

# 1. The origins of Christian Negative Theology

## 1.1 The ambiguity of the Holy Scripture concerning the knowledge of God

God reveals Himself in the Old Testament, tells Abraham and Moses who He is, and what He demands. God also gives His law and orders how He should be worshiped. In other words, God makes Himself known to man, while His nature remains hidden. It is often revealed in symbols: He is present in the burning bush, in the cloud, and the pillar of fire, but those are merely symbols which reveal His power and glory, while at the same time, they somehow hide the mysterious essence of God. This fact was recognized and widely commented on by the Church Fathers. They paid special attention to the figure of Moses, who was closest to seeing God's nature since "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." (Ex 33: 11). However, in other passages, the Book of Exodus clearly states that he was unable to see the face of God. During the two encounters with God on Mount Sinai, he sees only the cloud (24: 15–18), and to the demand of Moses, God answers that "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live." (Ex 33–20) Therefore, hidden in a cleft of rock, he sees only the back of God who passes by (Ex 33: 17–23). As we will see, those verses played a very important role in the evolution of Christian mysticism and they were used especially by Gregory of Nyssa to show incomprehensibility of God. For the Church Fathers, however, the knowledge of God is never a theoretical issue. Knowing God rather means being closer to him and ascending the mystical path. Man cannot worship God of whom he knows nothing. So the first step always belongs to God, who reveals Himself to man. It is very significant that in the Old Testament all the greatest revelations took place before great journeys. In the case of Abraham, it was going out of the Chaldean city of Ur (Gen 12: 1–4). In the case of Israel, it was going out of Egypt. Abraham heard the voice of God, and Moses saw the burning bush and heard the voice. A revelation of God always provokes one to leave the place and go forward. Along the road, man gets closer to God and step by step his knowledge of God goes deeper.

But the road never ends in seeing God face to face. He reveals Himself, invites to know Him better, but still remains unknown.

One of the strongest negative statements of the Old Testament is linked with the struggle for monotheism. God has a transcendent nature and, therefore, there is a strong prohibition of making any image of Him.<sup>42</sup> The God of Israel is so different from pagan idols that there could be no likeness between Him and those idols. Therefore, any representation of God could be misleading and give a false image of His nature. God stays beyond any human imagination and thought, and his ways and thoughts are far remote from man. (Is 55: 8–9.) There is no one like God in His Holiness.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, God reveals Himself, but on the other, He stays beyond any likeness to any other concept of God which can appear in human imagination. Therefore, the Old Testament leaves the question of knowing God open. On the one hand, Israel was aware of God's presence and care, but on the other, closeness to God was reserved for some figures, and even they were unable to see Him face to face. God, then, despite all what He revealed, will remain the "hidden God," who hides His face to man.<sup>44</sup>

The New Testament brings almost the same ambiguity of knowing and the lack of knowledge of God. However, this dialectic approach is expressed in a new manner. The incarnation of Christ is the only source of true knowledge of God. Since "no one has ever seen God," any cognition is possible by "the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made him known." (J 1: 18)<sup>45</sup> The revelation brought by the Incarnated is limited, and the nature of God will always be hidden since He "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim 6: 16). So the human nature of Christ reveals and also in some aspect hides the nature of God, and the true vision of God which is non-symbolic and direct is reserved to the afterlife. St Paul points it out very clearly in a passage of 1 Corinthians: "For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face

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42 Ex 4: 6, 20: 23; Deut 4: 15, 5: 8–10, and Lev 26:1. See also, D. Carabine's comment on the topic, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

43 1 Sam 2: 2; Hos 11: 9 and Ex 15: 11.

44 For all references of "hidden God" and its meaning in the Old Testament, cf. S.E. Balentine, *The Hidden God*, Oxford 1993, pp. 49–79.

45 On the impossibility of seeing the Father, see also J 6: 46; 1 J 4: 12.

to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know fully even as also I was fully known.” (1 Cor 13: 12). All human desires and longings to know God will be achievable in the afterlife, and it is the essence of the reward for the faithful.

