

## Рецепции платонизма

*Tatiana Litvin*

### Historical Narrative and the Symbolism of Numbers in Late Antiquity\*

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TATIANA LITVIN

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND THE SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

**ABSTRACT.** This article is devoted to an analysis of the language of philosophy which emerged in Late Antiquity at the intersection of several symbolic systems – the paganism of the Hellenistic period, early Christianity, and Platonism. These traditions remain the most notable ones but do not exhaust the doctrines of the period in which the nature and origin of time was conceptualized, as was, consequently, their relation to history. The study examines the story of the creation of time in the *Timaeus*, the commentaries of Plotinus, and also Egyptian cosmogony as a counterweight to Platonism. The Christianization of ancient narrative is considered in the forming of eschatological language in the Pauline Epistles and Early Christian interpretations of creation. Each tradition goes through its own unique evolution. Neoplatonism becomes ontology, developing from the genre of commentary and philosophical dialogue into a fundamental method of theological justification. Egyptian cosmology is an example of the development of a mythologeme, its improvement and multiplication, which did not contribute to going beyond the limits of mythological thinking, but created a special basis for the development of mathematics. Christian eschatology summarizes previous traditions, borrowing from Hellenism the ways of criticizing Jewish apocalyptic genres. This unique combination, the constellation of traditions, creates a special kind of non-linear narrative of historical temporality.

**KEYWORDS:** time, eternity, creation, Plotinus, the *Timaeus*, Augustine, eschatology, Paul, Egyptian cosmology, narrative, philosophy of history.

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In late antiquity a new idea of history was being formed, as Christian principles of narrative replaced ancient cosmogonies and myths.

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© T. V. Litvin (Saint Petersburg). littatiana@gmail.com. HSE University (Moscow, Russia); University of Religions and Denominations (Qom, Iran).

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The conventional wisdom that linearity came to replace the cyclical is, in part, correct, though one can only claim this to be the case for the later periods. This article aims to reveal the key components of the historical narrative in the doctrines, which predated, or existed in parallel with, Augustinian philosophy. Although one encounters a new philosophical anthropology of history in Augustine, in many respects his thought was reliant upon the doctrines of late Antiquity.

*The story about the beginning: the creation of time  
in the Timaeus and the commentaries of Plotinus*

Already in Plato's account of the creation of the world we see a cosmogonic language and philosophical conclusions taking shape. One might say that this is a story about how the past should be imagined. Since the story of the creation of the cosmos necessarily leads to dialectical principles, we see the juxtaposition of eternity and time as pattern and copy, prototype and image. All creation was created according to an eternal model, or more precisely, according to a model of eternity the Demiurge looked to, by creating the cosmos — eternity, that which “always is and has no becoming”, “the changeless”, and taking that as his “created pattern, fashioning the design and nature of this thing” (*Ti.* 28b). Moreover, in a relation to the prototype and image, some particular rules of language are established which are rather commonly encountered in both Plato and later in Neoplatonism, “words are akin to the matter which they describe” (*Ti.* 29b), one can only speak of them “in analogous” ways. Since the whole created cosmos exists in time, it was created together with time, time (as well as all that is created) is also a copy, an image.

Plato narrates the creation of time after his tale of the creation of the soul which is found in the centre of cosmos and plays the role of “mistress” to its “body” (*Ti.* 35a), corresponding to all the geometric laws of nature. The soul not only reigns over the body of the cosmos, in it there emerges and is uttered all conceivable knowledge. From the *Timaeus*' story, we know that this is how the cosmos moves and exists, an eternally living existence, akin in this nature to that which

