

# THE CHAIN-BREAKER IN PLATO'S ALLEGORY

Donald W. Catchings, Jr. on Escaping the  
Cave

In a story so ingrained in Western culture that it has become like a dead metaphor, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" describes one man's ascent from the Land of Shadows to the Upper-World of True Forms. Plato tells this story, or "powerful myth" which is "a gripping explanation of the condition of humanity" as John Mark Reynolds sees it, in Socrates's voice in order to further solidify, via imagery, the "enlightened" path of the Philosopher-King.<sup>1</sup> There are three elements to this 'myth' that make it 'powerful': the ascent, good news, and sacrifice of the Philosopher-King.<sup>2</sup> Though it seems likely that

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 251; John Mark Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem: An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 167-168.

<sup>2</sup> Myth, here, means a story in which objective truth, transcendent and eternal realities, or everyday realities like the human condition, which are often difficult to explain or beyond

this is a reflection of Socrates's own life, due to the central contrasting imagery of light and dark, and the seemingly sacrificial nature of the Philosopher-King's path, the question naturally arises among those who have an inkling about Plato's "Allegory" and the Gospel, "Is Christ the Platonic Philosopher-King?" A comparison of the Gospel with Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" will make it plain that Christ is so much more than the Platonic Philosopher-King.

The opening portion of Plato's "Allegory" is a stark and startling suggestion. The idea that every man's life begins in the Cave of Shadows, that every man is chained so that he sees naught save shadows on a wall — the only naturally known reality — is unsettling. Socrates masterfully employs this shocking revelation to draw the listener's attention so that he may reveal that an ascent to another world — the World of Forms — is possible.<sup>3</sup> However, this imagery of man's being born into a Cave of Shadows and that there is a World of Forms

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explanation in purely expository language, are expressed through imagery.

<sup>3</sup> Plato's World of Forms is a transcendent realm where the perfect, original, true forms of objects exist eternally. It is from this realm that the imperfect shadows we experience on Earth derive. To best understand this, read Plato's explanation of the essence and archetype of the bed: Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 597a-598d.

behind the shadows is not a far cry from Scripture's proposition that even the Israelites, the only ancient people privy to special revelation, were subject to copies and shadows until the real Light came: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."<sup>4</sup> And this shared theme of people being in need of the light of revelation is not a bit of mythological imagery that is exclusive to the ancient world; it still resonates today.

Still, however similar the imagery of the Platonic Cave is to Scripture in describing the natural state of mankind, the way by which 'enlightenment' is presented to the people in the 'myth' of the Cave pales in comparison to the "true light" that shone in the real, historical darkness of first-century Palestine.<sup>5</sup> The Philosopher-King's path to light and subsequent revelation concerning Forms is not as awe-inspiring as Christ's; yet, it should not be thought that this is so only due to the fact that Christ's revelation is historical. The powerfulness of the Christ myth is deeper than imagery or space and time — it begins in the World of Forms.

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<sup>4</sup> Heb 8:5, 10:1; Is 9:2; Mt 4:16.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 1:9.

As Plato's "Allegory" progresses, a certain man who is to become a Philosopher-King is, like all those who are born in the Cave, chained so that he sees naught save the shadows on the wall. Somehow this man is loosed from his chains. The man rises from his seat and begins an ascent out of darkness into the real world, the source of light that has caused the shadows. It is painful, but eventually that certain man's eyes adjust and he is able to see the Shadow he came from as it truly is and, finally, the real World of Forms behind it. Reynolds rightly observes that this loosing that allows the man to ascend and adjust is an unexplained "miracle."<sup>6</sup> It is a miracle that remains unexplained in Plato's "Allegory." Thus, by silence, the reader is left to wonder, "Who is the Chain-Breaker?"

As scriptural revelation progresses, on the other hand, the One beyond all Forms begins His journey to kingship, not in a miraculous ascent from darkness into light, but rather in a gracious descent from light into darkness: "... the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."<sup>7</sup> This One

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<sup>6</sup> John Mark Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem: An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 168.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:78-79.

(Christ) is greater than Plato's freed man, for He does not have to adjust to darkness; He makes the darkness adjust to Him.<sup>8</sup> He does not ascend to the World of Forms; He brings the World of Forms down into the Cave.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, He does not have to be miraculously freed from chains; it is more realistic to describe Him as the One who frees men from their chains, the miracle in Plato's Cave, and the one who allows those set free to become, if they choose to ascend, Philosopher-Kings — this is the very purpose of Christ's descent according to the Gospel.<sup>10</sup>

One may rebut that Plato's Philosopher-King also makes a descent from light to darkness and that his descent is more beneficial because he really knows the Cave of Shadows — it is where he was born and bred: it is his hometown: he 'knows' the people. Some might continue to argue that this Platonic Philosopher-King's experience gives him an advantage because he comes from darkness to light and back to darkness instead of only coming from light; they might contend that this is the greater sacrifice. Surely some think that returning to

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<sup>8</sup> Jn 1:5.

