



# The Platonic-Biblical Origins of Apophatic Theology: Philo of Alexandria's Philosophical Interpretation of the Pentateuchal Theophanies

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**Abstract:** This article examines Philo's philosophical interpretation of the three theophanies in Exodus, which would, centuries later, continue to be considered by the great thinkers responsible for developing negative theology, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite. Although Exod 33:11 clearly states that the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as if someone were to speak to his own friend, according to Philo, the lawgiver neither saw the face of God, nor learned the proper name of God, nor was he able to comprehend the essence of God. These very statements became the inspiration for later apophaticism. The present article seeks to establish to what extent Philo's theses were influenced by Plato's philosophy or by later Middle Platonism, and to what extent Philo, by commenting allegorically on the Pentateuch, becomes the initiator of new ideas hitherto unknown in philosophical discourse. In the course of the analyses, three great questions of apophatic theology are discussed: 1. the unnameability of God; 2. the unknowability of God's essence; and 3. the knowability of God's nature by grace.

**Keywords:** apophaticism, negative theology, mysticism, Philo of Alexandria, Moses, Exodus, theophanies, Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, Hellenistic Judaism, allegorical exegesis, Old Testament exegesis, patristic exegesis, Hellenistic philosophy, philosophy of God

## 1. From Anthropomorphism to Apophaticism: An Explanation of the Issue under Study

In searching for the origins of apophatic theology, such as was developed with great vigor in the Neoplatonic tradition beginning with Plotinus, and in Christian circles beginning with Gregory of Nyssa,<sup>1</sup> one can go far, far back in the history of ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, many themes of apophatic theology were addressed by thinkers working before Plotinus or Gregory of Nyssa; however, with the latter, the issue is much more developed and occupies an important place in their doctrines. In the area of Greco-Roman philosophy, especially in the circles of the Middle Platonists, there arose the question of the ineffability of God, but not the doctrine of the unknowability of God's essence. The latter would only be developed by Plotinus in connection with the adoption of the positively understood concept of the infinity of the One. In the case of Christian theology, the conviction of the infinity and unknowability of God's essence has been around from its very beginnings. Gregory of Nyssa, however, made this theme the leitmotif of many of his exegetical works. On the origins

In fact, already the earliest Greek philosophers, while criticizing anthropomorphic representations of God (gods), pointed out that humans always conceive of God through the prism of their own nature or the culture in which they live. “Mortals think, Xenophanes noted, that the gods are begotten, and have the clothing, voice, and body of mortals.”<sup>2</sup> “Africans say their gods are snub-nosed and black, Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired.”<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Heraclitus, while emphasizing the difference between the nature and wisdom of God and that of man, stated: “The wisest of men will appear like an ape compared to a god, in wisdom, in beauty, and in every other respect.”<sup>4</sup> In turn, while hinting at the inadequacy of the names by which people refer to God, he said: “One being, the only wise one, would and would not be called by the name of Zeus.”<sup>5</sup> Similar intuitions can also be found in biblical theology. Although the Old Testament is full of anthropomorphic theophanies of God, there also is the tradition that no man has actually seen God, “because a human being cannot look at God and remain alive” (Exod 33:20). Furthermore, there are statements such as “God is not as a man” (Num 23:19), or “The Lord sees not as man sees” (1 Sam 16:7), as well as “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9). Thus, the intuition that God’s nature and wisdom are diametrically opposed to human nature and wisdom was already emerging in the oldest philosophical and religious traditions.

Nevertheless, it is one thing to criticize anthropomorphisms and to emphasize that God differs from the way humans usually conceive of Him, and quite another to put forward the philosophical thesis of God’s unnameability, linked to the concept of his ontological transcendence, or the thesis of the absolute unknowability of God’s essence by the finite human intellect, linked to the concept of positively understood infinity. The latter seems to have first appeared with Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish thinker from the beginning of the first millennium, who not only criticized biblical anthropomorphisms, but, while commenting on the Pentateuch “through Platonic glasses,” came to very momentous conclusions, which would be taken over and developed by the great representatives of apophatic theology such as Gregory of Nyssa,

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of apophatic theology before Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa, see Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 13–84; Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 35–102 and 191–221; Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 120–133 and 207–251; Louth, *The Origins*, 1–34; Ramelli, “The Divine,” 167–188; Edwards, “Christian Apophaticism,” 64–77; Mrugalski, “The Notion of Divine Infinity,” 69–84.

<sup>2</sup> DK, 21 B 14.

<sup>3</sup> DK, 21 B 16. One of Xenophanes’ most famous polemics against anthropomorphisms, especially Homeric ones, reads as follows (DK, 21 B 15): “Now if cattle, horses or lions had hands and were able to draw with their hands and perform works like men, horses like horses and cattle like cattle would draw the forms of gods, and make their bodies just like the body each of them had.”

<sup>4</sup> DK, 22 B 83.

<sup>5</sup> DK, 22 B 32.

Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor and Meister Eckhart. Of course, the attribution of precedence of an idea to a particular thinker always remains a matter of dispute. Therefore, among scholars there are those who see in Philo a precursor, not only of apophatic theology, but also of many other major theological issues,<sup>6</sup> as well as those who consider that Philo is simply one of the continuators of the great current of thinkers associated with Platonic philosophy, which existed in various forms from the time of the Old Academy, through the circles of the Middle Platonists until the emergence of Neoplatonism.<sup>7</sup> It is admittedly true that Plato himself stated that finding God is a difficult task, and it is even more difficult to talk about Him to everyone.<sup>8</sup> It is also true that the Middle Platonists, referring to Plato, spoke of an ineffable God.<sup>9</sup> None of them, however, stated that the essence of God is in all respects incomprehensible and impossible to grasp by any idea, and that God moves away into infinity before the philosopher who seeks Him.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, the objective of Platonic philosophy, as the Middle Platonists note, becomes the knowledge of God and the likening of humans to God, although some difficulties arise in the realization of this goal.<sup>11</sup> Yet they should be overcome by the philosopher who advances on the path of intellectual and moral virtues.

The influence of Plato, or Platonism, on Philo's theology is undeniable, but it should not be overstated either. For Philo is an original thinker who, using certain philosophical ideas and language (not only Platonic, but also Pythagorean, Aristotelian and Stoic), seeks to understand and convey to his readers the deepest content of biblical revelation, and at the same time does not remain uncritical of Scripture, as well as the views of the philosophers he is inspired by.<sup>12</sup> Most of his work is, after all, an allegorical commentary on the Pentateuch, within which he arrives at certain theoretical concepts that did not appear in earlier philosophical discourse, and which, as some scholars suggest, will be taken over from him (directly or indirectly) by Plotinus.<sup>13</sup> The latter, in turn, would become the inspiration for subsequent apophatic theology, both that developed among the Greco-Roman Neoplatonists and that created by Christian thinkers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Wolfson, *Philo*, 439–460; Reale – Radice, “La genesi,” LXX–LXXXVII.

<sup>7</sup> See Dillon, “Philo,” 223–232; Dillon, *The Roots of Platonism*, 35–49; Runia, “Naming and Knowing,” 82; Moreschini, *Apuleius*, 224–225.

<sup>8</sup> See Plato, *Tim.* 28c.

<sup>9</sup> See Calabi, *Arrhetos Theos*, which is a collection of articles on this issue.

<sup>10</sup> See Philo, *Somm.* 1.67; *Post.* 18. We will return to this topic later in this study.

<sup>11</sup> See Eudorus, *Fr.* 25; Alcinous, *Did.* 153.3–12; 181.19–182.14; Iustinus, *Dial.* 3.4–4.2. See also Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 66–83; Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 293–299; Mrugalski, “The Notion of Divine Infinity,” 73–75.

<sup>12</sup> See Bonazzi, “Towards Transcendence,” 233–251.

<sup>13</sup> See Sterling, “Did Ancient Philosophers Read Philo?,” 37–63; Radice, “Nameless Principle,” 175–178.

<sup>14</sup> Plotinus' influence on later Christian thinkers postulating the infinity and unknowability of God's essence is also debated among modern scholars. In the case of Gregory of Nyssa, for example, some researchers suggest that this thinker arrived at the concept of God's infinity independently of Plotinus, others that he

It is impossible to discuss all aspects of Philo's apophatic theology in such a short text, let alone show its influence on individual thinkers of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Therefore, I have selected certain key issues in Philo's apophatic theology, which would be developed in the following centuries, and to concentrate my research around the Old Testament theophanies, especially those described in the Book of Exodus, which become the subject of the Alexandrian's allegorical-philosophical interpretation. I was inspired to make this choice by Denys Turner, who, in his monograph on negative theology, *The Darkness of God*, notes that two stories, each foundational in the intellectual and religious cultures of its respective tradition, play a huge role in understanding the language of the Western Christian mystical tradition: the 'Allegory of the Cave' in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*, and the story in Exodus of Moses' encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai.<sup>15</sup> After which he adds:

There is little doubt that, whether it was the Greek cast of mind picking up the religious significance of Exodus in Platonic terms, or an Hebraic mind which seized upon the philosophical opportunities to be explored in Plato, this convergence did happen and was consciously acknowledged to have happened by theologians both of Greek and Latin traditions. Thus for once, did logic and history coincide. What those theologians thought they were doing explains what they did. They wanted to bring Plato and Exodus together. The effect of their doing so was a seismic shock which was still registering tremors twelve hundred years later – though in our time the earth no longer moves, and what we perceive is the fixed metaphoric topography into which the landscape has settled.<sup>16</sup>

Turner, writing in a general way about the extraordinary encounter between Platonism and Exodus, surprisingly fails to mention Philo, although he is aware that Western apophatic theology, thanks to Latin translations of Greek texts, was directly or indirectly (especially through the works of Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor) influenced by Eastern theology.<sup>17</sup> The latter, in turn, was deeply indebted to the allegorical exegesis of Philo of Alexandria. In this study, therefore, I will try to take a close look at what Turner terms the "seismic shock" that gave impetus to the later apophatic theology that developed over the centuries in East and West. The subject of my study will be an allegorical interpretation of the three theophanies seen by Moses. The first took place at the burning bush (Exod 3:1–14), where God would reveal His name to Moses. The second took place on a mountain,

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was inspired by Plotinus' metaphysics, and still others that he drew from Plotinus selectively and from a certain point in his creative activity. What is indisputable, however, is the influence of Philo of Alexandria on Gregory of Nyssa's exegesis. See Meredith, "The Idea of God," 127–147. See also Geljon, "Divine Infinity," 152–177; Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, 243–261.