constantly exists. But the demiurge conceived it to appear more like the model, and time was created in order to achieve a greater verisimilitude. In other words, already in Plato we encounter a paradox in the understanding of the purpose of time: time is created to double the similarity. According to Plato, time, “the moving image of eternity”, and all of its forms, all emerging and vanishing, the past and the future, all these “parts” of time, make “an eternal image moving according to number” (*Ti.* 38a). In addition, time is born at the same time as “heaven”, so as to also disappear, “for the pattern is a thing that has being for all eternity, whereas the Heaven has been and is and shall be perpetually throughout all time” (*Ti.* 38c)<sup>1</sup>. In other words, from this discussion by Plato, the following conclusion arises: time, like all created things, will not exist eternally. The creation of planets, stars and all celestial bodies in general was, according to Plato, necessary in order to realize the design “relative to the birth of time”. The planets, each endowed with their own rules of motion, participate in the generation of time, thereby enhancing that similarity between the created pattern and the cosmos and realizing the geometric laws of soul and body in motion. Although this indicates that the correlation of the prototype and the copy is revealed through the number of motion, that is, the achievement of greater similarity is possible through the creation of a “new” kind of motion, a temporal one, it still does not fully explain the transition of the prototype into the copy<sup>2</sup>. And despite the fact that the whole aggregate movements of the planets, their rhythms and velocities actually form a world harmony, approximating its eternal prototype, and also create schemes of action of all the material objects, the question of the origin of time from eternity remains. Why were there not enough “prior” movements, after all, the body of the cosmos, and its soul, and the relationship between them not only had arithmetic, but also physical laws of proportionality, that is, was there not already movement in the cosmos? It seems that the demiurge is taking a very controversial step: to bring cosmos closer to its fixed prototype, he adds another dy-

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<sup>1</sup> Cornford 1937: 99.

<sup>2</sup> Mesch 2003: 145–157.

namic property to the universe, another type of movement — namely, time. The answer to this question can only be plausible in a literal sense, close to the truth, since human reasoning, as Plato repeatedly observes, is “akin to the subject it expounds” and cannot always attain the truth. The *Timaeus*’ story is structured as a story about sequence, but apart from the rules of syntax, nothing suggests that creation was in any sequence.

So, already in the *Timaeus* we discern that there is no possibility of completely distinguishing the copy and the number, insofar as with the creation of time, the image “follows on” from the number, the numerical laws are mixed with the image as a form of movement — time as a moving image is located in the interaction with the geometry of motion. This distinction is complex both in a semantic and a physical sense, and in a later natural scientific approach, time is already not thought of without a system of measurement but itself becomes this system, that numeral of movement, or is measured by a conventional scale. Can one affirm that the later idea about time is a more precise one, while the ancient idea is no more than a Pythagorean *acousma*? The question about precision can be applied to a “ready-made” scale, the problem of the origin of time is necessarily solved in the symbolization of the consciousness of time and in considerations regarding it. The lack of clarity in the *Timaeus* is expressed not only in the stylistics of the story itself about how the artificer “looked to” the paradigm and created something similar to it, but also in the very combination of imagery and mathematics, which in the context of the idea of time acquires a particular meaning. Time is a kind of symbolic representation of eternity, as well as an image and a number. The creation of time makes possible the creation of life, eternity proves to be a particular form of symbolization, imparting it a creative capacity, the reproduction of something, while insofar as the creation of any object of the material world occurs, literally speaking, in a moment of time (this being the function of the number in the nature of time), then the concept of eternity becomes the philosophical synonym of the concept of the totality and determination (existence) of things. Can one say that time

in Plato is more than just the formal basis of the narrative, a form of the exposition of the story of creation, a form of ordering attempts not subject to reason to divine the desire of the artificer?

One way or another, these issues remain in Plotinus too, setting a particular horizon for the symbolization of the physics of motion. Plotinus' reflection on eternity and time is defined by the dialectic of prototype and copy<sup>3</sup> from a historical and philosophical perspective, a third of the seventh book of the *Enneads* is devoted to the critique of the Aristotelian theory of time “as the numeral of movement”, something particularly clear in the ninth paragraph, just as is the polemic with the Pythagorean, Stoic and Epicurean views which takes up a large section of the eighth and ninth paragraphs. Since Plotinus' philosophy of time is rather extensive<sup>4</sup>, we shall provide its key theses. Plotinus addresses all previous views on the nature of time in the context of the determination of the character of motion and comes to the question of duration (διαστήμα), which opens a new angle — the numeral may be considered as a measure of motion. Since Platonic-Pythagorean ideas still represent the conventional backdrop for reasoning about numerals, the question of what this number is and how such a measure is determined, turns out to be a sort of indicator of the nature of movement. Moreover, considerations about numerals interfere with the ready-made methods of measurements, and Plotinus asks this valid question:

If then time be a number in itself, in what does it differ from the number ten, or from any other number composed of unities? As it is a continuous measure, and as it is a quantity, it might, for instance, turn out to be something like a foot-rule. It would then be a magnitude, as, for instance, a line, which follows the movement; but how will this line be able to measure what it follows? (*Enn.* 3.7.9)

The question about measurement and number is set in such a way to bear in mind the difference between the concept of number in Platonic creationism (ἀριθμός) and number as a “ready-made” scale of measurement, measure (μέτρον). Plotinus introduces an analogy which is fairly

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<sup>3</sup> Beierwaltes 1967: 10–11.

<sup>4</sup> See Litvin 2016.

significant for all ancient physicists, and is also used by Aristotle, when he states in this fragment that time will be a magnitude “akin to the line, convergent ( $\sigma\upsilon\nu\theta\acute{\epsilon}\omicron\upsilon\sigma\alpha$ ) on the movement” (*Enn.* 3.7.9).

*Egyptian cosmogony as a counterweight to Platonism*

Egyptian cosmogony while not noted for its consistency, provides, nonetheless, a very interesting representation of creation, one which was assimilated by both Jewish and Christian traditions<sup>5</sup>. Jan Assmann highlights the fact that the Egyptians had no concept of space, although they did conceive of the cosmos through categories of time and procedurality<sup>6</sup>. Characteristic for the Egyptians was the dualism, almost dialectical, with which they designated things (for example, Egypt was known as “two Lands”, “North and South”, the gods Amon-Ra, Ra-Horakhty and so on). In a similar way cosmic time is expressed in two words – Neheh ( $n\dot{h}h$ ) and Djet ( $d.t$ ), which convey a disjunction in the plenitude and sacredness of time. Assmann emphasizes that this pair cannot be reduced to the Hellenistic relation between time and eternity for here we are concerned with another ontology. Egyptian cosmic time is an absolute, completed time, comprising eternity but one that is comprehensive and not infinite. The disjunction of “Neheh-Djet” expresses the “absolute horizon of totality”, “all being”<sup>7</sup>. Since there is no division into three temporal forms in the Afroasiatic languages, so too the conceptual apparatus differs from that of European grammar, originating in the ancient Greek Linear writing systems. The Egyptians have no designation for past time, but there is a perfective, completed aspect. Besides, the idea of Neheh-Djet can be understood through the amalgamation of change (Khepri, the morning sun) and resultativity (Atum, the evening sun). Time dwells and endures, being completed in the plenitude of being, although it moves, changes, exists. According to Assmann, the matrix of all traditional cultures, which Mircea Eliade designated as “the myth of the eternal return”, can be attributed to

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<sup>5</sup> See Assmann 1984, Copeland 2004, Plumley 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Assmann 1984: 90.

<sup>7</sup> Assmann 1984: 91.

“Nehet”, the second part embodying the nature of Osiris and manifesting the “accomplished”, which has become and is eternally “remaining matured”. The monumentality of this dimension is comparable to the immortalization of mummies, pyramids, writing, that is, it is minutely structured in rituals. Duration, continuity also comprise transition. It can be expressed through cyclicality (in a cosmic scale — the circle of life and death), but it is important to note that this cyclicality for the ancients did not include mechanistic repetition, it is a ritual of sustaining life or initiation, one that is complete in itself<sup>8</sup>. In this way the constellation of Ra and Osiris is formed, which is experienced as the continuous existence of the cosmos, supporting any manifestation of human life.

This notion of time may well be called existential, given its rootedness in language and the special role of funerary rituals in ancient Egyptian religion<sup>9</sup>. One can already find such an interpretation in the German egyptologist Erik Hornung, namely that ontology always has a pragmatic expression built into everyday life<sup>10</sup>. The time of the communication of body and soul, a time of transformation and transition is described in the 17th Chapter of the *Book of the Dead*. An Egyptian must have been aware of the finiteness of human existence. The self-division of time may well be considered as a phenomenological distinction and compared with Aristotelian entelechy, the analysis of which gave rise to the development of the further idea of an unfolding and dwelling in being. As in Hegel, and in the phenomenology of the 20th century, the ontologizing of the union of change and duration is an attempt to describe the living process of eventness.

