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# The Reception of Xenophanes' Philosophical Theology in Plato and the Christian Platonists

Monika Recinová

The philosophical concept of god with the broad impact on later Western theological speculation, because of its wide reception, especially via the Platonic tradition, was formulated by Xenophanes of Colophon, a pre-Socratic thinker of the late archaic period (580/577 – c. 485 BC). Xenophanes formulated his new rational concept of god in the context of the anti-anthropomorphic and moral critique of Homeric and Hesiodic epic mythology. In his rational theology, Xenophanes used the ancient word θεός, “god”, which was initially used in a predicative way<sup>1</sup> in the scope of the Greek religious cult but changed its content profoundly. The vivid experience of the divine in the religious cult reflected in Greek myth was replaced by a purely rationally constructed metaphysical theology with the rational concept of god endowed with philosophical perfections. Xenophanes is thus the founder of the most influential Greek concept of the god of philosophers, which broke with the concept of the divine in Greek myth and established a completely new theological paradigm.

Xenophanes' thought structure, a critique of traditional mythology, which is replaced by the new rational concept of god, became a very influential *topos* of Greek philosophy, which was widely shared and further enlarged and reinterpreted by numerous later Greek philosophers of different philosophical schools. This wide reception of the Xenophanean *topos* is not restricted to merely ancient philosophers; its echoes can also be traced in some Hellenistic-Jewish writers and in many Church fathers. The history of this broad reception of the Xenophanean *topos* was never studied in its entirety.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1955) 17-19; *cf.* also Burkert (2009) 20.

<sup>2</sup> The most complete attempt to outline this reception in ancient philosophers so far was made by Schäfer (1996) 214-264; the Hellenistic-Jewish reception, mainly by Philo, was studied by Dreyer (1970); the reception by the Church fathers was partially studied by H. A. T. Reiche in his unpublished dissertation at Harvard (1955), and from partial points of view by some later scholars in significant journal studies; *cf. esp.* Grant (1979); Schoedel (1979); Mansfeld (1988); *etc.* The comprehensive study of Xenophanes' reception, especially in the patristic writings, is the subject of my research at Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic.

In this paper, I intend to present a short outline of the reception of the Xenophanean *topos* in Plato and the Platonic tradition and its subsequent impact on the theological discourse of some Hellenistic-Jewish and Christian Platonists.

### 1. The formation of Xenophanes' philosophical notion of god

The first “religious teachers” of ancient Greece, who shaped the ideas about gods known from the religious cult, were ancient poets, above all Homer and Hesiod.<sup>3</sup> Xenophanes was very much aware of the importance of the epic poets for the religious instruction of ancient Greece: “Since from the beginning all have learned according to Homer...”<sup>4</sup> This importance of the ancient epic poets for the religious ideas of the ancient Greeks was later also reflected by Herodotus.<sup>5</sup> The Homeric epic provided commonly shared ideas of Greek civic religion and profoundly influenced the nascent Greek religious art, but the Homeric stories about gods were a product of a vivid poetic depiction of a mythical world, not a serious theology in the later Platonic sense of the word.<sup>6</sup> Epic stories about gods were playful transformations of mythical motifs where the power of gods became apparent in the context of a story, not doctrines about the nature of gods. Nevertheless, it was precisely the Homeric conception of personal and immortal Olympic gods, especially of the exalted Homeric Zeus,<sup>7</sup> which paved the way for Xenophanes' rational concept of god: Xenophanes formulated his new philosophical notion of god polemically against the epic conceptions and because of its origin, his own concept of god was to a large extent *ex negativo* determined by the Homeric idea of personalized and immortal Olympic gods.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Adam (1908) 9; 21-67.

<sup>4</sup> Xenophanes, Fr. 10 (Heitsch), tr. Leshner; Xenophanes was very probably the first to mention Homer polemically as the educator of Greece; cf. Gemelli Marciano (2005) 122.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hdt. 2.53.

<sup>6</sup> For Plato's conception of theology in the *Republic* and its inspiration by Xenophanes see *infra* section 2.2

<sup>7</sup> Cf. esp. Hom. *Il.* 8.19–26; cf. also, e.g., *Il.* 1.544; *Od.* 1.26–27.

<sup>8</sup> Babut (1974a) 42; Dreyer (1970) 22 cf. also Granger (2013).

## 1.2. Xenophanes' critique of the epic stories about gods and his new philosophical notion of god

Xenophanes regarded the Homeric stories about gods, contrary to their intention, as seriously intended theological statements. The epic stories, when taken as serious accounts of the nature of gods, inevitably appear blasphemous, as is apparent in Xenophanes' Fr. 11 (Heitsch):

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all sorts of things which are matters of reproach and censure among men (ὄνειδα καὶ ψόγος): theft, adultery, and mutual deceit (κλέπτειν μοιχεύειν τε καὶ ἀλλήλους ἀπατεύειν). (tr. Leshner)

This fragment was preserved by Sextus Empiricus,<sup>9</sup> who cites it once more in another place in his *Adversus Mathematicos*,<sup>10</sup> in slightly different wording and connected with a critique of the succession myths about the first generations of gods:

Fr. 12 (Heitsch)

[Homer and Hesiod, according to Xenophanes the Colophonian:] ...as they sang of numerous illicit divine deeds (θεῶν ἀθεμίστια ἔργα): theft, adultery, and mutual deceit. [For Cronus, in whose time they say the life was happy, castrated his father and swallowed his children, while his son, Zeus, after removing him from his kingdom, "threw him under the earth..." (*Il.* 14.204) etc.]<sup>11</sup> (tr. Leshner)

Xenophanes' critique of epic mythology was predominantly moral: the poets attributed to gods deeds which did not even correspond to the standards of human behavior (ὄνειδα καὶ ψόγος ἐστίν)<sup>12</sup> and which violated the laws common in the human society of Xenophanes' day (θεῶν ἀθεμίστια ἔργα).<sup>13</sup> The critique of the succession myths about the first generations of gods mentioned by Sextus Empiricus could be taken directly from Xenophanes' original text:<sup>14</sup> Although no direct fragment of Xenophanes with this critique has been preserved, the critique of the fights between the first generations of gods is mentioned

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<sup>9</sup> Sex. Emp. *M.* 9.193.