<sup>15</sup> See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 11–12.

<sup>17</sup> See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 12–13.

where, despite God's presence, Moses actually experienced darkness (Exod 20:21). The third, on the other hand, took place during Moses' prayer, in which the lawgiver asked to see God's face (Exod 33:23).<sup>18</sup> In connection with these three theophanies, I will address three key issues: God's unnameability (a theme that connects Philo to Platonic theology), the unknowability of God's essence (the original theme of Philo's theology), and God's "knowability" by grace (a theme that Christian apophaticism will take up).

## 2. "I am the one who is": On the Unnameability of God

The first theophany of interest occurred at the burning bush. The narrative of Exod 3:1–4:17, where the theophany is described, provides an extensive dialogue between the lawgiver and God regarding the leading of the sons of Israel out of Egypt, in 3:13–15, which in the Septuagint version, reads:

And Moses said to God, "Look, I shall come to the sons of Israel and shall say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you'; they will ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I am The One Who Is." And he said, "Thus shall you say to the sons of Israel, 'The One Who Is has sent me to you.'" And God said again to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, God of Abraam and God of Isaak and God of Iakob, has sent me to you.' This is an everlasting name of mine and a memorial of generations to generations."<sup>19</sup>

Of particular interest are the LXX translations of two Hebrew phrases: in verse 14: *ehyeh āšer ehyeh* ('I am what I am,' or 'I will be what I will be') was translated as: ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν ('I am the being,' or 'I am the one who is'),<sup>20</sup> while the phrase

<sup>18</sup> It is these three theophanies, or rather Philo's interpretation of them, that will become the inspiration for Gregory of Nyssa, who in *The Life of Moses* (a work with the same title as one of Philo's works) symbolically describes the mystical journey in getting to know the unknowable God. This process will never end, since God (the object of the search) is infinite. See Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Moys.* 2.19–41; 2.162–169; 2.219–255. See also Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Exod 3:13–15 (LXX, trans. Pietersma – Wright).

<sup>20</sup> An older English translation of the Septuagint, by Lancelot C.L. Brenton, renders the expression ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν as 'I am THE BEING' (*The Septuagint with Apocrypha*, 73). Such a translation, however, suggests a kind of ontologisation of the name of God. Whereas the Greek philosophers used the term τὸ ὄν when speaking of being, the Septuagint text employs the active masculine participle of the verb εἶμι, preceded by a masculine article (ὁ ὢν). Therefore, the more recent English translation of the Septuagint by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright is more appropriate, since the formula ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν is translated here as 'I am the one who is' (*A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, 53). Nevertheless, it is true that Philo repeatedly identifies God with being and uses the term τὸ ὄν on this occasion. See Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton*, 45–88.

in verse 15, containing the Tetragrammaton: *YHWH ʾēlohē*, has been translated as: κύριος ὁ θεός (“The Lord, the God”). This type of Greek translation of the Hebrew text became the basis for the Alexandrian to conclude that God, while speaking to Moses from the burning bush, did not actually reveal His proper name to him, but only the title κύριος ὁ θεός, which indicates His relation to the world. Thus God in His essence is unnameable. The thesis of God’s unnameability appears in many of Philo’s works, and is most extensively discussed in *De mutatione nominum*, where our author states:

It is a logical consequence that no personal name (τὸ μὴδ’ ὄνομα κύριον) even can be properly assigned to the truly Existent (τῷ ὄντι πρὸς ἀλήθειαν). Note that when the prophet desires to know what he must answer to those who ask about His name He says “I am He that is” (Exod 3:14), which is equivalent to “My nature is to be, not to be spoken (τῷ εἶναι πέφυκα, οὐ λέγεσθαι).” Yet that the human race should not totally lack a title to give to the supreme goodness He allows them to use by licence of language, as though it were His proper name, the title of Lord God (κύριος ὁ θεός) of the three natural orders, teaching, perfection, practice, which are symbolized in the records as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For this He says is “My age-long name,” belonging as it were to the age of human existence, not to that when age as yet was not, “a memorial” too, not set, that is, beyond memory or apprehension, and again “to generations” (Exod 3:15), not to beings that were never generated (“γενεαῖς,” οὐ φύσεσιν ἀγενήτοις). For those who are born into mortality (τοῖς εἰς τὴν θνητὴν γένεσιν ἐλθοῦσιν) must needs have some substitute for the divine name, so that they may approach if not the fact at least the name of supreme excellence and be brought into relation with it.<sup>21</sup>

The philosophical background of this text is the Platonic distinction between two levels of reality, that is to say, the distinction between intelligible being (νοητός), which is eternal and immutable, and sensible being (αἰσθητός), which is generated and mutable. The former always is, while the latter is becoming.<sup>22</sup> For Philo, the intelligible, eternal and immutable being is God, termed in *Mut.* 11 as the true being (τὸ ὄν πρὸς ἀλήθειαν) and as the one whose nature is to be (τῷ εἶναι πέφυκα). Yet eternal being, according to Philo, is also the Divine Logos and the Divine Powers and, in general, everything that is of an intelligible nature, which the Alexandrian discusses

<sup>21</sup> Philo, *Mut.* 11–13.

<sup>22</sup> See Plato, *Tim.* 27d–28a: “Our starting-point lies, I think, in the following distinction: what is it that always is, but never comes to be (τί τὸ ὄν αἰεὶ, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον), and what is it that comes to be but never is (τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν αἰεὶ, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε)? The former, since it is always consistent, can be grasped by the intellect with the support of a reasoned account, while the latter is the object of belief, supported by unreasoning sensation, since it is generated and passes away, but never really is (γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν).” See also Plato, *Phaed.* 79a; 80b–c; 83b.

in virtually all his works.<sup>23</sup> Probably this is why the last part of *Mut.* 12 refers to “natures uncreated” in the plural (φύσεις ἀγένητοι).<sup>24</sup> In the proper sense of the word, however, the uncreated (ἀγένητος) is God alone, since everything else (the Logos, the Powers, and the Ideas, which are the thoughts of God) originates from God and is ontologically dependent on Him. On the other hand, all visible, that is, sensible and corporeal beings, including humanity, are part of the genus of being that is in the process of coming into being. They are destructible and mortal (εις τὴν θνητὴν γένεσιν ἐλθοῦσιν). This Platonic division of reality into real being and being in the process of coming into being is further evident in *Mos.* 1.75–76, in which Philo also comments on the theophany in the burning bush:

God replied to Moses: “First tell them that I am He Who is, that they may learn the difference between what is and what is not (διαφορὰν ὄντος τε καὶ μὴ ὄντος), and also the further lesson that no name at all can properly be used of Me, to Whom alone existence belongs (οὐδὲν ὄνομα τὸ παράπαν ἐπ’ ἐμοῦ κυριολογεῖται, ὅ μόνῳ πρόσεστι τὸ εἶναι). And, if, in their natural weakness, they seek some title to use, tell them not only that I am God, but also the God of the three men whose names express their virtue, each of them the exemplar of the wisdom they have gained – Abraham by teaching, Isaac by nature, Jacob by practice.”<sup>25</sup>

In this text, God is again identified as a being whose essence is existence, while everything else beyond Him, is characterised in a Platonic manner as non-being.<sup>26</sup> The question arises, however, as to why, in the two texts quoted above, the Alexandrian places such emphasis on the impossibility of attributing a name to God.

<sup>23</sup> See Philo, *Opif.* 12–24; *Leg.* 1.51; *Conf.* 171–172; *Deus* 31–32. See also Runia, “The Beginnings of the End,” 289–299; Mrugalski, *Il Dio trascendente*, 89–117.

<sup>24</sup> According to Philo, the generation of the Logos took place beyond time (see *Leg.* 1.19–20). Furthermore, the Alexandrian states explicitly that what is intelligible in nature is eternal (see *Opif.* 12; *Mut.* 267). However, since the Logos, though eternal, originates from God, Philo states in one of his works that “the Logos is neither uncreated as God nor generated as man (οὔτε ἀγένητος ὡς ὁ θεὸς ὢν οὔτε γενητὸς ὡς ἡμεῖς)” (see *Her.* 206). In the quoted text, Philo speaks of uncreated natures (φύσεις ἀγένητοι), using the plural. Perhaps he means here, besides God, also the Logos and his Powers. The term ἀγένητος thus appears here as a synonym for the word ‘eternal.’ After all, intelligible beings, whose life is eternity, have a different ontological status from sensible beings. Also their manner of being generated is not the same as the manner of being generated inherent to beings that are in the process of becoming.