It is known that among the Egyptians the unity of the plenitude of existence, described not only other disjunctions of the pantheon and human nature (in particular, the human body and its *ba* are equally indissolubly eternal), but also the ontology of the Supreme Being as the Universal God and Saviour. This theological outcome of the sun cult of the Ramesside period, it may well be compared to the monotheistic conception of a transcendental deity. The formula “one that turns

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<sup>8</sup> Assmann 1984: 132–133.

<sup>9</sup> Assmann 1984: 118.

<sup>10</sup> Hornung 1971: 184.

into millions”, “all is one”, and “one that is all”, *una quae es omnia* were attributed to the cult of Isis right up until the Christianization of Egypt<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the ancient Egyptian doctrines, which survived until the time of Augustine, demonstrate an interesting mythological alternative to the Hellenistic world, although the “wisdom of the Chaldeans” was undoubtedly revered by the Greek philosophers. Although Greek mythology and later philosophy assimilated earlier doctrines, the ancient Egyptian cults continued to persist and evolve in a way – later ideas rationalizing earlier ones. It is also necessary to recognize the inclusion of Egyptian astronomy in Pythagorean cosmology, which thus unites both traditions in matters of the physics of time.

*The story of the end:  
eschatological language in the Pauline Epistles*

What key ideas can be traced in the eschatology of Paul based on the priorities of the *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*? In contrast with Platonism and Egyptian polytheism, this is a story about the future. The eschatology of Paul in many respects alludes to Judaic eschatology<sup>12</sup>, but its Christian reading creates a new existentialist language. First of all, it is a new meaning of the expectation itself, which includes a certain sequence of events. One can outline at least two key terms, the clarification of which can lead to an understanding of these events: parousia and resurrection.

The word for “coming” (παρουσία) is used for the first time in the nineteenth verse of the second chapter of the *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*. However, we find a more detailed teaching of the second coming in the fourth chapter of the *Epistle*, from the thirteenth to the eighteenth verses, and in the subsequent fifth chapter, up to and including the eleventh verse. This section of the *Epistle to the Thessalonians* can be tentatively divided into the following thematic parts: the senselessness of mourning for the dead (4:13–15), the sequence of the resurrection (4:16–18), the obviousness of the suddenness of the second

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<sup>11</sup> Assmann 1984: 278.

<sup>12</sup> See Tantlevsky, Litvin 2018.



coming (5:1–3), the contrast between light and darkness (5:4–7), the obtaining of salvation (5:8–11).

The passage 4:13–15 attracted the attention of many theologians from the time of John Chrysostom. Modern scholars, in particular, pay attention to the fact that this passage demonstrates the style of Paul's eschatology. The juxtaposition of "sleep", "the departed" and "the watchfulness" of the resurrected, and also their "having hope" and those who could lose it, creates a specific "apocalyptic contrast"<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, this passage echoes with other similar ones (1 Cor. 6:14; 2 Cor. 4:14).

The complexity of Pauline stylistics consists in the use of verbs, and in the narrative itself. This cited passage also requires a certain linguistic deciphering as indicated by Anthony C. Thiselton who proposed to use Peter Frederick Strawson's theory of presupposition in which the idea is divided between the literal (assertion) and the implicit (presupposition)<sup>14</sup>. So, to understand the verse "we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord" (4:15), it is important to take into account both of these meanings, that is, "we" signifies solidarity with all Christians, who await the advent at any moment (in the present), but "we that are alive" are not necessarily those who will be alive at that moment (in the future) when the advent occurs<sup>15</sup>.

The following verse, 1 Thess. 4:16, still continuing with the idea of resurrection, introduces a new contrast in the semantic field. Albert Schweitzer demonstrates that for its correct interpretation it is necessary to be mindful of the fact that Paul "like the authors of the Apocalypses of Baruch and Ezra, awaited the resurrection only after the messianic Kingdom (reign of the Messiah)"<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, the Apostle conceded that all who died before the second coming "will not participate in the Messianic Kingdom but must wait for the resurrection of the dead"<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Dunn 1998: 301.