<sup>10</sup> Sex. Emp. *M.* 1.289.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. also Hes. *Th.* 453–506; 617–819.

<sup>12</sup> Xenophanes, Fr. 11 (Heitsch).

<sup>13</sup> Xenophanes, Fr. 12 (Heitsch).

<sup>14</sup> Babut (1974) 86–87, n. 15.

in a passage in Euripides' *Hercules*,<sup>15</sup> strongly influenced by Xenophanes,<sup>16</sup> which was included by the Diels-Kranz edition of pre-Socratics among Xenophanes' fragments as fragment DK 21 C 1. In his general moral critique, in Fr. 11 and 12, directly quoted above, Xenophanes does not mention the specific epic stories which he alluded to, but later tradition identified them almost unanimously: "Theft" (κλέπτειν) can be a critique of Hermes' stealing of Apollo's herd from *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*<sup>17</sup> or Hesiod's myth about Prometheus' theft of fire from Zeus.<sup>18</sup> Stories about the rapes of mythical semi-divine heroes (e.g., of Theseus) also occur in Greek mythology. The verb μοιχεύειν is a neologism of Xenophanes based on the Homeric noun μοιχάργια.<sup>19</sup> The Homeric passage referred to by this word is the well-known Ares-Aphrodite story from the *Odyssey*.<sup>20</sup> The other passage from Homer alluded to by Xenophanes may be the catalogue of Zeus' adulteries from the *Iliad*.<sup>21</sup> "Mutual deceit" (ἀλλήλους ἀπατεύειν) can allude to Prometheus' deceit of Zeus<sup>22</sup> or even more probably the famous passage "The Deception of Zeus" from the *Iliad*.<sup>23</sup> In another Fr. 1.21–23 (Heitsch) Xenophanes also criticized the myths about the "battles of Titans, Giants and Centaurs" and the other "furious conflicts" (στάσιας σφεδανάς) of Greek mythology. These myths are devalued by Xenophanes as mere "outdated fictions" (πλάσματα τῶν προτέρων).<sup>24</sup>

Xenophanes' philosophical critique of epic stories about gods was based on the category "worthy" or "seemly of god", which is attested to in Xenophanes' Fr. 26 (Heitsch):

...Always he [*i.e.*, god] abides in the same place, not moving at all, / nor is it seemly (οὐδὲ... ἐπιπρέπει) for him to travel to different places at different times. (tr. Leshner)

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<sup>15</sup> Eur. *HF* 1341–1346.

<sup>16</sup> Jaeger (1948) 213, n. 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Hom. hymn.* 4.70–105.

<sup>18</sup> Hes. *Th.* 565–566; *Op.* 50–52.

<sup>19</sup> Hom, *Od.* 8.332.

<sup>20</sup> Hom. *Od.* 8.267–366.

<sup>21</sup> Hom. *Il.* 14.315–328.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Babut (1974) 89.

<sup>23</sup> *Il.* 14.153–353.

<sup>24</sup> Xenophanes, Fr. 1.22 (Heitsch).

It is not fitting for god to travel between different strata of the cosmos, as the Homeric gods did, but in the later terminology of natural theology, god is completely without motion.

This category “worthy of god”, which Xenophanes introduced to philosophical theology,<sup>25</sup> is based on the profoundly different notion of god which Xenophanes coined under the influence of Homeric concepts. Against the background of this new rational notion of god, it can be said what is or what is not “seemly” to predict about god. Xenophanes’ most important theological Fr. 23 (Heitsch) is already to a large extent polemical:

One god (εἷς θεός) is greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or in thought. (tr. Leshner)

In later terminology, god is neither anthropomorphic as to his shape nor anthropopathic as to his thought. In this theological fragment of Xenophanes’, the word θεός is used not predicatively, but, for the first time in a Greek philosophical text, as the subject in a sentence, about which new philosophical qualities are predicated. This fragment is the first extant attempt to construct, still to a large extent only polemically, a doctrine about the nature of god. As we have seen in Fr. 26 (Heitsch), Xenophanes’ god is also without motion. The other philosophical predicates of the “one god” are specified by the next theological fragments of Xenophanes:<sup>26</sup> god is also without beginning and end,<sup>27</sup> he is without parts or members and he perceives as a whole: “Whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears.”<sup>28</sup> Xenophanes’ “one god” – in the manner of the later “unmoved mover” of Aristotle<sup>29</sup> – effortlessly “shakes” the whole world by the power of his thinking: “But completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind.”<sup>30</sup>

Xenophanes himself still expressed his theological ideas to a large extent polemically and did not yet use the explicit predicates of god that were common in later positive rational theology. His significance

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Dreyer (1970) 20-24; Sheridan (2000) 24; *etc.*

<sup>26</sup> Cf. “Die ‘Sieben Dogmen’ des Xenophanes” in: Schäfer (1996) 203-207.

<sup>27</sup> Xenophanes, Fr. 14 (Heitsch): “But the mortals suppose that gods are born, / wear their own clothes and have a voice and body.” (tr. Leshner); and DK 21 A 13 (critique of the death of mythical gods).