<sup>25</sup> Philo, *Mos.* 1.75–76.

<sup>26</sup> For a similar distinction, see also Philo, *Det.* 160: “For, among the virtues, that of God really is, actually existing, inasmuch as God alone has veritable being. This is why Moses will say of Him as best he may in human speech, ‘I am He that is’ (Exod 3:14), implying that others lesser than He have not being, as being indeed is (ὡς τῶν μετ’ αὐτὸν οὐκ ὄντων κατὰ τὸ εἶναι), but exist in semblance only, and are conventionally said to exist (δόξη δὲ μόνον ὑφ’ ἐστάναι νομιζομένων).” Plato’s distinction between being and non-being is applied by Philo to emphasise the ontological difference between God and creation. In fact, however, God, according to Philo, transcends even the concept of being and is therefore unknowable. See Mrugalski, “Between Ontologisation and Apophaticism,” 3–5. This topic will be further discussed in the second part of this study.

Are we dealing here with a distancing of Philo from Platonism? After all, according to Plato, knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) concerns precisely the true and immutable being, which is the intelligible being, whereas opinion (δόξα) concerns that which is in the process of coming into being. Gaining knowledge of true being and communicating it to others is, after all, the task of the philosopher, as Plato propounds in much of his *Republic*.<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Plato himself also mentions the difficulties that the philosopher encounters in the process of coming to know the supreme being and then conveying this knowledge. Thus, while explaining the famous ‘Allegory of the Cave’ in Book VII of the *Republic*, he speaks of the disturbance of sight experienced by a man freed from his shackles, and of the initial difficulty in looking at the sun, which symbolises the Idea of the Good.<sup>28</sup> Whereas in *Timaeus* he states that “it would be a hard task to discover the maker and father of this universe of ours, and even if we did find him, it would be impossible to speak of him to everyone” (εἰς πάντα ἀδύνατον λέγειν).<sup>29</sup> However, the initial difficulties in knowing the Idea of the Good and the difficulties in telling everyone about God, the creator and father, are not the same as the absolute unknowability and unnameability of God. Plato’s statements thus indicate that only a few are able to comprehend what God is and to only a few can this knowledge be communicated. Moreover, the supreme Idea of the Good, is explicitly stated to be knowable,<sup>30</sup> and its exact cognition is the task of the philosopher.<sup>31</sup>

Contemporary scholars point out, however, that the Middle Platonists, that is, the commentators on Plato from the first centuries AD,<sup>32</sup> believed that the first God, whom they identified with the Platonic Idea of the Good or the One, was unnameable and unspeakable.<sup>33</sup> In their allegorical interpretations of Plato’s Dialogues, they were referring precisely to the famous statement in *Tim.* 28c, but also to the statement in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*, where the philosopher confesses that what pertains to the first and loftiest aspects of nature cannot be expressed either in words or conveyed in writing.<sup>34</sup> Yet the Middle Platonists such as Alcinous, Apuleius and Numenius, who

27 See Plato, *Resp.* 476d–478d; 519b–534e.

28 See Plato, *Resp.* 515e–516c.

29 Plato, *Tim.* 28c.

30 See Plato, *Resp.* 508e: αἰτίαν δὲ ἐπιστήμης οὐσαν καὶ ἀληθείας, ὡς γιγνωσκομένης μὲν διανοοῦ.

31 See Plato, *Resp.* 517b–c; 518c–d; 532a–b; Plato, *Symp.* 511c. See also Wolfson, *Philo*, 111–112.

32 It will be noted that Philo of Alexandria himself is now also considered a Middle Platonist. See Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 129–183. See also Dillon, “Philo,” 223–232.

33 See Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 111; Dillon, “Commentary,” 101; Moerschini, *Apuleius*, 224–225.

34 See Plato, *Ep.* 7, 341c–d: “There is certainly no treatise of mine on it, nor will there ever be. For unlike other sciences, this one can in no way be communicated by means of words (ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἔστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα). On the contrary, it is only through a prolonged communion with the subject, by living with it, that, like a light that is kindled by a flickering flame, it begins to suddenly nourish itself within one’s soul.” It is quite likely that the statement by Plato quoted here was, albeit freely, reproduced in Apuleius, *De deo Socr.* 124. See Donini, “Apuleio,” 95.

spoke explicitly of an ineffable God,<sup>35</sup> lived and worked in the second century AD, long after Philo, who composed his works at the turn of the millennium. Therefore, Harry A. Wolfson's thesis that Philo is the first thinker known to us who developed the doctrine of the absolute unknowability and ineffability of God seems correct.<sup>36</sup>

But did Philo's apophatic theology take inspiration from Plato's statements in *Tim.* 28c<sup>37</sup> or the *Seventh Letter*, as did the later Middle Platonists? We have no convincing evidence for this. It is evident that the Alexandrian knew, quoted and sometimes paraphrased Plato's *Timaeus*, but the texts in which he states that God is absolutely ineffable and unnameable do not refer to the famous statement in *Tim.* 28c or to the *Seventh Letter*. It has been argued by some scholars, however, that Philo, when he states that God cannot be attributed with any name, was inspired by considerations from the *First Hypothesis* of the *Parmenides*.<sup>38</sup> In this hypothesis, Plato states that the One has no parts, has no form, is not in any place, is neither in motion nor at rest, is not in time, and consequently it cannot be said that the One participates in being, nor that the One becomes. Since the One is beyond any categories that are ascribed to that which is, the One cannot also have the name that is ascribed to being.<sup>39</sup> Philo's God assumes the characteristics of the Platonic One.<sup>40</sup> Being absolutely sim-

<sup>35</sup> See Alcinous, *Did.* 165.5: ἄρρητος δ' ἐστὶ καὶ ὡς μόνῳ ληπτός. See also Apuleius, *De deo Socr.* 124–125; Apuleius, *Dogm. Plat.* 1.190–191; Numenius, *Fr.* 2.

<sup>36</sup> See Wolfson, *Philo*, 110–115. Some scholars criticise Wolfson's view, which attributes to Philo an overwhelming influence on later pagan, Christian and even Islamic philosophy. However, when it comes to the doctrine of the ineffability of God, these scholars are unable to point to specific texts written in the time before Philo to refute the claim of his originality on this matter. They quote on this occasion the above mentioned passages from the works of the Middle Platonists (who lived after Philo) or one passage by Cicero (who lived before Philo), who in his work *De natura deorum* paraphrases a statement from *Tim.* 28c (see Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 111). Although Cicero mentions the impossibility of naming God (see Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.30: *Iam de Platonis inconstantia longum est dicere, qui in Timaeo patrem huius mundi nominari neget posse*), this is only a mention and not a doctrine. Furthermore, later in Cicero's work we read that "it is obvious that these propositions are both inherently false and mutually destructive (*per se sunt falsa perspicue et inter se vehementer repugnantia*).” Thus, the view of the impossibility of naming God is criticised in the same work. See also Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," 310, who, with regard to the passage quoted above, states: "To my mind the passage must be considered suspect. The Epicurean spokesman is trying to convict Plato of contradictory statements. It is more likely that he is giving tendentious interpretations of two Platonic texts than that he is recording views held by contemporary Platonists."

<sup>37</sup> David Runia found 41 places in Philo's works where God is referred to as ποιητής καὶ πατήρ, which would suggest a reference to the first part of the passage from *Tim.* 28c. None of these places, however, addresses the issue of God's ineffability, which is mentioned in the second part of the statement of *Tim.* 28c. See Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 108–113.

<sup>38</sup> See Plato, *Parm.* 137c–142a. See also Runia, "Naming and Knowing," 77; Calabi, "Unknowability of God," 43–44.

<sup>39</sup> See Plato, *Parm.* 142a.

<sup>40</sup> See Philo, *Praem.* 40: "For this which is better than the good, more venerable than the monad, purer than the unit (ὁ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ κρείττον καὶ μονάδος πρεσβύτερον καὶ ἐνός εἰλικρινέστερον), cannot be discerned by anyone else; to God alone is it permitted to apprehend God. Now the fact that He is, which can be apprehended under the name of His subsistence, is not apprehended by all or at any rate not in the best way."

ple and transcendent, He does not fall under any physical or metaphysical category. However, not all people, Philo notes, are able to think of God in this way:

Among men some are soul lovers, some body lovers. The comrades of the soul, who can hold converse with intelligible incorporeal natures, do not compare the Existent to any form of created things. They have dissociated Him from every category or quality, for it is one of the facts which go to make His blessedness and supreme felicity that His being is apprehended as simple being, without other definite characteristic; and thus they do not picture it with form, but admit to their minds the conception of existence only.<sup>41</sup>

The numerous allusions to Plato's dialogues that we find in Philo's texts, however, do not fully explain the reason why he regarded God as absolutely unnameable. For, on the one hand, Plato did not develop the doctrine of the unnameability of God; on the other hand, Philo is able to criticise the views of the great philosophers that contradict biblical theology.<sup>42</sup> Thus, if he were convinced that the ontological and epistemological transcendence of God contradicts biblical revelation, he would be able to defend his thesis. Meanwhile, it is the text of Scripture itself that becomes the inspiration for his thesis of the unnameability of God. And while there are many anthropomorphic statements about God in the Bible, there are also some that clearly indicate Divine transcendence. It is this tension, and sometimes contradictory claims, present in the Bible that attracts Philo's attention and becomes the subject of his allegorical exegesis. Within this exegesis, Philo arrives at original theoretical concepts that would later be taken up by the Middle Platonists and then by Plotinus.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Philo, *Deus* 55. See also Philo, *Somn.* 1.231: "Testimony to this is afforded also by the divine response made to Moses' question whether He has a name, even 'I am He that is' (Exod 3:14). It was given in order that, since there are not in God things which man can comprehend (ἵν' ὄν δυνατὸν ἀνθρώπῳ καταλαβεῖν μὴ ὄντων περὶ θεόν), man may recognize His subsistence (ἐπιγνῶ τὴν ὑπαρξίν)."