<sup>14</sup> Strawson 1959: 190–192, 199–204; Thiselton 2011: 117.

<sup>15</sup> Thiselton 2011: 117.

<sup>16</sup> Schweitzer 1930: 92

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

In the concluding seventeenth and eighteenth verses of the fourth chapter Paul proclaims that we, “the living, remaining”, and the resurrected Christians will be taken away (“enraptured”, ἀρπαγησόμεθα) into heaven and will remain there “forever”. This epilogue of the fourth chapter includes both a sort of summary of previous appeals by the Apostle, and a particular theological and rhetorical leap, since until that time the Apostle did not directly indicate the possibility of any sort of physical ascension. The resonance of these lines for the history of the Church, which served almost as a key to the ethical interpretations and beliefs of many believers in the issue of New Testament eschatology, is well known.

Summing up the fourth chapter, it should be noted that the theological doctrine expressed in it about parousia and resurrection mainly includes the continuation of the Old Testament eschatological tradition, both in its stylistic devices (4:13–15), and in its knowledge about resurrection (4:16–17). However, regarding the issue of resurrection from the dead the Thessalonians, or Macedonians, probably had tentative ideas drawn from Hellenistic mythology, along with their own faith in resurrection. Therefore, the Apostle is not persuading, but merely complements the knowledge of the Macedonians, deftly switching to a prophetic style. In setting forth the “sequence” of the resurrection at the onset of parousia and the role of each (both living and dead) in this event, Paul not only reminds his audience of it, but formulates comforting words for the entire community.

Many scholars concur that parousia is fundamentally the key topic of both *Epistles to the Thessalonians*<sup>18</sup>. Only in the correspondence with the Thessalonians, and only once in the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (12:23), is it about the coming of Christ, although in the New Testament as a whole the question of the day of judgment is raised fairly often. It is possible that Paul’s choice of metaphor (“as a thief”) is connected with this, referring to traditions surrounding Jesus. Like in the other epistles in which the topic of the advent is dealt with (*1 Cor.* 12:23, *2 Cor.* 5:10, *Rom.* 13:11–14), parousia becomes a part of the pleas and paraenesis,

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<sup>18</sup> Marshall 1982: 180.

together with the ethical appeals, and sometimes acquires a clearly expressed apocalyptic character. Parallel to verse 2 *Thess.* 5:2, the second chapter of the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* can be called unique for the entire corpus of Paul's work<sup>19</sup>. In it, the Apostle, after a detailed description of the judgment in the first chapter and continuing the Old Testament apocalyptic tradition, does not consider the second coming a day of sorrow before the end, but rather repeatedly emphasizes the justice of recompense and the joy of expectation for Christians.

Also a particular feature of the first two verses of the fifth chapter of the *First Epistle to the Thessalonians* is the paradoxical statement that "you have no need that aught be written unto you" and "for yourselves know perfectly" regarding parousia. This "strange" allusion is nonetheless quite typical in Paul. The Apostle speaks of parousia, the date of which can be known by none, and it refers thereby to a sort of knowledge about ignorance. But in addition to the mystery of this passage, it is worth considering that the fifth chapter is a logical continuation of the fourth, there is a theological and stylistic unity between the two. And therefore the mysterious phrase may be completely in line with the previous stylistics: if in the fourth chapter Paul establishes an eschatological contrast between death and resurrection, the living and the dead, mourning and hope and so on, then at the start of the fifth chapter he uses the opposition of knowledge and ignorance in an analogous way. Essentially, the only difference consists in the fact that the fourth chapter deals not with mental ideas but with physical ones, and the fifth chapter begins with a mental contrast. We have already seen that it is important for Paul to strike as many "chords" as possible to teach the Macedonians the correct words of consolation and to ensure the expectation is one filled with joy (rather than the fear of the Old Testament). And since no one can know the "date" of the advent, and it is only possible to prepare for it spiritually, then the word regarding this should affect all possible aspects of human understanding. Mental readiness is the ground for spiritual and ethical development, a readiness by which the "thief in the night" will not be a surprise, that is, there will be no fear of the unknown (*1 Thess.* 5:2–3).