St Paul also writes about God’s knowledge of the Greeks. The fragment of the Letter to Romans is so important that it needs a more in-depth analysis, since, as we will see, it will reappear in the discussion on the activities of God. The Greeks achieved the knowledge of God which is sufficient to admit that He should be worshiped. Since they did not do that, this knowledge is the reason of accusation. God manifested Himself to the Greeks (ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανερώσεν), but this was not the kind of revelation which was granted to Israel; it was not a voice that was heard or a symbol that was seen, but rather God showed Himself in His creation.

“For the invisible things (ἀόρατα) of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen (ποιήμασιν νοούμενα), being perceived through the things that are made (ποιήμασιν).” (Rom 1: 20)

This passage was always interpreted as admittance that man is able to have the knowledge of God thanks to natural reasons. The works of God are an explicit testimony of his divinity (θειότης) and his everlasting power (ἄδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις). So the only things to be known are God’s attributes, which can give some insight of who He is, but they do not show his essence. As we shall see, this point will become very important for Clement of Alexandria and later for the 4th-century discussion on the knowledge of God, because St Paul himself admits that the knowledge of God is the knowledge of what comes from him and not of his nature.

A second important topic of this passage, which will be present in the Arian controversy, is the relation of the knowledge of God to the ability to worship Him. The Greeks possessed enough knowledge to praise the glory of God, and St Paul accused them of not doing so; moreover, they kept that knowledge to themselves (Rom 1: 18). They deserved the wrath of God because “knowing God (γνότες τὸν θεόν), they glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks...” (1: 21). For the Apostle, the relation between the knowledge of and worshiping God goes both ways. The knowledge of God should lead to worship, but a lack of such worship also has disastrous consequences for further knowledge. That is why their reasoning became

vain and their hearts were darkened.<sup>46</sup> Since their knowledge did not make them worship true God, instead of being wise they became foolish, because they continued to worship idols. In the eyes of St Paul, this simply meant that they “exchanged the truth of God for a lie.” (Rom 1: 25) This passage, thus, clearly shows that for the Apostle the link between knowledge and worship is fundamental and the two are never separated, which will be seen in the discussion on the troublesome Anomean question of whether “You worship what you know, or what you do not know.” Therefore, Neo-Arian accusations of the Orthodox were of much greater importance than we would admit from the present perspective, and the participants in the polemic certainly could refer their discussion to the Bible, which shows the topic in such light.

The question of the possibility of knowing God can be seen as the question of the limits of knowledge. God can be known to some extent, and such knowledge is indispensable for worshiping and reaching God. On the other hand, it is also evident that man with his limited powers of intellect cannot know God as much as he wants to. The texts of the Old and New Testament leave the question open. Christian writers, who search the Bible for answers to the question whether the knowledge of God is possible, may have found answers confirming both positions. The Holy Scripture contains the knowledge of God, who reveals Himself while at the same time provides very strong evidence of his incomprehensibility.

## 1.2 Philo of Alexandria – transcendence and negative theology

The writings of Philo of Alexandria are among the earliest examples of using negative theology as the primary way of speaking of God. Although his doctrine was based on the Pentateuch in the Septuagint version commented in the spirit of Platonic philosophy, his influence was not significant for the Jewish or pagan tradition. His writings, however, were crucial to Christian theology, and his influence is especially seen in the development

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<sup>46</sup> Rom 1: 21. ἀλλ’ ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν, καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδία.

of the Alexandrian patristic tradition.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, there is a resemblance between Philo's account of creation of the universe and early Arian claims on the created character of the Logos,<sup>48</sup> and we also must remember that Gregory of Nyssa himself found a quotation from Philo in *Second Apology* by Eunomius.<sup>49</sup>

The fundamental statement of Philo's philosophy is the identification of the Platonic One with the God of the Old Testament.<sup>50</sup> Here, for the first time in Ancient tradition, we observe speaking about the God of the Scripture in the language of philosophy. The God of the Scripture is the Creator of the Universe, and the act of creation of this kind was unknown to Greek philosophy, which saw the Universe as eternal. For Philo, the Creator is completely different and separated from the creations, and to emphasize his entirely different nature, he presents God as the only Uncreated (ἀγένητος) being. This distinction underlies the criticism of idolatry, because being creations, the Sun and the stars could no longer be treated as having the divine power and causing the events on Earth.<sup>51</sup> God is also naturally the sole agent, and in relation to Him, the creations are always passive and receptive.<sup>52</sup> God is then unlike any idols and, therefore, cannot