<sup>28</sup> Xenophanes, Fr. 24 (Heitsch); tr. Leshner.

<sup>29</sup> Jaeger (1948) 408; Schäfer (1996) 258-264; Halfwassen (2008) 290.

<sup>30</sup> Xenophanes, Fr. 25 (Heitsch), tr. Leshner.

lies, however, in the fact that he laid the foundations for the later development of philosophical theology. The key figure in the broad ancient reception of Xenophanes' philosophical theology, which became a widely shared philosophical *topos*, was Plato.

## 2. The reception of Xenophanes' philosophical theology in Plato and the Platonic tradition

### 2.1 Plato's reception of the Xenophanean critique of epic mythology

Plato admitted that Homer "educated Greece" and that he was "the most poetic and first of the tragic poets,"<sup>31</sup> but as a philosopher Plato parted with the epic tradition. He refers to "an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry,"<sup>32</sup> which is Plato's poetic description of the tension between mythical and rational thinking. This "old quarrel between poetry and philosophy" originated in the pre-Socratics, especially in Xenophanes, as has been shown, in differences about theology, *i.e.*, about the proper concept of god.<sup>33</sup> The *locus classicus* of Plato's reception of the Xenophanean critique of epic mythology is situated especially in Plato's *Republic*<sup>34</sup> in the context of the discussion between Socrates and Adeimantus about the proper musical education of the future rulers of Plato's ideal state.<sup>35</sup> The children must hear only those tales which correspond to the opinions "they must have when they are grown up".<sup>36</sup> Homer and Hesiod told "false tales" about the nature of gods,<sup>37</sup> because they do not represent "what gods and heroes

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<sup>31</sup> *R.* 10.606e–607a (tr. Bloom).

<sup>32</sup> *R.* 10.607b (tr. Bloom). For an alternative interpretation see, *e.g.*, Levin (2001); Most (2011).

<sup>33</sup> *Cf.* Adam (1908) 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Esp. R.* 2.377e6–3.392c *passim*. The influence of Xenophanes on Plato's critique of mythology is generally acknowledged by many scholars, see, *e.g.*, Schäfer (1996) 250-254; Palmer (1998) 31; Enders (2000)75; *etc.*

<sup>35</sup> Plato's critique of mythology has been the subject of extensive study in modern scholarship; from the recent literature the contributions of Moors (1982), Brisson (1994), and Janka and Schäfer (2002) are especially deserving of attention; for the problem of Plato's attitude to the myth see also Destée and Herrmann (2011); for Plato's attitude to the poets see also Collobert and Destrée and Gonzales (2012).

<sup>36</sup> *R.* 2.377b (tr. Bloom).

<sup>37</sup> *R.* 2.377d.

are like".<sup>38</sup> As a striking example of this false representation of gods, Plato mentions the succession myths of the first generations of gods:

R. 378a

First, I said, the man who told the biggest lie about the biggest things didn't tell a fine lie—how Uranus did what Hesiod says he did, and how Cronus in his turn took revenge on him. And Cronus' deeds and his sufferings at the hands of his son, not even if they were true would I suppose they should so easily be told to thoughtless young things... (tr. Bloom)

These "harsh speeches" could become a pretext for immoral deeds among men:

R. 378b

And they mustn't be spoken in our city, Adeimantus, I said. Nor must it be said within the hearing of a young person that in doing the extremes of injustice, or that in punishing the unjust deeds of his father in every way, he would do nothing to be wondered at, but would be doing only what he first and the first and the greatest of the gods did. (tr. Bloom)

In accordance with Xenophanes' criterion in theology, Adeimantus in Plato' text labeled these succession myths as "unseemly": "To say this doesn't seem fitting (*ἐπιτήδεια*) to me either."<sup>39</sup> The Platonic term *ἐπιτήδεια* is the direct equivalent of the Xenophanean word *ἐπιπρέπει*.<sup>40</sup>

Plato also criticized as wrong examples for young people epic stories that "gods make war on gods, and plot against them and have battles with them", the "battles of Giants and the many diverse disputes of gods and heroes with their families and kin", and "the battles of the gods made by Homer... whether they are made with a hidden sense or without a hidden sense".<sup>41</sup> Plato's critique of the wars and battles between gods mentioned in Homer<sup>42</sup> is not evidenced in Xenophanes' preserved fragments. If not inspired by Xenophanes, it could be

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<sup>38</sup> R. 2.377e.

<sup>39</sup> R. 2.378b (tr. Bloom).

<sup>40</sup> Enders (2000) 75, n. 133.

<sup>41</sup> R. 2.378c–d.

<sup>42</sup> *Esp. Il.* 20.4–21.520.



Plato's own enlargement of traditional Xenophanean reproaches of epic mythology.

Plato also criticized the rapes of semi-divine heroes<sup>43</sup> and the morally offensive passage from the *Iliad* depicting the unmoderated behavior of Zeus<sup>44</sup> which occurs in the same paragraph of the Homeric text as the catalogue of Zeus' adulteries as bad examples for the future rulers of his ideal state. Plato connects this moral critique of Zeus with the moral critique of the Ares-Aphrodite story from the *Odyssey*:

R. 3.390b–c

Or Zeus, alone and awake, making plans while the other gods and men sleep, easily forgetting all of them because of sexual desire, and so struck when he sees Hera that he isn't even willing to go into the house, but wants to have intercourse right there on the ground, saying that he wasn't so full of desire even when they first went unto one another, 'unbeknownst to their dear parents?' Nor is Hephaestus' binding of Ares and Aphrodite fit, for similar reasons. (tr. Bloom)