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<sup>19</sup> Marshall 1982: 180.

In the following verses (1 *Thess.* 5:4–5) we see a new juxtaposition that further reinforces the Old Testament context. The contrast between knowledge and ignorance, surprise and safety, is replaced by the contrast between light and darkness. In the understanding of the expression “sons of light” one fairly often finds parallels with the Qumran manuscripts (1Q S 3.13–4.26; 1Q M 1.1–3), in which “the war between sons of light against sons of darkness” was a part of soteriology. In particular, Alexander Men notes that the presence of this “Essene lexicon” in Paul is a research problem, since Paul was a hereditary Pharisee, a disciple of Gamaliel<sup>20</sup>, and not an Essene at all. From a linguistic perspective, the peculiarity of this passage is Paul’s transition from the pronoun “them” in the previous verse, to “you” and “we” in the following (5:4). One way or another, it can be concluded that the juxtaposition of light and darkness, day and night, sobriety and intoxication, wakefulness and sleep again becomes a stylistic device by which Paul emphasizes the need for preparedness for the second coming, urging his readers not to forget about what should not be forgotten.

Summing up our analysis of the first verses of the fifth chapter (1 *Thess.* 5:11), it should be emphasized that, firstly, they logically pursue the doctrine of the resurrection (4:13–18), but add a number of eschatological contrasts. Secondly, in addition to the style of Old Testament prophecy, we find a metaphor characteristic of all religious cultures in the ancient world and parallels with the Gospel texts. As in the fourth chapter, it is not a story about the events of the future, but about edification in the present, about spiritual readiness for the coming at any moment.

*Early Christian interpretations of creation:  
the end of the story, the cycle and the six days*

In the Christian mind reflection on the first verses of the *Book of Genesis* and some conceptualization of creationism will naturally be part of any relationship to the past. All early Christian writers in one way or

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<sup>20</sup> See Men 1993.

another built up their view of the past aimed at a history that one could call a history of Scriptural inspiration, that is, the history of the continuity of Christianity and the development of the idea of creation in religious consciousness. The interpretation of hexaemeral literature in great and minute detail was very popular in the early Church, despite its obvious break at that time with the Rabbinic tradition, but also in part owing to that very rupture. Nonetheless, the degree of influence remains an object of study. We can also point to the attention of Christian authors in the creation of their hermeneutic techniques reflecting the Christian kerygma and raise the question: can we say that in early Christian hermeneutics there was an idea of the linearity of history?

Already in Philo of Alexandria, whose interpretation was more often considered later in the Patristic tradition, we encounter the question of the origin of time. Transcribing Moses, Philo writes:

Then he says that “in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”, taking “beginning” not, as some think, in a chronological sense, for time there was not before there was a world. Time began either simultaneously with the world or after it. For since time is a measured space determined by the world’s movement, and since movement could not be prior to the object’s movement, but must of necessary arise either after it, or simultaneously with it (*Opif.* 26)<sup>21</sup>.

Despite the fact that the understanding of order in creation is expressed numerically and using Platonic-Pythagorean numeric meanings, which geometrically establish the cosmology of eternity, time is nonetheless created. Moreover, a measure of time is created – the day as a measure emanating from the One. The world in its simultaneity of creation is filled with, and the heavens include in themselves, all the necessary laws for life of the earth, in the creation of days and nights there,

a measure of time was brought about, which its Maker called Day, and not “first” day but “one”, an expression due to the uniqueness of the intelligible world, and to its having a natural kinship to the number “One” (*Opif.* 35).

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<sup>21</sup> Here and below, tr. by F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, slightly modified.

It should be noted that time as a measure of time is not always repeated later in Christian exegesis. Augustine would be inclined to ask how it is possible to measure time but would not discern a similar reliance on the Pythagorean teachings on number as Philo did in answer to this question. From Philo's text it can be seen that "space" was created already "after" the measure of time (*Opif.* 36–37) and is a more thorough materialization of the earth. Does the physics of creation become the basis for the idea of history? According to Philo, the human dimension arises not so much with the creation of man as with the allegoresis of the Fall (*Opif.* 148–151).