<sup>9</sup> Eph. 4:9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Is 42:6-7, 49:9; Jn 8:32, 36; 1 Pt 2:9.

subjection must be harder than initially subjecting oneself to a master that they are inherently greater than. Yet, such statements are not considering the fact that Christ, unlike the hypothetical Philosopher-King in Plato's "Allegory," does not just come from light, Christ is light and is inherently greater than all darkness.<sup>11</sup>

But, as Socrates reveals, such a sacrificial action will not be natural to the freed man. The freed man will want to stay and contemplate the "upper-region" — the World of Forms. Christ, on the other hand, is not interested in the upper-region only; He is fully immersed in "human business" for it is His business.<sup>12</sup> The freed man will have to be forced to return to the darkness; Christ's descent was chosen, not forced.<sup>13</sup> The legislators have to "compel" Plato's Philosopher-King to return from the real world he has grown to love; even though his return is a sacrifice of sorts, it is a coerced sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the greatness of a sacrifice is not measured by pain or hardship. The greatness of a sacrifice is measured

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<sup>11</sup> Jn 1:4-5, 3:19, 8:12.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 517c-d.

<sup>13</sup> Jn 10:18.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 519e-520a.

by the fitness of the sacrifice (i.e. What is the sacrifice meant to do, and does the sacrifice, in fact, fulfill its purpose?). It seems that the respective end results of Plato's "Allegory" and the Gospel give an answer to whose sacrifice is fittest.

A problem arises, however, in the Platonic Philosopher-King's forced return; his eyes have not readjusted to the dark and, therefore, he is discombobulated. When put into a "contest" about moral shadows, he "seems awkward and ridiculous" to such a point that the "old prisoners" think his eyes are ruined by his "upward journey."<sup>15</sup> As a result, Socrates believes that these prisoners will kill anyone who attempts to free them from their shadowy morality.

Likewise, Christ's journey to the World of Shadows was filled with strife because the prisoners misunderstood Him; however, Christ was not misunderstood because of His own discombobulation. In the end, Christ had the exact opposite problem, the head prisoners (Sanhedrin) knew exactly what He was saying: "Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 517a-d.

witnesses?”<sup>16</sup> They misunderstood what Scripture said concerning the Christ and, therefore, misunderstood Christ’s words concerning Himself. This is why they crucified Him.

The greatest point of similarity between the Platonic Philosopher-King and Christ is the purpose of each king’s respective message. Both went into darkness to present an *evangelion*, a beneficial message to their people, the “common welfare,” that would set its hearers free from darkness and remove the Shadow’s bonds.<sup>17</sup> Both had good news to give and went into a bad situation to make that revolutionary, even seditious, news known. Yet, the greatest difference also lies in this similarity — the motivation behind delivering the good news.

The Philosopher-King is not motivated by love or compassion, while Christ — who is Love — is motivated solely by His loving dedication to His Father who sent Him to “commendeth” His Father’s love toward mankind.<sup>18</sup> In the Gospel, it is for, by, and in Love that the captives of Shadow are to be freed. In Plato’s “Allegory,” it is simply to bring about the most harmonized form of government —

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<sup>16</sup> Mt 26:65.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 520a; Is 42:6-7.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Jn 4:8; Rom 5:8.

to show “the people of the city that they are prisoners of their ignorance” and to keep it fresh on the Philosopher-King’s mind that his duty is to “serve the city.”<sup>19</sup> It is in this comparison that the grandness of God’s plans and purposes are shown to be exalted far above the highest reaches of man’s desire. And, here, God’s better way shines brightly.

The Philosopher-King would rather “lift his vision above the changing forms of our world to the eternal forms that dwell above in unsullied purity.”<sup>20</sup> Conversely, the very world that Christ came from or, better yet, embodied is that ‘unsullied purity.’ Rather than longing to separate ‘unsullied purity’ from the Shadows, Christ, motivated by love, brought it to the Shadows with Him and freely gave to His people in grace through faith. While “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,” the Philosopher-King so loved the Upper-World of Forms that he had to be compelled to return to the ‘common welfare’.<sup>21</sup>

Although the Philosopher-King’s ascent is beautifully startling, descent is seemingly

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<sup>19</sup> Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem*, 168.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Markos, *From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 189.

<sup>21</sup> Jn 3:16.

sacrificial, and *evangelion* in the Cave is meant to set the prisoners free from darkness, Christ's path, sacrifice, and good-news far exceeds that of Plato's Philosopher-King's.<sup>22</sup> Christ is the light that the Philosopher-King is drawn out to. Christ is the mystery that "miraculously" loosed the chains of every real Philosopher-King in human history. No doubt, Christ is a Philosopher-King of sorts, but not as Plato describes. As Scripture exceeds Plato's *Republic*, the Scriptural Philosopher-King exceeds the Platonic Philosopher-King.

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<sup>22</sup> Is 42:6-7

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