In his Fr. B 11 and B 12 (Heitsch) Xenophanes asserted the social impact of the moral offensiveness of the deeds assigned to gods by poets. Plato followed and further enlarged this point of view of Xenophanes' (cf. also Xenophanes' Fr. B 1,23) when he labeled the traditional stories of gods as inappropriate examples for young people and thus incorporated the Xenophanean moral critique of epic narrations into the context of his philosophy of education (παίδεια). Plato's Socrates argued that people could commit amoral acts under the pretext of old myths<sup>45</sup> and Plato himself illustrated this worry extensively as a real danger in his dialogue *Euthyphro*, where the young Euthyphro justifies his legal action against his father by the deeds of Zeus against his fathers in the succession myths about the struggles between the first generations of gods.<sup>46</sup>

Xenophanes' assault on epic mythology provoked, as early as during Xenophanes' lifetime, the endeavors of Theagenes of Rhegium to defend Homeric mythology by way of an allegorical exegesis.<sup>47</sup> Plato

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<sup>43</sup> R. 3.391d.

<sup>44</sup> *Il.* 14.330–353.

<sup>45</sup> R.2.378b.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Euthyphr.* 5e–6a.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. DK 8 A 1; A 2.

resolutely opposed the allegorical exegesis of epic mythology in accordance with his educational point of view, as “a young thing can’t judge what is hidden sense and what is not”.<sup>48</sup> As a result of his sharp criticism, Plato finally banished poets from his ideal state,<sup>49</sup> not because of the poetic form of their stories about gods, but because of their moral offensiveness and their falsehood.

## 2.2 Plato’s philosophical theology

Plato did not reject poetry as such but strived for the reform of the epic stories about gods with the help of the new philosophical notion of god. Socrates, in his discussion with Adeimantus, refused to construct new myths about gods on the grounds that “Adeimantus, you and I aren’t poets right now but founders of the city”.<sup>50</sup> He instead proposed new “laws and models concerning gods” (τύποι περὶ θεολογίας),<sup>51</sup> which the poets should follow. It is worth noting that Plato was the first Greek thinker within the extant ancient sources to define the word θεολογία, “theology”, as philosophical speculation about god.<sup>52</sup> Plato’s Socrates specifies that “the god must surely always be described as he is”<sup>53</sup> and defines two main τύποι περὶ θεολογίας:

1. God (ὁ θεός) – with the definite article and as the subject in the sentence – is above all good (ἀγαθός).<sup>54</sup> He cannot be the cause of any evil, contrary to epic stories about gods, but is only the cause of good things:

R. 380c

Now, then, I said, this would be one of the laws and models concerning the gods, according to which those who produce speeches will have to do their speaking and those who produce

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<sup>48</sup> R. 2.378d (tr. Bloom).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. esp. R. 3.398a.

<sup>50</sup> R. 2.379a (tr. Bloom).

<sup>51</sup> Plato’s terminology: νόμοι R. 2.380c4; 2.383c7; τύποι R. 2.379a5; οἱ τύποι περὶ θεολογίας R. 2.380c7; 2.383a2; 2.383c6.

<sup>52</sup> For Plato’s conception of theology in the *Republic* and its inspiration by Xenophanes cf., e.g., Jaeger (1948) 4; Schäfer (1996) 249-257; Enders (2000) 75-89; Riel (2013) 25-59; etc.

<sup>53</sup> R. 2.379a (tr. Bloom).

<sup>54</sup> R. 2.379b.

poems will have to do their making: the god is not the cause of all things, but of the good. (tr. Bloom)

Plato's first *τύπος περι θεολογίας* was very probably inspired by Xenophanes' theology, as the basis of Xenophanes' critique of traditional mythology was a doctrine of divine perfection.<sup>55</sup> Although it is not attested to by any direct fragment of Xenophanes, this idea is attributed to Xenophanes by Simplicius: "The most powerful and the best of all is god."<sup>56</sup> The general goodness of god is also attested to by Xenophanes' student Euripides: "If gods do anything evil, they are not gods."<sup>57</sup>

2. Plato's second *τύπος περι θεολογίας* states that god does not change:

R. 382e

Then the god is altogether simple and true in deed and speech, and he doesn't himself change or deceive others by illusions, speeches, of the sending of signs either in waking or dreaming. (tr. Bloom)

The metamorphosis of gods was a very frequent topic in Greek myths. The unchangeability of god was already foreshadowed by Xenophanes' fragment 21 DK B 26: Xenophanes' "one god" was physically static in terms of external motion. This ideal of external immobility was enlarged in the idea of the absence of internal change. Plato argued against the mutability of god on the basis of his general philosophical assumption that rest is more perfect than motion: god is the most beautiful and in the best form, so that he remains permanently in his own shape; every change would be a change for the worse. Change, multiplicity, and in consequence also passion, as was deduced by later philosophers on the basis of the rational notion of god,<sup>58</sup> must be considered incompatible with the divine nature. Plato's second "model concerning gods" laid the foundations for the later idea of the immutability and *apatheia* of god, which was coined predominantly by the Stoics, but as a theological dogma was also adopted by many later Platonists.

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Leshner (1992) 83-84.

<sup>56</sup> DK 21 A 31; cf. also MXG 927b27 = DK 21 A 28.

<sup>57</sup> Eur. Fr. 292.7 (Nauck).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Frohnhofen (1987) 68-69; 72-76.