We also encounter a hexaemeral interpretation through the geometry of the numeric in Basil the Great, where in his first conversation he discusses the apparent and the unoriginated, about the circle and order of cosmic motion. In contrast to Philo, Basil deftly combines physical and human time, moving from a geometric to a moral interpretation. And although he expounds "in the beginning" with several meanings, pointing to the polysemy and openness to interpretation of the opening words of *Genesis*, one of these meanings proves to be the literal beginning in time:

To this world at least it was necessary to add a new world, both a school and a training place where the souls of men should be taught and a home for beings destined to be born and to die. Thus was created, of a nature analogous to this world and the animals and plants which live therein, the succession of time, forever pressing on and passing away, and never stopping in its course. Is not this the nature of time where the past is no more, the future does not exist, and the present escapes before being recognized? <...> Thus the writer who wisely tells us of the birth of the Universe does not fail to put these words at the head of the narrative: "In the beginning God created"; that is to say, in the beginning of time (Bas. *Hex.* 1.5)<sup>22</sup>.

The interpretation of Basil the Great demonstrates an extraordinary reverence for the wisdom of Moses, inscribing in the lines such a deep knowledge and a tale about ancient cosmology, in which the "nature"

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<sup>22</sup> Tr. by Blomfield Jackson.

of heaven also represents for us the moral order of the movement of things. Speaking about movement, the Bishop of Caesarea remains within the framework of cyclical cosmogonic movement and there is no basis to argue that the idea of linearity emerges in his thought.

Another Alexandrian, Origen, was closer to the allegoresis of Philo. We can also trace through him the “order” of creation and the creation of heaven “in the beginning” and afterward the arrangement of the mental space as a spiritual firmament<sup>23</sup>, and to the celestial God above. Of course, there is no reason to assert the formation in them of the concept of linearity, in Philo too, and in Origen the sense of progression is present in creation and it bears Platonic characteristics. It is as though before creation there had been a prototype that could be found in the mind, that is, an intelligible plan, a kind of speculative sketch, according to which the Creator created the material world. This prototype still remains the property of a human mind, given by God, because the architectonics of thought is as three-dimensional as the architect’s sketch.

Much closer to Augustine’s position was the interpretation of his teacher, Aurelius Ambrosius, who had, apparently, taken into account the writings of his predecessors. Turning his attention to philosophy and philosophical “fallacies”, beginning with the Pre-Socratics, Ambrosius evaluates their positions and proposes raising the question of the beginning, as was customary, in three senses — the beginning in time, in space, and on earth. His references to the *Parables*, the *Psalms*, the *Exodus*, and the meeting of Abraham with Melchizedek, makes the writings of the Bishop of Milan a model of the romanization of the Hebrew Bible, the statements of the first verses of the *Genesis* are interpreted using typological parallels with other Old Testament texts.

Ambrosius’ argument about the beginning and the cycle is constructed in comparison with the words of the Gospel that God will be “to the end of the world”, in other words with the New Testament testimony that there is an end of time. And this signifies that there also exists a beginning and the beginning, according to Ambrosius, does

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<sup>23</sup> Asmus 2008: 25.

not replace the “sphericity”, despite its geometric complexity, the cycle also has a “beginning” — the point from which it can be constructed (*Hex.* 1.3.10). If the world does have a beginning, then what is it, what is its foundation? Its foundation was Wisdom (*Hex.* 1.4.12), although this does not negate the possibility of interpreting “in the beginning” as its beginning in time. Ambrose proposes an original view of the creation of the world, calling the beginning the effective beginning of chronology, the calendar.

Therefore, He created heaven and earth at the time when the months began, from which time it is fitting that the world took its rise. Then there was the mild temperature of spring, a season suitable for all things. Consequently, the year, too, has the stamp of a world coming to birth, as the splendor of the springtime shines forth all the more clearly because of the winter’s ice and darkness now past (*Hex.* 1.4.13)<sup>24</sup>.

And since then, “nature has readily obeyed time” in the natural cycle, producing plants and changing seasons. According to Ambrose, the world was created in the spring, the beginning of time is the month of spring, in which the Exodus is now celebrated. Passover as the beginning of the world, which is also celebrated by the Christian feast of Easter — not only the beginning of the calendar cycle of the rebirth of nature, but also the “the passing over from vices to virtues, from the desires of the flesh to grace and sobriety of mind, from the unleavened bread of malice and wickedness to truth and sincerity” (*Hex.* 1.4.14).