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Philo, *Opif.* 7–8, where Philo criticises the view of Aristotle, who, while rejecting the doctrine of the creation of the world, attributed inactivity to God. See also Bonazzi, "Towards Transcendence," 233–251, who portrays Philo as an independent-minded philosopher. On the one hand, he used the language and solutions of Platonism of the time, while on the other hand he did so for his exegetical purposes. And since the latter were a priority for him, he was able to appropriately select, and sometimes criticize, concepts developed in the various philosophical schools of his time.

<sup>43</sup> As Roberto Radice rightly points out, Philo on the issue of the unnameability of God appears to be original. For in his doctrine, "Unnameableness is no longer a symptom of the indefiniteness and irrationality of the object. Rather, it is a sign of its infinity and, in consequence, of the subject's inability to grasp its reality: God's essence is indeed necessarily unknowable. We have thus arrived at a view none too distant from Plotinus," especially given that Philo too recognises a kind of negative theology in which the *via negationis* and the *via eminentiae* coincide. In this respect, then, Philo is an important forerunner of Plotinus. That he may have been Plotinus' first forerunner as regards the ineffability and unnameableness of the Principle is, in my view, a hypothesis that should not be discounted, even though it calls for wide-ranging research if it is to be supported." See Radice, "Nameless Principle," 175. For a slightly different view on this issue see Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," 286–289 and 310–312. We will return to

It is important to recognize that *Deus* 55 is preceded by reflection on the question of biblical anthropomorphisms. In particular, Philo contrasts Num 23:19, “God is not as a man,” with Deut 8:5, “like a man He shall train his son.”<sup>44</sup> The latter becomes the basis for Philo’s thesis that biblical anthropomorphisms have a pedagogical function. Representing God in terms that simple people (‘body lovers’) can understand helps them to obey the law, even if they do so only out of fear. People who are educated and familiar with philosophical thinking (‘soul lovers’) do not need anthropomorphic representations of God because they obey His law out of love, not fear. They also, while acknowledging God’s transcendence, do not ascribe any physical or metaphysical categories to God. In this way, the latter are closer to the truth, while the former are on the way to the truth. Therefore, according to Philo, the statement, ‘God is not as a man,’ expresses the truth about the nature of God, while the others (those comparing Him to man) have only a pedagogical function.<sup>45</sup>

If, in turn, one examines the argumentation presented in the work *De mutatione nominum*, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, which contains an interpretation of the theophany at the burning bush, it becomes clear that the Alexandrian refers precisely to biblical (and not philosophical) texts to support his thesis of God’s unnameability. Indeed, he goes on to cite the biblical stories of God’s revelation to Abraham (Gen 17:1) and Jacob’s mysterious struggle with God (Gen 32:30) to prove that none of the patriarchs ever learned the proper name of God.<sup>46</sup> For the theophany itself is a vision which, as Philo argues elsewhere, took place only in the intellect of the patriarch.<sup>47</sup> A supernatural vision, however, does not imply the acquisition of knowledge of what God is in His essence or of what His proper name is, as we see in *Mut.* 13–15, where Philo appeals to Exod 6:3:

“I was seen,” He says, “of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, being their God, and My name of ‘Lord’ I did not reveal to them” (Exod 6:3). For when the transposition is reset in the proper order it will run thus, “My proper name I did not reveal to thee,” (τὸ ὄνομά μου κύριος οὐκ ἐδήλωσα αὐτοῖς), but, He implies, only the substitute, and that for reasons already mentioned. So impossible to name indeed is the Existent that not even the Potencies who serve Him tell us a proper name. [...] Think it not then a hard saying that the Highest of all things should be unnameable (ἄρητον) when His Word has no name of its own which

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the question of God’s infinity in the next paragraph, when discussing Philo’s conception of God’s absolute unknowability, although, as we shall see, the two issues are linked.

<sup>44</sup> See Philo, *Deus* 53–54.

<sup>45</sup> See Philo, *Deus* 60–69.

<sup>46</sup> See Philo, *Mut.* 13–19. See also Philo, *Somm.* 1.231–234.

<sup>47</sup> See Philo, *Sacr.* 59, where, commenting on the theophany under the oaks tree of Mamre, Philo speaks of three images that God produced in Abraham’s soul (τριττὰς φαντασίας ἐνεργάζετο τῇ ὀρατικῇ ψυχῇ). See also Philo, *Mut.* 7. On ‘seeing God’ and the different meanings of this statement in Philo, see Mackie, “Means, Methods, and Mysticism,” 147–179. On this, see also Mackie’s essay in this volume, “Apophatic and Anthropomorphic Visions of God,” 529–546.

we can speak. And indeed if He is unnameable (ἄρρητον) He is also inconceivable and incomprehensible (ἀπερινόητον καὶ ἀκατάληπτον).<sup>48</sup>

In order to understand this text, it is important to note that the Greek term κύριος can be used as a noun (ὁ κύριος, ου) and then means ‘lord,’ but can also be used as an adjective (κύριος, ου, α, ον) and then means ‘proper,’ ‘personal,’ ‘legitimate.’<sup>49</sup> According to Philo, the expression in Exod 6:3, τὸ ὄνομά μου κύριον, appears to be a hyperbaton, that is, a figure of speech in which the typical, natural word order is altered. In fact, the grammatically correct order of the phrase should be: ὄνομά μου τὸ κύριον (‘my proper name’). It follows that he read the term κύριος as an adjective (‘proper,’ ‘personal’). Thus, one and the other of the versions of the biblical statement quoted by him mean the same thing, i.e. “my proper name.” The former, however, is, according to Philo, just an incorrect arrangement of the sentence made by the biblical author. Colson’s English translation, which I have quoted above, therefore appears to be incorrect, since it renders the term κύριον, as ‘Lord.’ However, this translation corresponds to the text that actually appears in the Septuagint (τὸ ὄνομά μου κύριος οὐκ ἐδήλωσα αὐτοῖς), which Philo, for some reason, quotes incorrectly, changing the term κύριος into κύριον.<sup>50</sup> Thus the term κύριον, appears to him as an adjective of the neuter form, which corresponds to the noun τὸ ὄνομα, which is also of the neuter form. This fact provides some food for thought because, as mentioned above, the term κύριος, which appears frequently in the Septuagint, is equivalent to the Tetragrammaton YHWH. It therefore follows that Alexandrian either deliberately altered the biblical verse for the purposes of his philosophical exegesis (which is highly unlikely), or is completely unaware that in the Hebrew version of the text he quotes, the word YHWH appears.<sup>51</sup> This in turn raises the question, which many scholars have already posed, to what extent Philo knew Hebrew, or whether he used the original Hebrew of the Pentateuch at all. Whatever the answer to this question might be, the fact remains that he considers the Greek translation of the Bible to be inspired, as he contends in *Mos.* 2.37–39. If, therefore, the Tetragrammaton YHWH was translated by inspired scribes as κύριος, this was done under divine inspiration. This is why an insightful commentator on the Septuagint such as Philo states that no mortal has ever learned God’s proper name and cannot learn it, for God does not possess one. He is utterly unnameable (ἄρρητος), as he states explicitly

<sup>48</sup> Philo, *Mut.* 13–15.

<sup>49</sup> See LSJ, “κύριος,” 1013.

<sup>50</sup> At this point, however, it should be noted that in the quotation of Exod 6:3 in the manuscripts of *De mutatione nominum*, the word κύριον (or κύριος) does not appear. Yet it does appear in the florilegia, and it is most likely that Philo must have had this version of the text (i.e. with the term κύριον) at his disposal, hence his further argumentation regarding the correct word order of the biblical verse. See Colson – Whitaker, “Appendix to *De Mutatione Nominum*,” 586.

<sup>51</sup> This latter thesis is suggested by Runia, “Naming and Knowing,” 78.

in *Mut.* 13–15.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, the term κύριος, when it appears in the Septuagint as a noun (‘Lord’), indicates, according to the Alexandrian, only God’s function in relation to the world, and not God’s proper name. This function is to rule over the world. Moreover, the title κύριος, as we learn from Philo’s other works, is actually the name of one of God’s main Powers through which He rules the world. The second is the Power through which God created the world. To the latter Philo ascribes the title θεός, since, according to the etymology he gives, everything was laid or made (ἔθηκε) through it.<sup>53</sup> The issue of the Divine Powers through which God acts in the world and reveals Himself to humanity, however, is already linked to another topic that we will address in the next section, namely the absolute unknowability of God’s essence.