Plato is thus, together with Xenophanes and under his influence, the founder of Greek natural theology with its new rational concept of god. It is worth noting that Plato's philosophical notion of god is not the reflection of religious experience, but the product of a widespread demythologization of musical education.<sup>59</sup>

### 2.3 The reception of the *topos* of the Xenophanean critique of Greek mythology in ancient philosophical schools

The Xenophanean critique of epic stories about gods, largely as a result of its reception by Plato, became a very influential *topos* frequently adopted by many later Greek philosophers of different philosophical schools in their almost universal opposition to mythical anthropomorphism. This broad ancient reception of the *topos* of the Xenophanean and Platonic critique of Greek mythology cannot be outlined within the scope of this paper.<sup>60</sup> I will restrict its depiction to only one significant instance. In his dialogue *De Natura Deorum* Cicero puts very similar traditional Xenophanean and Platonic arguments against Greek mythology into the mouths of three different protagonists of Hellenistic philosophical schools: an Epicurean, a Stoic, and an Academic skeptic. The Epicurean Velleius asserts the following about Greek mythology:

Cic. *ND* 1.16

The poets have represented the gods as inflamed by anger and maddened by lust, and have displayed to our gaze their wars and battles, their fights and wounds, their hatreds, enmities and quarrels, their births and deaths, their complaints and lamentations, the utter and unbridled licence of their passions, their adulteries and imprisonments... (tr. Rackham)

The argumentation of the Stoic Balbus is very similar:

Cic. *ND* 2.28

We know what the gods look like and how old they are, their dress and their equipment, and also their genealogies, marriages and relationships, and all about them is distorted into the

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<sup>59</sup> Kerényi (1963) 30.

<sup>60</sup> For a general outline of this broad ancient reception of Xenophanes' rational theology in Greek thinkers, see Schäfer (1996) 214-264. For a general survey of the reception of Plato's critique of epic mythology, see, e.g., Weinstock (1927).

likeness of human frailty. They are actually represented as liable to passions and emotions – we hear of their being in love, sorrowful, angry; according to the myths they even engage in wars and battles, and that not only when as in Homer two armies are contending and the gods take sides and intervene on their behalf, but they actually fought wars of their own, for instance with the Titans and with the Giants... (tr. Rackham)

The Academic skeptic Cotta rejected, in accordance with Platonic tradition, a Stoic allegorical exegesis of succession myths about the first generations of gods:

Cic. *ND* 3.24

The mutilation of Caelus by his son, and likewise the imprisonment of Saturn by his, these and similar figments you rationalize so effectively as to make out their authors to have been not only not idiots, but actually philosophers. (tr. Rackham)

Cicero acquired his arguments against Greek mythology from Greek philosophical sources. The arguments of the Epicurean Velleius correspond with the critique of Greek mythology, *e.g.*, in the Epicurean writer Philodemus, whose writings were found in Herculaneum. The arguments of the Stoic Balbus are very probably a reflection of the ideas of the Stoic philosopher Posidonius of Rhodes, and the Academic skeptic Cotta reproduces the arguments of the New Academy under Carneades. Cicero's dialogue *De Natura Deorum* is thus a late echo in Latin dress of the wide reception of the *topos* of the Xenophanean and Platonic critique of Greek mythology in different Greek philosophical schools. The traditional gods were rejected by the Xenophanean arguments popularized by Plato, and instead of these traditional gods, a new philosophical theology of a different kind was developed.

#### 2.4 The Xenophanean-Platonic philosophical notion of god in the theology of the Middle Platonists

The positively formulated theology developing the Xenophanean notion of god is the construction of later doxographic tradition. The authors of what is termed the Xenophanean “doxographical vulgate”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Mansfeld (1987) 286; Mansfeld (1988) 93.

defined the god of Xenophanes as “one”, “eternal”, “homogeneous”, “spherical”, “limited”, “unmoved”, and “rational”.<sup>62</sup> These positive qualifications of the god were in accordance with Plato’s τύποι περι θεολογίας and were adopted as the *viae analogiae* and *eminentiae* in the theology of the Middle Platonists.<sup>63</sup> An eminent example of such a summary of Middle-Platonic positive theology is outlined in the tenth chapter of the *Didascalicus*, a manual of Platonic doctrines attributed to Alcinous:<sup>64</sup> according to Alcinous’ theology, god is “eternal” (ἀίδιος),<sup>65</sup> “perfect” (τέλειος),<sup>66</sup> “good” (ἀγαθὸς μὲν ἐστὶ),<sup>67</sup> and “immovable” (ἀκίνητος αὐτὸς ὄν),<sup>68</sup> he does not move externally or change internally (ἀκίνητος ἂν εἴη κατὰ τόπον καὶ ἀλλοίωσιν),<sup>69</sup> and he is also without a body (ἄσώματος):<sup>70</sup> if he had a body, he would be “corruptible” (φθαρτός), “generated” (γενητός), and “changeable” (μεταβλητός), which is not a “seemly” way to describe god (ἄτοπον ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ).<sup>71</sup> It was this Middle-Platonic positive theology which impacted on the theological discourse of a number of Hellenistic-Jewish and old Christian Platonists.

### 3. The question of the broad impact of the Xenophanean and Platonic theological *topos* on the theological discourse of Hellenistic-Jewish and Christian Platonists

#### 3.1 The Hellenistic-Jewish and patristic adoption of the *topos* of the Xenophanean and Platonic critique of Greek mythology

Hellenistic-Jewish and old Christian apologists were confronted in their surroundings with living ancient religions. As heirs to the biblical monotheism, they opposed ancient polytheistic religions. Since the ideas of Greek religion were strongly influenced by epic

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. DK 21 A 1; 31; 32; 33; 36.

<sup>63</sup> Mansfeld (1987) 312.

<sup>64</sup> Dillon (1996) 285.

<sup>65</sup> Alcin. *Didasc.* 10.164.31.

<sup>66</sup> Alcin. *Didasc.* 10.164.33.

