

Did Plato Get His Ideas from the Bible?

T.S. Eliot [once wrote](#) that “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal.”

If that’s the case, then according to some influential past authorities, Plato was a “mature poet” when it comes to his ideas on God and creation.

The other day I was reading St. Augustine’s (354-430) [De Doctrina Christiana](#)—a treatise that played an enormous role in shaping Western education—and came across an interesting passage in Book 2. In it, Augustine responds to the charge that Jesus Christ derived his teachings from Plato. Drawing on his mentor [St. Ambrose \(340-397\)](#), he denies the charge, and responds that Plato actually borrowed from Jewish thinkers!

“The illustrious bishop [Ambrose], when by his investigations into profane history he had discovered that [Plato made a journey into Egypt](#) at the time when Jeremiah the prophet was there, show[ed] that it is much more likely that Plato was through Jeremiah’s means initiated into our literature, so as to be able to teach and write those views of his which are so justly praised?”

Augustine also makes the same claim of Pythagoras, namely, that his thought on God depended upon Jewish thinkers, and by proxy, divine revelation.

In his classic [The City of God](#), Augustine [later rejected the Jeremiah connection](#), since the prophet was dead long before Plato visited Egypt. And he also notes that Plato couldn’t have read the Hebrew Scriptures directly, because they hadn’t yet been translated into Greek. But he nevertheless still believes that affinities between these Scriptures and Plato’s

writings means that the latter probably studied them through a translator.

I looked further, and discovered that the thesis that Plato borrowed from the Jews was not uncommon in the ancient world. [In a post for First Things](#), Peter Leithart draws upon Theophilus Gale's 17th-century work *Court of the Gentiles* in relaying the tradition of this thesis:

"[Gale] knows he is in a long tradition of Jewish and Christian thought. Aristobulus, a Jew, claims that Plato followed the institutes of the Jews carefully, and this is repeated by Clement and Eusebius. All make the same claim about Pythagoras. Tertullian claims in his Apology that all poets and sophists draw from prophets.

Gale denies that the notion that Plato borrowed from Jews is a Christian prejudice. Pagan philosophers say the same. Hermippus of Smyrna, who write life of Pythagoras, says that he 'transferred many things out of the Jewish Institutions into his own philosophy' and calls him 'imitator of Jewish Dogmas.' Gale takes from Grotius the notion that Pythagoras lived among Jews. Numenius is reputed to have said, 'What is Plato but Moses Atticizing?'"

Before you freak out—if you are inclined to freak out about the above—let me tell you *why* you might freak out:

In our secular world, both non-religious and religious have a lot staked in the idea that man can come to discover deeper truths purely through the "natural light of universal reason". We see religion and its dependence on a special revelation from God as "a bridge too far" to serve as a source for social unity, knowledge, and the recommendation of virtue. In the West, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and other pagan philosophers thus serve as our go-to proof-texts for the idea that divine revelation can be bypassed in the pursuit of truth and the creation of a harmonious society.

The thesis that Plato borrowed from Judaism certainly bears further scrutiny. I haven't yet looked into the counterarguments to it (my point in this post was simply to raise awareness of it), but I'm sure they're out there, and I encourage you to look into them.

But the thesis shouldn't be dismissed outright. That wouldn't be very "academic".

—