### 3. “In the darkness was God”: On the Unknowability of the Essence of God

The problem of the unnameability of God, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, was taken up by the Middle Platonists of the second century AD, and then by the Neoplatonic philosophers from the third century AD onwards. They were inspired to deal with this issue by Plato’s statements in *Tim.* 28c and the *Seventh Letter*,

<sup>52</sup> See Runia, “Naming and Knowing,” 77–82. A slightly different view is taken by Francesca Calabi, who believes that, according to Philo, God has a proper name, but it is hidden to humans, in accordance with the above-quoted passage of *Mut.* 11–13. See Calabi, “Unknowability of God,” 47–48: “It is not a question of the ontological lack of a name, but rather the impossibility of man’s knowing an adequate name. If we cannot know the essence of God, we cannot know His name either. Underlying this idea is the Jewish tradition of the value of a word in terms of its efficacy, the power of a name, its controlling function and the knowledge it provides about whatever is named. According to this tradition God has a name, a hidden name which cannot be pronounced or used, except by particular people in particular circumstances. Given the relationship pertaining between name and reality, the proper name would indicate the essence of God – which humans cannot know. It is for this reason that God did not reveal it. In this perspective, it seems that unnameability is related not to God’s lack of a name, but to His silence in this respect. In the other interpretation, which derived from theorizations based on Plato’s *Parmenides*, ‘He who is’ cannot have a name as it is His nature solely to be: any name given would add something to being, multiply it, destroy its oneness. A name involves predication, which implies plurality and relatedness.”

<sup>53</sup> Philo derives the etymology of the word θεός from the verb τίθημι (‘put,’ ‘set,’ ‘establish’). See Philo, *Conf.* 137: “That Potency of His by which He made (ἔθηκε) and ordered all things, while it is called God (θεός) in accordance with the derivation of that name, holds the whole in its embrace and has interfused itself through the parts of the universe.” Meanwhile, the names of the two supreme powers, θεός and κύριος are mentioned in *Abr.* 121: “The central place is held by the Father of the Universe, Who in the sacred scriptures is called He that is as His proper name, while on either side of Him are the senior Potencies (δυνάμεις), the nearest to Him, the creative (ποιητική) and the kingly (βασιλική). The title of the former is God (θεός), since it made (ἔθηκε) and ordered the All; the title of the latter is Lord (κύριος), since it is the fundamental right of the maker to rule and control what he has brought into being.” See also Philo, *Mut.* 27–29. In *Fug.* 95 Philo enumerates the names of not just two, but five major Powers of God. On the various hierarchies of the Powers, see Termini, *Le potenze di Dio*, 116–136.

in which the philosopher speaks of the difficulty of communicating, whether orally or in writing, the knowledge of the highest principles. A completely new question, however, is the doctrine of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God, which we find in Philo's writings. It will be taken up after him by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and, in Greco-Roman philosophy, though not until Plotinus. The Middle Platonists do not seem to have addressed this issue.<sup>54</sup> Philo himself touches on this problem while discussing the Sinai theophany, and of greatest interest to him is the final part of the narrative:

And all the people were perceiving the sound and the flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking. Now all the people were afraid and stood at a distance. And they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and do not let God speak to us, lest we die." And Moses says to them, "Take courage! For in order to test you God has come to you in order that his fear might be in you so that you do not sin." Now the people were standing at a distance, but Moses went into the darkness where God was (Μωυσῆς δὲ εἰσηλθεν εἰς τὸν γνόφον οὗ ἦν ὁ θεός).<sup>55</sup>

This text emphasises the transcendence of God, both through the description of the extraordinary phenomena that accompanied the theophany, and through the people's fear that an encounter with God causes death. This fear, though repeatedly espoused in scripture, is unfounded (cf. Gen 16:13; 32:30; Exod 33:18–23; Judg 6:22–23; 13:21–23; Isa 6:5). Not one biblical character dies due to the *visio Dei*. Nevertheless, only those whom God has chosen and granted the special grace of seeing are entitled to speak to God. Moses himself, however, although chosen by God, did not see

<sup>54</sup> See Mrugalski, "The Notion of Divine Infinity," 73–75. See also the volume edited by Francesca Calabi, *Arrhetos Theos*. This volume is a collection of contributions from a conference held at the University of Pavia in 2001. This conference initially was entitled *The Unknowability of the First Principle in Middle Platonism*. Yet, because none of the contributors were able to prove the thesis of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God in Middle Platonism (with the exception of the paper on Philo, by Calabi, "Conoscibilità," 35–54), the name of the volume was changed to *The Ineffability of the First Principle in Middle Platonism*.

As we mentioned in the previous paragraph, Roberto Radice recognises Philo's originality on the question of the absolute unnameability and unknowability of the essence of God, which in the thought of the Alexandrian is linked to the concept of infinity (see Radice, "Nameless Principle," 175–178). According to Radice, after Philo and before Plotinus, only Numenius of Apamea considered the question of the unknowability of the Supreme God. The issue, in my opinion, is not so obvious. In fact, in *Fr.* 17, Numenius states that "only the Creator was acknowledged by men, but the First Intellect, which is called being-itself (αὐτοῦν), was completely unrecognised by them (παντάπασις ἀγνωσούμενον παρ' αὐτοῖς)." The fact that many people are unaware of the existence of supreme principles, or ignore them completely, does not mean that the essence of the Supreme Intellect is unknowable to the philosopher seeking it. One cannot conclude from this single passage that Numenius taught the doctrine of the absolute unknowability of God. It is true, however, that Numenius was in some way familiar with Judaic theology and perhaps even with the writings of Philo himself.

<sup>55</sup> Exod 20:18–21 (LXX, trans. Pietersma – Wright).

God's face.<sup>56</sup> He entered the darkness (εις τὸν γνόφον) in which God was (οὗ ἦν ὁ θεός). The characterisation of God's dwelling place as darkness contradicts many statements in Scripture in which God is called light or the source of light.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, according to Exod 19:18, Mount Sinai was covered with fire while Moses was entering the darkness. Contradictions of this kind attract the attention of Philo, who, interpreting the biblical text allegorically, again in the Platonic spirit, makes a distinction between light perceptible by the senses (belonging to the level of sensible being) and light illuminating the mind (belonging to the level of intelligible being):

And so when you hear that God was seen by man, you must think that this takes place without the light which the senses know, for what belongs to mind can be apprehended only by the mental powers. And God is the fountain of the purest radiance (πηγή δὲ τῆς καθαρωτάτης αὐγῆς θεός), and so when He reveals Himself to a soul the rays He puts forth are free from all shadow and of intense brightness. Do not however suppose that the Existent which truly exists is apprehended (καταλαμβάνεσθαι) by any man; for we have in us no organ by which we can envisage it, neither in sense, for it is not perceptible by sense, nor yet in mind (οὐτ' αἰσθησιν αἰσθητὸν γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν οὔτε νοῦν). So Moses the explorer of nature which lies beyond our vision, Moses who, as the divine oracles tell us, entered into the darkness (Exod 20:21), by which figure they indicate existence invisible and incorporeal, searched everywhere and into everything in his desire to see clearly and plainly Him, the object of our much yearning, Who alone is good.<sup>58</sup>

Philo's interpretation, however, does not stop at the distinction between two kinds of light: sensible and intelligible. On the one hand, it is true that the darkness referred to in Scripture concerns the level of the senses. Moreover, God, being incorporeal and therefore imperceptible by the senses, is in a sense darkness for the one who tries to know Him by this means. On the other hand, Moses, in Philo's interpretation, did not seek God through the senses, and yet he entered the darkness where God was. What, then, is this darkness in which the lawgiver ended up, if God is "the fountain of the purest radiance" that illuminates the soul? An answer to this question is given in *Post.* 14, which also interprets the theophany of Exod 20. Philo notes that, when Moses entered the darkness, he entered "into unapproachable and invisible conceptions regarding the Existent Being (εις τὰς ἀδύτους καὶ ἀειδεῖς περὶ τοῦ ὄντος ἐννοίας). For the Cause of all, Philo adds, is not in the thick darkness, nor locally in any place at all, but high above both place and time (ὑπεράνω καὶ τόπου καὶ χρόνου)." Thus, conceptions, or even the very act of thinking (ἐννοια)

<sup>56</sup> From the earlier narrative describing the theophany, we learn that Moses heard the voice of God speaking (see Exod 19:19), but there is no mention of seeing God's face.

<sup>57</sup> God is metaphorically compared to a lamp, fire and light that illuminates the darkness in Deut 4:24; 2 Sam 22:29; Ps 26:1 (LXX); Ps 35:10 (LXX); Ps 75:5 (LXX); Ps 103:2 (LXX); Isa 2:5; Isa 60:1; Isa 60:20.