<sup>67</sup> Alcin. *Didasc.* 10.164.36.

<sup>68</sup> Alcin. *Didasc.* 10.164.23.

<sup>69</sup> Alcin. *Didasc.* 10.165.38.

<sup>70</sup> Alcin. *Didasc.* 10.166.7.

<sup>71</sup> Alcin. *Didasc.* 10.166.13–14.

poetry, Hellenistic-Jewish and old Christian apologists combated the ideas about gods expressed in Greek epic mythology. They followed almost unanimously the devaluation of Greek myths about gods as “unworthy” of the divine nature, as was common in the Xenophanean and Platonic tradition of Greek philosophy.<sup>72</sup> In their apologies they often quoted Xenophanean and Platonic arguments against pagan gods, adopted almost word by word from Greek (and later also Latin) philosophical sources.<sup>73</sup> They usually did not conceal the fact that they borrowed these arguments extensively from pagan sources. In contrast, in their apologetic argumentation they often explicitly reminded their pagan readers that it was their own thinkers and philosophers who first expressed these arguments against the epic stories about gods.<sup>74</sup> The patristic adoption of Xenophanean and Platonic arguments against Greek mythology can be documented extensively, as these arguments are used in the majority of patristic apologetical writings. Below the most significant instances of this patristic reception of the *topos* of the Xenophanean-Platonic critique of Greek mythology will be presented.

Among the most frequently criticized Greek myths about gods in Hellenistic-Jewish and patristic writings were the succession myths of the first generations of gods.<sup>75</sup> The battles with the Titans and Giants,<sup>76</sup> and the other wars between gods,<sup>77</sup> are often the subject of criticism. The main argument against the epic stories about gods was their moral offensiveness. A number of apologists criticized the stories

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<sup>72</sup> Cf., e.g., Jos. C. Ap. 2.244; Athenag. Leg. 20.4; Min. Fel. Oct. 22.5; Arnob. Adv. gent. 4.35; Aug. Civ. 6.5; 6.8.

<sup>73</sup> Cf., e.g., Burkert (2005) 183-185.

<sup>74</sup> E.g., Jos. C. Ap. 2.237-239; Arist. Apol. 13.2-3; Thphl. Ant. Autol. 1.9; Clem. Prot. 2.24.2-3; 2.39.1; Arnob. Adv. gent. 4.24-25; etc.

<sup>75</sup> E.g., Philo Prov. 2.35; Jos. C. Ap. 2.240-241; Sib. Or. 3.110-155; Arist. Apol. 9.1; Thphl. Ant. Autol. 1.9; 2.5; 3.3; Tat. Orat. 25.5; Athenag. Leg. 20.3; 21.4; Clem. Protr. 2.14.2; [Just.] Or. ad Gr. 2.1-2; Or. Cels. 1.17; Athan. Gent. 10; Epiph. Anc. 105; Tert. Apolog. 9.4; Min. Fel. Oct. 30.3; Arnob. Adv. gent. 4.24; Firm. De err. 12.8; Aug. Civ. 4.10.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Philo Gig. 13.58; Sib. Or. 3.110-155; Thphl. Autol. 2.6; Athenag. Leg. 20.3; 21.4; Or. Cels. 4.32; Lact., Inst. 1.10.10; Aug. Civ. 4.30 who adopted the critique of the Titans and Giants from the speech of the Stoic Balbus in Cicero's *N.D.*

<sup>77</sup> Cf. also Jos. C. Ap. 2.241; [Just.], Coh. ad Gr. 2.5; Athan. Gent. 12; Arnob. Adv. gent. 4.33; Tertull. Apolog. 14,2-4; Aug. Civ. 2.25; etc.

about the thefts committed by mythical gods.<sup>78</sup> The immorality of the Ares-Aphrodite story from the *Odyssey* is also one of the most frequently criticized motifs.<sup>79</sup> The moral critique of Zeus, the supreme god of Greek religion, is also very common.<sup>80</sup> The deeds of mythical gods are often rejected on the basis of arguments that they are against the laws that are standard in human society.<sup>81</sup> Hellenistic-Jewish and Christian Platonists also often adopted the Platonic *paideia* motif: The deeds of mythical gods are rejected because they represent bad examples for human behavior.<sup>82</sup> Christian Platonists also generally rejected, in accordance with Plato's model, the allegorical exegesis of Homeric mythology.<sup>83</sup> A number of apologists also argued that Homer was rightly banished from Plato's ideal state.<sup>84</sup>

### 3.2 Influence of the Middle-Platonic rational theology on the Hellenistic-Jewish and Christian theology

The *topos* of the Xenophanean and Platonic critique of Greek mythology has its own internal logic. The aim of the arguments against the traditional gods coined by Xenophanes and Plato is to prove that the traditional gods are in fact no gods, as their qualities and deeds contradict the philosophical notion of god, which is the basis of their anti-anthropomorphic and moral critique. The traditional gods are rejected, only to make way for the new rational concept of god,

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<sup>78</sup> E.g., Philo *Prov.* 2.39; Arist. *Apol.* 10.2; Athenag. *Leg.* 30.4; Arnob. *Adv. gent.* 4.24; 5.31; Lact. *Inst.* 1.10.7; Aug. *Civ.* 7.26.

<sup>79</sup> E.g., Jos. *C. Ap.* 2.246; Arist. *Apol.* 10.4; Athenag. *Leg.* 21.3; Clem. *Prot.* 2.33.7–8; 4.59.1–2; 4.60.2; Tat. *Orat.* 34.4; Athan. *Gent.* 12; Min. *Fel. Oct.* 23.7; Arnob. *Adv. gent.* 5.41; 5.43 (Arnobius criticized the allegorical interpretation of the Ares-Aphrodite story); Firm. *Err.* 9.2; 12.8; Lact. *Inst.* 1.17.9; Aug. *Civ.* 4.10; etc.

