

Text 3

The Bible: it's also a philosophy divided into different disciplines¹

[58] Now Christianity conceives of itself as a philosophy, the continuation of Greek philosophy, even employing the same means, namely the means of reason. However, it does not address an exclusivist or elitist circle only, but everything possessing a human face. If, then, Christianity is to be conceived of as the consummation of Greek philosophy in this regard, then it must – not least if it is to be taught and learnt – admit of a division. We know today that the division of philosophy into different disciplines was not Plato's work. Instead, we must attribute the first divisions to the Old Academy or even Aristotle. However, for late antique philosophy, both pagan and Christian, the most famous division of philosophy into the disciplines of logic, ethics and physics, which was also frequently used by the Stoics, goes back to Plato. Thus, Eusebius, representing the whole of Greek and Latin Christian philosophy, states that Plato divided philosophy into these three parts. The very reception of this division in Christian philosophy is, by itself, a remarkable event in intellectual history. However, what, in terms of its impact upon subsequent intellectual history, makes this reception process a truly momentous act of interpretation of the greatest significance to Europe as a whole is the fact that this division of philosophy is applied to the basic text of Christian philosophy itself, the books of the Old and New Testaments. It is not the right place here to give an exhaustive account of the status of the words of the Holy Writ in terms of philosophy of science, i.e. to discuss the question whether they have the rank of first principles (*κοινὰ ἔννοιαι*) or a different one. However, the fact that the Church Fathers believed that the division of Greek philosophy could also be found in the Bible itself shows that for them its words constituted the highest form of philosophy. For the Church Fathers that which we believe to be two distinct things is in reality one: the biblical and the Greek, the Bible and philosophy. The opposition between the two is an invention of theologians – as modern theologians themselves admit. The classic place where the biblical philosophy of science is expounded for the first time is the prologue to Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. There he argues that the three Books of Solomon, [59] *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* and the *Song of Songs*, are to be understood in the sense of the Old Academic or Stoic division. This means that *Proverbs* constitutes the ethics, *Ecclesiastes* the physics and the *Song of Songs* the epoptics or the philosophical theology of Christian philosophy, as this designation of metaphysics in Middle Platonism suggests. Origen mentions that there are others who hold on to logic as a discipline of its own besides these three. Later authors say that the original discipline of logic has been redefined as theology in Christian philosophy. Either way, it is certain that this division into ethics, physics and metaphysics became canonical. We find traces of it as late as the 17th century. However, it was not the very first division of Christian philosophy ever. For Clement of Alexandria already reports that the philosophy of Moses, i.e. the original Christian philosophy, which forms the basis of all subsequent philosophies

¹ *Christliche Philosophie. Die Entdeckung der Subjektivität*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006, ch. V.: "Die Bibel – auch eine Philosophie, unterteilt in Disziplinen", pp. 58–60.

(this is why the Pythagorean philosopher Numenius could call Plato an “Atticizing Moses”), is divided into four parts among which there are also ethics, physics and epoptics, namely theology itself. Apparently, the link of these three disciplines to the Christian doctrine was already so close in the fourth century that Cyrill could call Christ the crucified king and lord of practical, i.e. ethical, of physical and of theological philosophy. These very characteristics, he claimed, were also expressed by the fact that the inscription on the cross was, on Pilate’s order, in the Roman, Greek and Hebrew tongues. Thus, “Roman” stands for the practical, for courage and the like, while Greek points to theoretical philosophy, notably physics, as it was invented in Greece. Finally, Hebrew symbolizes theological mystagogy, since the Jewish people had always had a special relationship to God.

The prologue to Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs* offers a science of Christian philosophy which defines the object and the aim of each of its disciplines. Moreover, they are ordered according to the Platonist way of ascent. Thus, we have to start with the ethics contained in *Proverbs*, which purges the student, making him open to sublime objects. After ethics, we must turn to the physics of *Ecclesiastes* which enlightens us on the natures and causes of visible things as well as their fragility and transience. Thereby, we are prepared in the best possible way to follow the lead of the metaphysics of the *Song of Songs*, and ascend to the contemplation of mystical and divine objects. It was three Old Testament figures who had already pointed to this tripartite division of Christian philosophy: [60] the figure of the obedient Abraham is a symbol of ethics. Isaac who searches the depths of the earth for wells stands for natural philosophy. And Jacob who is knowledgeable about things divine embodies epoptics, which Rufinus, the translator of many of Origen’s writings, translates as *inspectiva*, i.e. metaphysics or philosophical theology.