<sup>58</sup> Philo, *Mut.* 6–7.

about the transcendent God is darkness to the human intellect. For in fact no concept can adequately capture God as an “object” of thought.<sup>59</sup> This is because the created mind operates with concepts that refer to a spatio-temporal reality, whereas God does not belong to this reality: He is beyond place and time. We could say that here Philo anticipates the concept of ‘diastema,’ which Gregory of Nyssa would later develop. According to the latter, there is a never-reducible abyss between creation and God, which he describes using the term of διάστημα (literally: ‘interval,’ ‘difference’ but also ‘extension’ and ‘dimension’).<sup>60</sup> Created beings always remain and think in spatio-temporal categories (creation is διαστηματικός), whereas God always transcends all spatio-temporal categories (God is ἀδιάστατος).<sup>61</sup> Even after death, without the presence of the body, the human soul will apprehend God in a ‘diastematic’ way (this is the nature of finite creatures), whereas God will always elude such cognition. This does not mean that man will not have knowledge of God, on the contrary he will continually keep growing in knowledge of Him, exceeding and extending his own cognitive capacities by the grace of God, but he will never comprehend the essence of God in its totality, because of its infinity.<sup>62</sup> According to Philo, who in many respects inspired Gregory of Nyssa, the essence, power, and wisdom of God are also infinite, and their intellectual exploration will never end.<sup>63</sup> The complete knowledge of the infinite riches (ἀπερίγραφος πλοῦτος) of God surpasses the cognitive capacity of the finite human mind. The reason for this is not the object of cognition itself, for that object is by its nature knowable (or intelligible = νοητός), but the excess of what is in Him to be known.<sup>64</sup> This excess is symbolised by the metaphor of light:

We cannot look even upon the sun’s flame untempered, or unmixed, for our sight will be quenched and blasted by the bright flashing of its rays, ere it reach and apprehend them, though the sun is but one of God’s works in the past, a portion of heaven, a condensed mass of ether. And can you think it possible that your understanding should be able to

<sup>59</sup> It is noteworthy that Philo, when speaking of these concepts concerning God, uses the term ἀειδής, which literally could be translated as ‘formless’ or ‘indistinct.’ The term also appears in Plato to denote Ideas (see Plato, *Phaed.* 79a) and rather indicates invisibility or incorporeality. Ideas, though incorporeal and invisible are nevertheless knowable according to Plato. Therefore, convinced of the radical transcendence of God, Philo adds the term ἄδντος (‘unapproachable’) to indicate that the knowledge of God is not accessible to the human intellect.

<sup>60</sup> See “διάστημα,” *PGL*, 413.

<sup>61</sup> See Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ecll.* 7; GNO 5, 412–413; See also Gregorius Nyssenus, *Eun.* 1.361; 1.363; 1.381; 2.70; 2.459; 2.531; 3.78; Peroli, *Il platonismo*, 43–51; Douglass, “Diastêma,” 227–228.

<sup>62</sup> For more on this issue, see Ludlow, “Divine Infinity,” 217–237; Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 131–212; Robb-Dover, “Perpetual Progress,” 213–225; Mateo-Seco, “Epektasis,” 263–268.

<sup>63</sup> On the concept of the infinity of God and the influence of Philo’s thought on Gregory, see Geljon, “Divine Infinity,” 152–177. See also Geljon, “Philo of Alexandria,” 225–236; Ramelli, “Philosophical Allegoresis,” 55–99; Bendová, “The Influence of Philo’s *De Abrahamo*,” 91–109.

<sup>64</sup> See Philo, *Post.* 151–152, 174; *Sacr.* 59, 124; *Opif.* 23; *Deus* 79–80.

grasp in their unmixed purity those uncreated potencies, which stand around Him and flash forth light of surpassing splendour?<sup>65</sup>

The comparison of God to a source of light is one of Philo's favourite metaphors.<sup>66</sup> By referring to it repeatedly in his writings, as Francesca Calabi has rightly pointed out, Philo not only alludes to Plato's metaphor of the sun, but evidently polemicalises against it.<sup>67</sup> According to Plato, the Idea of the Good, of which the sun is a symbol, is knowable.<sup>68</sup> For the human eye is capable of becoming somewhat accustomed to looking at the sun. According to Philo, God's essence is unknowable, and the light to which it is symbolically compared is blinding, as is clearly illustrated in the texts quoted above, *Deus* 78 and *Mut.* 6–7. Although God is 'the fountain of the purest radiance,' the Alexandrian notes, 'we have in us no organ by which we can envisage Him, neither in sense, for He is not perceptible by sense, nor yet in mind.' Thus, the doctrine of the unknowability of God's essence flows not so much from the fact that God is a transcendent, intelligible being (like the Platonic Idea of the Good), but from the fact of the radical transcendence of this being, to which the concept of infinity is linked. It is difficult even in the case of God to say that He is a being, since Philo places Him even above the Idea of the Good, which according to Plato is beyond being (*ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*).<sup>69</sup> In fact, there are many statements in Philo's works indicating that God is 'more' transcendent than the highest principles of which Plato spoke: He is 'beyond' the Good, 'beyond' the Beautiful, 'beyond' the One, or 'beyond' the Monad.<sup>70</sup>

And so we must ask, in what would this 'greater' transcendence consist? Many researchers of Philo's thought do not provide an answer to this question, and focus solely upon the assertion that the Alexandrian develops his apophatic theology inspired by Plato's *Parmenides* and his Middle Platonic contemporaries, and that the above-quoted expressions are merely a reference to Plato's *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*.<sup>71</sup> In my view, statements of this kind arise from the concept of the infinity of God, which does not appear in the doctrines of Philo's Middle Platonic contemporaries, and which will only be taken up by Plotinus and then by Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>72</sup> This concept explains why the light that is God is absolutely blinding (although in Plato

<sup>65</sup> Philo, *Deus* 78.

<sup>66</sup> See Philo, *Somn.* 1.73–76; *Abr.* 75–76; *Cher.* 97; *Spec.* 1.279; *Ebr.* 43–45; *Fug.* 165; *Praem.* 45–46.

<sup>67</sup> See Calabi, "The Dazzling Light," 59–67.

<sup>68</sup> We wrote about this in the previous paragraph. See Plato, *Resp.* 508e, and other texts quoted above.

<sup>69</sup> Plato, *Resp.* 509b. It is noteworthy that in the above-quoted text from *Mut.* 11–13, God is referred to not only as a true being, but also as the supreme good (*ὁ ἄριστος*).

<sup>70</sup> See Philo, *Praem.* 40; *Contempl.* 2; *Opif.* 8; *Legat.* 5; *Leg.* 2.3.

<sup>71</sup> See Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 155–158; Calabi, "Unknowability of God," 42–51.

<sup>72</sup> See Mrugalski, "The Notion of Divine Infinity," 69–84.

it only caused a temporary sight disturbance), as well as why Philo's God transcends even the Idea of the Good.

The infinity of God is understood by the Alexandrian in two ways. On the one hand, there is an infinite abyss (ἄπειρον διάστημα) between creation and God, and approaching the infinite, even if intellectually, does not logically reduce the distance; it still remains infinite.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, God, being the infinite Good, possesses powers that also have no end or limit (ἀπερίγραφοι καὶ ἀτελεύτητοι). He is thus able to grant infinite benefits, which, however, due to the finiteness of creatures, will not be able to be received in all their fullness.<sup>74</sup> In the latter case, we are dealing, no longer with an infinite distance, but with an excess of what could be received or known. Having said this, the apparent contradiction that appears in Philo's interpretation of the theophany in Exod 20:21 is resolved: namely, Moses entered the darkness where God, who is the source of light, was. This means that, according to Philo, Moses' seeking intellect was surrounded by an intelligible light so intense as to be blinding. This means that he was unable to capture intellectually what God is in His essence, due to the 'superabundance' of what can be known. Each of the conceptions he had hitherto used was inadequate in relation to what he was confronted with. For the infinite cannot be encompassed by a finite intellect or enclosed in any definition or notion. The infinite God of Philo thus remains unnameable, ineffable and incapable of being embraced by any idea (ἀκατονόμαστος καὶ ἄρρητος καὶ κατὰ πάσας ιδέας ἀκατάληπτος).<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See Philo, *Post.* 15–18: “When therefore the God-loving soul probes the question of the essence of the Existent Being, he enters on a quest of that which is beyond matter and beyond sight. And out of this quest there accrues to him a vast boon, namely to apprehend that the God of real Being is apprehensible by no one (ἀκατάληπτος), and to see precisely this, that He is incapable of being seen. [...] The wise man is ever longing to discern the Ruler of the Universe. As he journeys along the path that takes him through knowledge and wisdom, he comes into contact first with divine words, and with these he makes a preliminary stay, and though he had meant to go the remainder of the way, he comes to a stop. For the eyes of his understanding have been opened, and he sees perfectly clearly that he has engaged in the chase of a quarry hard to capture, which always eludes its pursuers by placing an immeasurable distance between them (ἀπείρω τῷ μεταξύ διαστήματι).” See also Philo, *Somn.* 1.63–66.

<sup>74</sup> See Philo, *Opif.* 23: “But not in proportion to the greatest of His own bounties does He confer benefits – for these are without end or limit (ἀπερίγραφοι γὰρ αὐταῖ γε καὶ ἀτελεύτητοι) – but in proportion to the capacities of the recipients. For it is not the nature of creation to receive good treatment in like manner as it is the nature of God to bestow it, seeing that the powers of God are overwhelmingly vast (αἱ δυνάμεις ὑπερβάλλουσι), whereas creation, being too feeble to entertain their abundance, would have broken down under the effort to do so, had not God with appropriate adjustment dealt out to each his due portion.” For more on this issue, see Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos*, 146–147.

<sup>75</sup> See Philo, *Somn.* 1.67.