<sup>80</sup> E.g., Arnob. *Adv. gent.* 4.22.

<sup>81</sup> E.g., Arist. *Apol.* 8.1; 13.5; Thphl. *Ant. Autol.* 3.8; [Just.], *Mon.* 5.5.48–49; Tert. *Apolog.* 11.14; Arnob. *Adv. gent.* 4.22–23; Lact. *Inst.* 1.9.1; Firm. *Err.* 4.2; etc.

<sup>82</sup> E.g., *C. Ap.* 2.275; Arist. *Apol.* 8.2; 9.3; 11.7; Just. *1 Apol.* 21.4–5; Athenag. *Leg.* 34.2; Min. *Fel. Oct.* 23.8.

<sup>83</sup> E.g., Jos. *C. Ap.* 2.255; Arist. *Apol.* 13.6; Tat. *Orat.* 21.5–8; Athenag. *Leg.* 22.1–12; Or. *Cels.* 3.24; Eus. *PE* 2.6.16; Tert. *Ad nat.* 2.2.14; Min. *Fel. Oct.* 19.10–11; Arnob. *Adv. gent.* 5.32–45; Firm. *Err.* 7.7; etc.

<sup>84</sup> E.g., Jos. *C. Ap.* 2.256; Just. *2 Apol.* 10.6; Min. *Fel. Oct.* 23.1–2; Aug. *Civ.* 2.14; 8.13; cf. Athenag. *Leg.* 21.3; Clem. *Prot.* 4.59.2 (condemnation of Homer).



which is their exact opposite. This internal logic of the Xenophanean and Platonic critique of Greek mythology impacted on the thinking of Hellenistic-Jewish and patristic apologists. The traditional ancient gods were rejected by the apologists by means of the traditional Xenophanean and Platonic philosophical arguments, but at the same time, the rational concept of god, which was their basis, exerted a strong influence upon proper Hellenistic-Jewish and old Christian theological thinking. In numerous Christian apologetic writings the philosophical notion of god, which became a cornerstone of the emerging Christian positive theology, was also adopted side by side with the Xenophanean and Platonic arguments against traditional gods. The influence of this Xenophanean and Platonic thought structure is obvious in the first place in the writings of the early Greek apologists, who laid the foundations of Christian theology, but it can also be traced in later apologists.

The *Apology* of the Christian philosopher Aristides widely criticized the pagan gods by means of the traditional philosophical arguments.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, Aristides' own Christian notion of God, outlined in the first chapter of his *Apology*, is strongly influenced by the Middle-Platonic theology: Aristides' God is "the Mover of the world", "ungenerated", "constant", "without beginning and end", "immortal", "perfect", "incomprehensible", "in need of nothing", "unnamable", "without members", he "encompasses all", and is "above all passions and weaknesses like anger, oblivion and ignorance".<sup>86</sup>

The influence of the same Xenophanean and Platonic thought structure can also be traced, *e.g.*, in Athenagoras, who ridicules and rejects traditional pagan gods and at the same time adopts Middle-Platonic theology as the basis of his Christian theological synthesis: Athenagoras' God is "ungenerated" (ἀγέννητον), "eternal" (αἰδιον), "invisible" (ἀόρατον), "impassible" (ἀπαθῆ), "incomprehensible" (ἀκατάληπτον), and "unlimited" (ἄχωρητον).<sup>87</sup> These notions with their alpha privative in the theology of Athenagoras merely contrast the true God with the mythical gods. They are not the predicates of negative theology, as Athenagoras' God is not above the realm of

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<sup>85</sup> *Esp. Arist. Apol.* 8–11 (*Ba*).

<sup>86</sup> *Arist. Apol.* 1.2 (*Ba*).

<sup>87</sup> *Athenag. Leg.* 10.1.

being and intellect, but he is identified with true being and intelligible by mind.<sup>88</sup>

The writings of Aristides and Athenagoras are the most striking early examples of the Christian reception of Xenophanes' and Platonic *topos*, but the influence of this thought structure can be traced in all the old Christian apologists. However, the reception of the Xenophanean and Platonic critique of Greek mythology was not the only gate through which the philosophical notion of god entered Christian theological speculation. The next was the philosophical critique of biblical anthropomorphism, which was based on the same philosophical notion of god as the critique of Greek mythology.

### 3.3 The philosophical critique of biblical anthropomorphism

The philosophical critique of mythical anthropomorphism is a double-edged weapon. It was used against pagan mythology by Hellenistic-Jewish and old Christian apologists in accordance with the Greek philosophers, but at the same time, certain pagan intellectuals turned the same critique against the sacred texts of the Jewish and Christian Bible.

Hellenistic scholars, educated in the Xenophanean and Platonic critique of Homeric anthropomorphism, regarded the biblical narrations under the influence of Homeric scholarship as mere myths and the remaining anthropomorphisms of LXX became the subject of severe criticism. The anthropomorphic expressions of LXX were understood by Hellenistic scholars as descriptions of God's nature and according to the standards of Greek philosophy since Xenophanes, the anthropomorphic description of God was considered blasphemous. The critique of biblical anthropomorphism is not the problem of the Hebrew Bible and is foreign to biblical thought. It developed in the encounter of biblical thinking with Greek philosophical theology. The constitution of this problem was the result of an endeavor to apply the category "worthy of god", based on the philosophical notion of god, to the biblical text.