Ambrosius’ commentaries include the phenomena that are not seldom mentioned in interpretations, but undoubtedly reflect his familiarity with Jewish tradition. Did God create through his voice or did silence reign during creation? Is the world the shadow of God? Ambrosius emphasizes that light as a cause for the shadows is more important than the “body” as the reason for the shade, because the world is like a shadow of the invisible, like the “shining of incorporeal light” just as visible (cf. *Hex.* 1.5.18). The Son also became the image of the invisible God, being the beginning of the world and, it may be added, the beginning of history. If “angels, dominion and powers” existed before

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<sup>24</sup> Here and below, tr. by J.J. Savage.



creation, then the Son as the Word is created and is the beginning of human history, all the rest is willed by God. The centrality of Christ for Ambrosius leads to the fact that he also calls the Son the Creator.

The influence of Philo on Ambrosius is indisputable even in the interpretation of the *Book of Genesis*. Moreover, Ambrosius' interpretation of Philo's *Quaestiones in Genesim et Exodum* which was lost and rediscovered only in a fifth-century Armenian translation, is of particular historical value. Ambrosius comments and retells fragments dealing with Abraham, writes about Cain and Abel, Noah and about paradise. The Bishop of Milan was fluent in Greek and was well acquainted with the writings by the Eastern Fathers of the Church written by that time; in particular, the writings of Origen and Basil the Great dedicated to the "six days" are organically integrated in his hermeneutics. The Alexandrian allegoreses undoubtedly remain a source of symbolism, which is necessary not only for the interpretation of Scripture, but also for the explanation of the mysteries<sup>25</sup>. And, therefore, the mysticism of the soul in Ambrosius is largely understood based on allegorical means of elevating meaning. Those elements of ritual which seem irrational to an observer unfamiliar with numerical symbolism refer precisely to the Pythagorean doctrine of number, borrowed from ancient Egyptian mathematics. The ancient Egyptian numerical symbolism that inspired both Greek and Jewish philosophy, that "Egyptian wisdom" in Ambrosius remains an essential part of exegesis, at least in the interpretation of the hexaemeron. Did he know about it through Philo and Origen or directly from the rabbis, or were both of these sources of interest to the Bishop? One way or another, the hexaemeral interpretation remains the sum of previous interpretations, and frequently overshadowed philosophical and hermeneutic knowledge, creating both ethical and political doctrinal syntheses.

### *Conclusion*

Thus, in Late Antiquity, a complex interpenetration of traditions is constructed, where Platonism is synthesized with Christian interpre-

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<sup>25</sup> See Lewy 1932, Lucchesi 1977.

tations and both schools enter into disputes with retreating paganism and Judaism. A common principle of all traditions can be considered as work with a mythologeme, in which dialectics does not replace myth and does not completely rationalize it, but develops it, building internal encoded metaphors as a nonlinear narrative. At the same time, in Plato and Plotinus the transition from myth to logos, characteristic of other aspects of their philosophy, in the question of time is impregnated, in the first place, with the numerical symbolism rooted in Pythagorean mathematics.

For the Apostle Paul, the subject of demythologization is Jewish eschatology; his comments on it are quite important for building an idea of the future as such and in addition to Plato's "past". In the Egyptian doctrine, there is a rationalization of the earlier mythology by the later. It is impossible to claim that in the first centuries of Christianity any new scheme of linearity was formed; rather, the narrative is constructed as a non-linear combination, a constellation of other traditions in an attempt to christianize them. Christianity, not having any other mathematics than the Pythagorean and any other cosmology except the Ptolemaic, does not create a new historicism capable of explaining numerical symbolism, which contains both the fullness of time and the presence of eternity. History is not homogeneous, creation is not complete, human time is part of the divine: for all traditions, the events of human history are components of a plan and correspond to celestial geometry. The language of the narrative is polysemic, and Ptolemaic cosmology is by no means limited to any one mythology, a story about time is also a kind of memory of eternity.

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