#### 4. “Show me your own glory!”: On the Knowability of God’s Nature by Grace

The third theophany occurred in the wake of the golden calf incident, in Exod 32–34. This text is fraught with important tensions, however, since in Exod 33:11 we hear that “the Lord spoke to Moses face to face,” while in 33:20, 23 Moses is twice informed that God’s face cannot be seen! Thus, despite Moses’ repeated requests,<sup>76</sup> God’s response is emphatically negative:

And [Moses] says, “Show me your own glory!” And [the Lord] said, “I will pass by before you in my glory, and I will call by my name “Lord” before you. And I will have mercy on whom ever I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I have compassion.” And he said, “You shall not be able to see my face. For a person shall never see my face and live.” And the Lord said, “Look, a place is near me. You shall stand on the rock. Now, whenever my glory passes by, then I will put you in a hole of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I pass by. And I will take my hand away, and then you shall see my hind parts (τὰ ὀπίσω μου), but my face will not appear to you.”<sup>77</sup>

Once again, we find that the biblical text itself already contains certain elements that point to the transcendence and unknowability of God. Despite his repeated request, Moses will not be allowed to see the face of God. As a justification for this impossibility, the author puts into the mouth of God the dogma: “Man cannot look at God and remain alive.” Ultimately, although Moses is accorded an extraordinary revelation of God’s glory (δόξα), he does not behold God’s face (τὸ πρόσωπον). What the lawgiver beholds stands behind God. The Greek expression τὰ ὀπίσω, which appears here, can be translated in the sense of place or time, and thus as ‘things that are behind God,’ i.e. ‘back parts’ or ‘things that follow God.’<sup>78</sup> This mysterious statement obviously attracts Philo’s attention:

It is quite enough for a man’s reasoning faculty to advance as far as to learn that the Cause of the Universe is and subsists. To be anxious to continue his course yet further, and inquire about essence or quality in God, is a folly fit for the world’s childhood. Not even to Moses, the all-wise, did God accord this, albeit he had made countless requests, but a divine communication was issued to him, “Thou shalt behold that which is behind Me, but My Face

<sup>76</sup> See Exod 33:13, 18 (LXX). The Hebrew text differs here from the Greek translation. In the Hebrew version of Exod 33:13, Moses asks God to let him know His ways (i.e. His intentions towards Israel). In the LXX, by contrast, there is a request for a clear revelation of God Himself: ἐμφάνισόν μοι σεαυτὸν γνωστῶς. In Exod 33:18 Moses repeats his request, this time asking that God show him His glory: δεῖξόν μοι τὴν σεαυτοῦ δόξαν.

<sup>77</sup> Exod 33:18–23 (LXX, trans. Pietersma – Wright).

<sup>78</sup> See LSJ, “ὀπίσω,” 1239.

thou shalt not see” (Exod 33:23). This meant, that all that follows in the wake of God is within the good man’s apprehension, while He Himself alone is beyond it (ἀκατάληπτος), beyond, that is, in the line of straight and direct approach, a mode of approach by which (had it been possible) His quality would have been made known; but brought within ken by the powers that follow and attend Him (ἐκ δὲ τῶν ἐπομένων καὶ ἀκολουθῶν δυνάμεων καταληπτός); for these make evident not His essence but His subsistence (οὐ τὴν οὐσίαν, τὴν δ’ ὑπαρξιν) from the things which He accomplishes.<sup>79</sup>

In the philosophical interpretation of the biblical theophany by Philo, what comes after God (τὰ ὀπίσω) are the divine Powers (δυνάμεις). It is through them that the transcendent God acts in the world and it is through them that God becomes knowable (καταληπτός) to the human intellect. What is knowable, however, is His existence or subsistence (ὑπαρξίς), but not His essence (οὐσία). In his essence, God remains unknowable (ἀκατάληπτος) to all creation. Only God is able to comprehend Himself, as Philo emphasises elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, it is worth adding that also the essence of the divine Powers is unknowable. After all, as we saw in *Deus* 78 and in *Mut.* 6–7 they are compared to a blinding light whose source is in God.<sup>81</sup> This perspective seems very pessimistic. Attaining the knowledge of God’s existence on the basis of His Powers manifested in creation is not much. Despite his many assertions about the absolute impossibility of getting to know the essence of God, Philo nevertheless encourages and endorses seeking and desiring to know God. He makes this point in *Spec.* 1.39–41, in which he again interprets the theophany of Exod 33:18–23:

So then just as, though we do not know and cannot with certainty determine what each of the stars is in the purity of its essence, we eagerly persist in the search because our natural love of learning makes us delight in what seems probable, so too, though the clear vision of God as He really is is denied us, we ought not to relinquish the quest. For the very seeking, even without finding, is felicity in itself, just as no one blames the eyes of the body because when unable to see the sun itself they see the emanation of its rays as it reaches the earth, which is but the extremity of the brightness which the beams of the sun give forth. It was this which Moses the sacred guide, most dearly beloved of God, had before his eyes when he besought God with the words, “Reveal Thyself to me” (Exod 33:13).<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Philo, *Post.* 168–169.

<sup>80</sup> See Philo, *Praem.* 40, quoted above.

<sup>81</sup> See also Philo, *Fug.* 165; *Spec.* 1.47–49. In fact, the Alexandrian distinguishes between two kinds of powers: pure powers that exist in God (their essence is unknowable) and temperate powers that operate in the world and are somehow adapted to human cognitive capacities. See Philo, *Deus* 77–80.

<sup>82</sup> Philo, *Spec.* 1.39–41.

The ultimate felicity of man, then, is to seek God, even if one fails to find Him, which actually represents the human inability to fully and completely grasp the essence of God. However, according to Philo, it is possible to make progress in knowing God and assimilating to Him.<sup>83</sup> On the one hand, this process is related to intellectual-ethical effort; on the other hand, because of God's transcendence and infinity, progress in gaining knowledge of God is possible only through His grace. This grace and all God's benefits, which are also infinite, are bestowed on people progressing in knowledge and virtue according to how much each of them is able to receive.<sup>84</sup> The capacity of the human mind, however, is not something static. For, as Philo believes, humans are able to transcend their own limitations and thereby expand their minds, ascending ever higher in knowledge of the world and of God.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, God Himself also reaches out to humans and, by revealing Himself in various ways, bestows the greater grace of knowledge on those who seek Him.<sup>86</sup> We have seen in the passages quoted in the first paragraph of this study that Philo allegorically attributes to the individual patriarchs different levels and ways of coming to the knowledge of God.<sup>87</sup> "Each of them is the exemplar of the wisdom they have gained – Abraham by teaching, Isaac by nature, Jacob by practice" (*Mos.* 1.76). Yet Moses, through the extraordinary revelation of God in the burning bush, even though he was not given to know God's proper name, gained wisdom even greater than the patriarchs. He is therefore termed as all-wise (πάνσοφος)<sup>88</sup> and the most beloved by God (θεοφιλέστατος).<sup>89</sup> Elsewhere, however, Philo, similarly treating the figures of the individual patriarchs in a symbolic manner, and speaks of the possibility of

<sup>83</sup> Philo, as other Middle Platonists did, elaborates the concept of assimilation to God (ὁμοίωσις θεῶν), which is a reference to and development of Plato's famous statement of *Theaet.* 176b (See Philo, *Fug.* 63, where the passage from *Theaet.* 176b is quoted explicitly). Philo, however, links the doctrine of assimilation to biblical themes. After all, already in Gen 1:26 there is the statement that humanity was created according to the image and likeness of God (κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν) (See Philo, *Opif.* 69). Furthermore, the individual patriarchs of the Old Testament become for Philo symbols of the different stages in the process of assimilation to God. Moses holds a special place among them. His life is interpreted by Philo in an allegorical way, as an intellectual-ethical journey of becoming like God. In a particular way, the work *De vita Moysis* narrates this process, but it is not the only one. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Merki, *Homoiosis Theo*, 35–44; Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 145–153; Helleman, "Philo of Alexandria," 51–71; Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 58–65; van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology*, 181–199; Putthoff, *Ontological Aspects*, 95–102.

<sup>84</sup> See Philo, *Spec.* 1.43–44; *Her.* 31–37; *Opif.* 23; *Praem.* 39.

<sup>85</sup> See Philo, *Det.* 90–94.

<sup>86</sup> On this point, Philo anticipates Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of 'εpektasis.' The term ἐπέκτασις alludes to the Apostle Paul's statement of Phil 3:13–14 and indicates the constant 'transcending of oneself' that is present in man's intellectual-ethical process aiming at knowledge of God and union with Him. Because of the infinity of God's essence, the ἐπέκτασις will accompany man even after death, through all eternity, and will never end. For more on this issue, see Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 291–307; Mateo-Seco, "Epektasis," 263–268.

<sup>87</sup> See Philo, *Mut.* 11–13, 13–19; *Mos.* 1.75–76; *Somn.* 1.231–234, quoted above.

<sup>88</sup> Philo, *Post.* 169.

<sup>89</sup> Philo, *Spec.* 1.41.

an infinite progress in the knowledge of God. This progress has no limits, due to the infinite riches of God's wisdom, which is the object of knowledge and at the same time the goal of the process of assimilation to God:

Mark the advance to improvement made by the soul that has an insatiable desire to be filled with things that are beautiful, and the unlimited wealth of God (ἀπερίγραφος τοῦ θεοῦ πλοῦτος), which has given as starting-points to others the goals reached by those before them. For the limit of the knowledge attained by Seth became the starting-point of righteous Noah; while Abraham begins his education with the consummation of Noah's; and the highest point of wisdom reached by Abraham is the initial course in Moses' training.<sup>90</sup>

In the works of Philo, we find many descriptions of such hierarchies and of the various ways of ascent to God, of which the life stories of individual biblical figures become symbols.<sup>91</sup> Sometimes Philo makes a certain general tri-division of people according to their knowledge and progress in assimilation to God. The first group consists of simple people (uneducated or beginners) who perceive God in an anthropomorphic way. The next group are the advancing ones. They are able to deal with intelligible beings and thus more adequately perceive God, His Ideas and Powers. The third group are those who achieve perfection, who have become God's own possession, not through the practice of intellectual and moral virtues, but through their openness to God's grace.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, these divisions, as well as the descriptions of the level of cognition of God by individual biblical figures, are not perfectly coherent, as Scott Mackie has shown in his studies on Philo's mysticism.<sup>93</sup> What is relevant to the topic of our study, however, is that coming to know God is a process that, because of God's transcendence and infinity, has no end. And although God, in the biblical account, refuses to reveal His proper name or His face, in Philo's interpretation the continuing search for Him and the constant prayers and requests for grace are their own reward. This is also the case with the supplication: "Show me your own glory!" (Exod 33:18), which is uttered by a perfect man who has already reached the peak of his cognitive powers. His prayer, which is a request for

<sup>90</sup> Philo, *Post.* 174.

