fridge and help himself before I come back.

It's exactly the same. Heaven is the place where God's future purposes are stored up. Jesus speaking about treasure in heaven doesn't mean you have to go to heaven to get the treasure.

It means God has got all his future plans safely in store and when he makes the new heavens and new earth, then they will be joined together. And that sense of heaven, it's partly because we are natural Platonists now in the modern Western world, but also because the background to that in the first century, but also in our day, has a bit of the Epicurean sense that heaven might be a long, long, long way away. So, oh my goodness, it's up there and I've got somehow to get up there.

No, heaven is not far away. Heaven is God's dimension of ordinary reality and God has got everything we need right there and when the veil is taken away and heaven and earth are joined, then we will discover all we need. As for the salvation of the souls, the word "psuke" in Greek, which is translated soul, it's difficult.

We do not have good words to render the precise nuances here, but in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, "psuke" regularly renders neffes, a neffes, which does have to do a bit with breath, is about life, it's about ordinary human life. So, the salvation of your "psukei", the Telos taste pistios, human, the end of your faith, the goal of your faith is the Soteria "psuko", the salvation of your lives, your whole selves, and to translate it as soul is to what these days I think people call a dog whistle, to the natural

platonic hinterland, to say, "Here you are, salvation of the souls", but that is actually, if you chase through "psuke" in the New Testament, that's simply not what it's about. More questions, this time Andre in Stockholm, Sweden.

This is more about the way it's often applied, you know, in evangelistic contexts. Thanks for your comments, by the way, Andre, you say the podcast has really opened new ways for me to understand the gospel beyond the more Gnostic/Platonic view, which has been a big part of the teachings of my upbringing. Well, anyway, Andre says, "In a recent sermon I heard a preacher who was reading John chapter 3 about being born again, and it was followed by a very dualistic spiritual interpretation with detailed metaphysical theories on how the human receives a new spirit, which has merged with God's spirit, and you will be a new creation and one with God." Now, how should I understand this? Is this just a way of explaining the new creation in a platonic frame? When is the border to Gnosticism passed? And how is this passage about Nicodemus being reborn in John chapter 3 to be understood in the context of a first century Judaic worldview? Thanks for your time, says Andre.

So great question, and the passage about Nicodemus, which has formed the basis of thousands and thousands of sermons, evangelistic sermons, remains actually more mysterious than we often give it credit for, because being born of water and spirit, which is what Jesus says there, it looks as though Jesus is talking about the entire movement of his public career, which began with John's baptism, and Jesus himself and his followers were baptizing their early followers, the part of the movement. And baptism wasn't simply a strange washing ritual. It was a reenactment of the Exodus, and at the Exodus, one of the great things that happened coming through the Red Sea was that then the pillar of cloud and fire, which was the living presence of God, came to dwell with the Israelites in the wilderness, and finally to take its rest in the tabernacle in Exodus 40.

And some later Jewish writers referring back to that, you find it in Isaiah 60, you find it in Haggai, you find it in the great prayer of Nehemiah 9, talk about God's spirit dwelling with them in the wilderness. So this is actually new Exodus language. It's about if you want to be part of God's kingdom, you have to be part of this new Exodus movement, you have to be coming through the water person, you have to be indwelt by the spirit person.

And so our trouble is we don't naturally think in Exodus language, but the first century clearly did. If you're a Jew used to celebrating not only Passover, but the other festivals which commemorate the wilderness wanderings, this is part of your mental furniture from your very earliest days. And Jesus chose Passover, the Exodus moment, we must never forget this, to do what had to be done, to go to Jerusalem, and then to suffer and die and be raised.

So Passover Exodus is the natural grid of interpretation, rather than by taking it out of

that, a sense of what is this water and spirit, is this mechanical, is it magical, what is it? When it comes to our spirit and God's spirit, it's very, very interesting. There's a couple of passages in Paul, 1 Corinthians 2, and then famously Romans 8, where Paul says things like the spirit, God's spirit, bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. It's a very strange passage, and it's one of the many Pauline passages where I want to say to Paul, can you just take a few more verses and explain what you mean by that? But he never does.

He talks in 1 Corinthians 2 about the only person who really knows what's inside a person. Is that person's own spirit? And then he says, we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit from God, so that it looks as though he's happy to talk about our interiority, our true, insideist inside, as the composer Elgar referred to it. In terms of our spirit, but the point then is that God's spirit does, yes, work with our spirit.

Romans 8, 9, 10, and 11, there's a bit about this as well. The body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of Di'Kazune righteousness, covenant faithfulness. Is he talking about our spirit or God's spirit? It looks as though it may actually in a sense be both.

So though it's possible then to take off in a platonic, agnostic direction, I quite agree, and say therefore you have become a purely spiritual creature and your spirit is off to heaven, and so forget about the body. That is not how the spirit language in either the Old Testament or the New Testament works. In both it is about God's spirit dwelling within people and communities in order that they can be God's people on earth as in heaven.

The spirit forms the link between earth and heaven against the day when earth and heaven will be won. Well, final question then, and these have come from all over the place today. We've had North Carolina, Germany, Sweden, now Australia, Luca is in Queensland and says in that pithy quote from the day the revolution began, you say Tom that we have platonized our eschatology, moralized our anthropology and paganized our soteriology.

It was a revolutionary phrase for my understanding of 21st century Christianity. So thank you. But who or what books do you suggest reading to get an understanding of Plato and the way platonic thought has influenced Christianity? I'd ask what was Christianity like without Plato, but I feel that's something you're inviting us to explore.

So go ahead. Yeah, I mean actually the question of what was Christianity like without Plato, the answer is read the New Testament and see. But it's interesting because the platonic influence is already there in the 1st century and you can see that for instance in the Jewish book called the Wisdom of Solomon, which is very biblical in some ways and quite platonic and also a bit stoic in other ways.

And so there's all sorts of stuff going on. The short answer to how to find out about Plato and all that is that there are several very good histories of Western philosophy. Bertrand Russell's was the one that I was brought up on 50 years ago, but now the splendid volume by Anthony Kenny, one of the great philosophers of this last generation.

Kenny is a very clear writer and his work on Plato there is foundational for so much else and all the other great philosophers as well. I would also say Stanford University in California has made an astonishing gift to the world by having an online philosophical encyclopedia, which you can log on to and you can then search for anything you like in the philosophical world. So anything from a dictionary of philosophy, which you could pick up and would have a single column on Plato and Plato-ism right through to a big fat history of Western philosophy, but also with online resources freely available.

So if I was met with that question in Oxford, I think I would take the person and we'd go and have a coffee and walk down the road to the philosophical library just a few hundred yards from where I'm sitting. And I would say now here's this shelf and this shelf and this shelf, where would you like to start? But of course actually the real place to start would be to get some of Plato's dialogues and read them for yourself. They are available in good, clear modern English translations and if they're puzzling then there's any number of commentaries which you could follow them up in.

Lovely. Thanks so much Tom. I mean one could just go to your own library which is behind you right now and nick a few volumes from there.

You could, yes, have a good start. The classical section is over in the far corner there but then there's also there's a lot of philosophy in my room at Whitleyfall as well. Great to catch up with you again on this week's edition of The Father's Trust.

Thank you so much and we'll see you next time. Thank you so much for listening today. Next week we'll be talking about evil.

Are some people sort of given over to evil at a demonic level? Could God be evil? Will Satan and Jesus be friends one day? That's a question from a child that came in. Lots of questions on next week's show. Just a reminder that one of our show partners NT Right Online are offering a free ebook from Tom on the Book of Acts to podcast listeners.

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