The biblical anthropomorphic expressions in the Hebrew text were not intended as descriptions of God's nature, but they were the means used by the Semitic language to express the qualities of the relations of

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<sup>88</sup> Cf., e.g., Athenag. *Leg.* 4.1.

God to men.<sup>89</sup> The function of many biblical anthropopathisms is to express God's solicitous conduct toward his people.<sup>90</sup> For instance, the frequent statements concerning God's anger are not descriptions of God's irritable nature, but theological categories which allowed the biblical authors to explain concrete historical events in the light of the faith as the ultimate attempt of God to bring Israel from apostasy to conversion. The literal understanding of the biblical anthropopathisms as descriptions of God's irritable nature was thus a misinterpretation of biblical thinking.

The anti-anthropomorphic critique of the biblical text has the same internal logic as the Xenophanean and Platonic critique of mythical anthropomorphism. It is based on a rational concept of god and, together with the critique of biblical anthropomorphism, the rational concept of god exerted an influence on the theological speculation of Hellenistic-Jewish and patristic writers. The philosophical critique of biblical anthropomorphism was the next gateway through which Xenophanean-Platonic rational theology entered Hellenistic-Jewish and patristic thinking.

Philo of Alexandria, inspired by the Homeric exegetical schools, developed as a solution to the problem of biblical anthropomorphism the allegorical exegesis of the biblical text, which was later adopted by certain Church fathers. In his exegesis of God's repentance in verse *Gen. 6.6*, for example, Philo explains that the literal meaning of God's repentance is a mere concession to the weakness of illiterates who must be admonished by the fear of God,<sup>91</sup> but that the true hidden meaning of the biblical statement is that God is in fact immutable. The allegorical exegesis uncovers the philosophical truths in the figurative biblical narrations. Philo was, despite his Jewish origin, the Greek writer who, under the influence of Plato's philosophical theology, was the author of the first treatise on the immutability of God.<sup>92</sup> In Philo's theology, the biblical concept of a living God with solicitous relations to men was replaced, by means of the allegorical exegesis, by a philosophical concept of the immutable god of philosophers. An objection can be raised against Philo's exegetical method that biblical anthropomorphisms are not mere figurative shells of the philosophical

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. Boman (1983) 84-91.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Heschel (1962) 264 *et passim*.

<sup>91</sup> Philo *Immut.* 61-68; cf. also Philo *De sacr.* 95.

<sup>92</sup> Philo *Immut.*

cores uncovered by means of the allegorical exegesis. The relationship between biblical narrations and philosophical theology is not a relationship between the concrete and the abstract. Biblical thinking contains its own theology, which cannot be reduced to a philosophical notion of god without a profound distortion of biblical thinking. The God of the Hebrew Bible is by no means identical with the immutable, and hence insensitive and uninfluenceable, Xenophanean-Platonic god of the philosophers.

A striking example of the adoption of the Middle-Platonic theology in place of the problematic biblical anthropomorphisms can be found, *e.g.*, in Justin, in his outline of Christian theology in chapter 127 of his *Dialogue with Trypho*, which is very strongly influenced by the Middle-Platonic reinterpretations of Xenophanes' philosophical notion of god:

Justin *Dial.* 127

The ineffable Father and Lord of all neither has come to any place, nor walks, nor sleeps, nor rises up, but remains in His own place, wherever that is, quick to behold and quick to hear, having neither eyes nor ears, but being of indescribable might; and He sees all things, and knows all things, and none of us escape His observation; and He is not moved or confined to a spot in the whole world... (tr. Reith).

Very similar theology formulated in the context of the anti-anthropomorphic critique of the biblical text can also be found, under the influence of Philo, *e.g.*, in Clement of Alexandria:

Clem. Alex. *Str.* V.68.2-3

God has bestowed on us ten thousand things in which He does not share: birth, being Himself unborn; food, He wanting nothing; and growth, He being always equal; and long life and immortality, He being immortal and incapable of growing old. Wherefore let no one imagine that hands, and feet, and mouth, and eyes, and going in and coming out, and resentment and threats, are said by the Hebrews to be attributes of God. (tr. Wilson)

The reception of the anti-anthropomorphic critique of biblical anthropomorphism was thus another significant way in which Greek philosophical theology was accepted in patristic theological speculation.

The same anti-anthropomorphic critique was later also directed against the anthropomorphism of the New Testament,<sup>93</sup> with the same consequences of the influence of Greek rational theology on Christological speculation.<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusion

The Xenophanean thought structure, a critique of the traditional mythological stories about gods, which were replaced by the new rational theology, became, especially via Plato and the Platonic tradition, a very influential *topos* of Greek philosophy. This Xenophanean thought structure has its own internal logic: traditional mythical ideas are rejected, only to introduce the new rational concept of god. The *topos* of the Xenophanean-Platonic critique of Greek mythology was also adopted by some Hellenistic-Jewish and many Christian apologists. Together with the adoption of the *topos* of the philosophical critique of mythological gods, the Greek philosophical notion of god exerted an influence on the proper Hellenistic-Jewish and patristic theological speculation. Another gateway through which the Greek philosophical notion of god impacted on Hellenistic-Jewish and patristic theology was the philosophical critique of biblical anthropomorphism, which is based on the same grounds as the philosophical critique of anthropomorphism of Greek myth. The concept of the god of philosophers in Hellenistic-Jewish and patristic thinking thus represents an import from Greek philosophical sources, which was adopted by some Hellenistic-Jewish and old Christian Platonists together with their acceptance of the philosophical critique of religious anthropomorphism.

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<sup>93</sup> Cf., e.g., Or. *Cels.* 2.16–79 et *passim*.

<sup>94</sup> Cf., e.g., Clem. *Str.* VII.5.5.

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