<sup>91</sup> See Winston – Wyrwa, "Philon von Alexandrien," 748, who rightly point out: "There are descriptions in which the way of ascent is through the cosmos (*Abr.* 69–71, 77–80; *Praem.* 41–43), others in which it is through the virtues (*Ebr.* 82f.; *Mut.* 81f.; *Plant.* 36–40), or those which correspond to a more perfect and pure way of thinking, which say that God makes himself known from himself by his own light (*Leg.* 3.100–102; *Praem.* 43–46). At times the initiative lies with God alone, at times human effort is the indispensable prerequisite, and at times Philo strikes a balance between the human share and divine grace (*Mut.* 81–82; *Praem.* 37–39)."

<sup>92</sup> See Philo, *Mut.* 19–26; *Deus* 55–69.

<sup>93</sup> See Mackie, "The Logos, the Powers, or the Existent One?," 25–47; Mackie, "Means, Methods, and Mysticism," 147–179; Mackie, "The Passion of Eve," 141–163.

help to surpass this limit, pleases God, who wants to grant his favours to those in whom there is “the constant and profound longing for wisdom.”<sup>94</sup> For this longing expands the mind of the supplicant and thus makes room in it for the reception of further graces of the Infinite and growth in wisdom. And as Philo notes elsewhere, “there is nothing which can be asserted with a greater certainty than that wisdom is essentially without end or limit (ἀπερίγραφος καὶ ἀτελεύτητος).”<sup>95</sup>

It is worth emphasising, however, that the growth in wisdom that takes place during the intellectual-ethical process of assimilation to God does not ultimately lead to conceptual or thematic knowledge of God. Rather, it is a matter of an intuitive cognition, and ultimately a cognition of the mystical type, which is a gift of the transcendent God. We find a description of such cognition in *Opif.* 69–71, where Philo expounds the way in which the human mind, created “according to the image and likeness of God,”<sup>96</sup> ascends to its prototype. At first, it traverses and learns conceptually the world, starting with sense cognition. It then ascends to that which is knowable only by the intellect and contemplates the prototypes of created beings, in order to then arrive at the contemplation of God Himself. Then, the mind “is seized by a sober intoxication, like those filled with Corybantic frenzy, and is inspired, possessed by a longing far other than theirs and a nobler desire. Wafted by this to the topmost arch of the things perceptible to mind, it seems to be on its way to the Great King Himself; but, amid its longing to see Him, pure and untempered rays of concentrated light stream forth like a torrent, so that by its gleams the eye of the understanding is dazzled.”<sup>97</sup>

Once again, Philo’s favourite motif appears in the above text, namely the metaphor of blinding light. Although we are dealing here with some mystical rapture and contemplation of ‘the Great King,’ this contemplation does not presuppose a propositional or conceptual cognition. The eye of understanding is dazzled. Nevertheless, the ascent in cognition and further contemplation is still possible, even though (or precisely because) streams of intense light pour down upon the mind. This excess is admittedly blinding, but at the same time it becomes the basis and condition for the possibility of further growth in the acquisition of knowledge of God. The transcendence of God, which is so much emphasised by Philo, does not therefore preclude progress in the knowledge of the nature of God or even its direct contemplation. Quite the contrary, because of the infinite richness of God, this progress can be infinite. By the same token, however, the essence of God remains unknowable

<sup>94</sup> See Philo, *Spec.* 1.50.

<sup>95</sup> Philo, *Somm.* 1.12. See also Philo, *Post.* 151–152: “For the wealth of the wisdom of God is unbounded and puts forth new shoots after the old ones, so as never to leave off renewing its youth and reaching its prime. For this reason all who imagine that they have arrived at the limit of any science whatever are perfect simpletons; for that which seemed to be near the end is very far away from it.”

<sup>96</sup> See Gen 1:26.

<sup>97</sup> Philo, *Opif.* 71.

(ἀκατάληπτος), that is, it can never be enclosed in some definition or encompassed by the finite (though ever-expanding) human mind.

## Conclusions

The analyses carried out above concerning Philo's allegorical interpretation of the three theophanies of Exodus show that within the framework of philosophical reflection on biblical revelation, certain new concepts, hitherto unknown in the history of philosophical discourse, have emerged. Although Philo has made abundant use of the ideas and philosophical language of his time, this does not diminish his originality. What links Philo's thought with the doctrines of his Middle Platonic near-contemporaries is the thesis of the unnameability of God. The Middle Platonists of the second century AD, however, referred to Plato's statements in *Timaeus* 28c or the *Seventh Letter*, where the philosopher speaks of the difficulty of finding God and telling everyone about Him, whether orally or in writing. Their texts thus feature the idea that God is ineffable (ἄρρητος). Philo, by contrast, despite his familiarity with Plato's *Timaeus*, found his concept of divine unnameability in the biblical theophanies, especially the burning bush episode. According to him, the expression κύριος ὁ θεός, which appears in the Septuagint version as a translation of the Tetragrammaton YHWH, is not the name of God but one of His titles, which specifically indicates God's relation to the world. And although some parallels can be found in his argument for the absolute unnameability of God with hypotheses from Plato's *Parmenides*, Philo maintains the God of sacred scripture surpasses in transcendence the Platonic One, Good, Beauty or Monad. This 'greater' transcendence is associated with the concept of the infinity of God's essence, power and wisdom, which in turn links his thought more with Plotinus' system than with the doctrines of the Middle Platonists.

What is also linked to the concept of infinity is the doctrine of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God, which appears to be Philo's original contribution to the history of philosophical and theological ideas. In fact, Philo is convinced that the finite human mind is incapable of comprehending, and therefore of encompassing in some concept or definition, what is infinite. In this regard, he evidently polemicalises against Plato, and specifically with his metaphor of the sun from the Sixth Book of the *Republic*. Indeed, he states that light, the source of which is God, is blinding, whereas, according to Plato, it only caused an initial 'disturbance of sight' for a philosopher beginning to deal with intelligible beings. The question of the unknowability of God's essence also arises within the allegorical interpretation of the two biblical theophanies at Sinai. In this context, Philo's attention is particularly

focused on the statement about Moses' ascent "into the darkness where God was." In attempting to comprehend the nature of God, who is intrinsically the source of the purest light, the human intellect wanders as if in darkness, he explains. For no concept can adequately grasp the object of knowledge, which is infinite. According to Philo, the impossibility of comprehending God is also evidenced by another biblical theophany, or rather, by Moses' rejected request at the tent of meeting. The patriarch, despite his repeated requests to see God, looked ultimately, not directly at God, but at "that which follows behind God." What follows behind God in turn are, according to Philo, the divine Powers that operate in creation and reveal the existence of the transcendent God. The distinction between the unknowable essence and the knowable (at least in part) Power of God will enjoy a distinguished career in later theology.<sup>98</sup>

The concept of divine Powers also is related to another issue that will have a great impact on later apophatic theology, namely the concept of coming to know the nature of the transcendent God through the grace bestowed by God Himself. This grace nourishes and expands the finite human intellect, awakening in it an ever-increasing desire to know God and to receive yet further benefits from Him. And although it is by means of this grace that mystical experiences are possible, as Philo mentions in various places in his works, one should not conclude from this that a complete comprehension of the essence of God by the finite human intellect is possible. For *visio Dei* does not mean a conceptual cognition. Besides, as Philo himself explains when interpreting the biblical theophanies, what the patriarch beholds is only a God-created representation that appears in the intellect of the seer. This is precisely because the essence and Powers of God are infinite. Nevertheless, continuous progress in the knowledge of the nature of God is always possible. In addressing this issue, Philo interprets the life history of the individual patriarchs in a symbolic way, indicating that each of them climbed to a different (successively higher) level of knowledge of God. Yet there can be no end to the ascent to knowledge and assimilation to God. For the wisdom of God is essentially without end or limit (ἀπερίγραφοι καὶ ἀτελεύτητοι). In the process of cognition, the goal, reached after having travelled a certain path, becomes the starting point for a new path. And what seemed very close to the end is infinitely distant from it – the Alexandrian states explicitly. In this respect, Philo anticipates Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of the 'diastema,' namely the irreducible gap existing between God and creation, and at the same time the Gregorian doctrine of the 'epektasis,' namely humanity's infinite ability to transcend its own limitations in the process of coming to know the infinite God. These concepts will in turn become the inspiration for later thinkers developing apophatic theology.

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<sup>98</sup> As noted above, God's powers are intrinsically infinite and therefore, according to Philo, also unknowable. God, however, when acting in the world, uses powers that are somehow tempered, that is, adapted to the capacities of the finite creatures receiving them. This issue will be taken up by subsequent Church Fathers, who will, however, speak of the essence and power of God in the singular. We will also hear echoes of this Philonic distinction in the medieval dispute over *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinata*.

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