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47 The treatises of Philo were preserved thanks to Christians not Jews. (A. Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys*, Oxford 2007, p. 17). The fact that his doctrine was not acknowledged in the Jewish theology shows that Philo was probably a representative of a minority of the Alexandrian Jewish community (D. Carabine, *op. cit.*, p. 195).

48 Cf. H. A. Wolfson, *Philosophical Implications of Arianism and Apollinarianism*, DOP, vol. 12 (1958), p. 11.

49 Cf. CE III, 5, 24 (GNO II, 168, 11–18).

50 Eric Osborn notes that Philo's understanding of God resembles monism of Eudorus of Alexandria, who understood the One as the basis for all beings, and because it is the only principle of all it is beyond any properties (E. Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, Cambridge 2005, p. 114).

51 *Spec.* I, 13, 1–3. "Some have supposed that the sun and moon and the other stars were gods with absolute powers and ascribed to them the causation of all events" (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 7, pp. 106–107).

52 *Cher.* 77 "What deadlier foe to the soul can there be than he who in his vainglory claims to himself that which belongs to God alone? For it belongs to God to act (ἴδιον μὲν δὴ θεοῦ τὸ ποιεῖν), and this we may not ascribe to any created being. What belongs to the created is to suffer (ἴδιον δὲ γενητοῦ τὸ πάσχειν)" (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 2, pp. 54–55).

be cognized like gods made by humans. So, naturally, the only Uncreated must be incomprehensible: “The Unoriginated [ἀγένητος] resembles nothing among created [γένεσις] things, but so completely transcends them that even the swiftest understanding falls far short of apprehending Him and acknowledges its failure.”<sup>53</sup> The God of the Scripture is, then, not only unlike anything in the sensible world, but he also resists any likeness, comparison, or similitude. He cannot be perceived by sense and intellect:

“Do not however suppose that the Existent [ὄν] which truly exists is [καταλαμβάνεσθαι] apprehended 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 [νοῦς]. So Moses the explorer of nature which lies beyond our vision [ἀειδής], Moses who, as the divine oracles tell us, entered into the darkness [γνόφος] (Exodus 20:21), by which figure they indicate existence [οὐσία] 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. And when there was no sign of finding aught, not even any semblance [ιδέα] of what he hoped for, in despair of learning from others, he took refuge with the Object of his search Himself and prayed in these words: ‘Reveal Thyself to me that I may see Thee with knowledge (Exodus 33:13).’”<sup>54</sup>

Despite man’s effort God stays beyond our capabilities; He is without form since He is incorporeal and His substance is invisible. Getting closer to Him means entering into darkness. Philo exploits Moses’s ascend onto Mount Sinai, which will be later so important to Christian tradition, especially for Gregory of Nyssa. As Jean Daniélou points out, the exegesis of Moses’s ascend shows that the Holy Scripture remains the basis for Philo, but he explains the words of the Bible using a philosophical language.<sup>55</sup> Philo says that the substance (οὐσία) is incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτος), and all the powers of the human soul are not enough to grasp Him.<sup>56</sup> Finally, man can only gain the highest form of knowledge which is: “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 (ἀόρατος).”<sup>57</sup>

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53 *Som.*, I, 184 (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 5, pp. 394–395); see also *Cong.* 133–34 (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 4, pp. 526–527).

54 *Mut.* 7–8 (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 5, pp. 144–147).

55 Cf. J. Daniélou, *Philo of Alexandria*, tr. J.G. Colbert, Cambridge 2014, p. 115.

56 Cf. *Post.* 13–14 (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 2, pp. 334–337).

57 *Post.* 15 (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 2, pp. 336–337).

Despite claims of absolute incomprehensibility of God's essence, Philo also says that we can know Him thanks to his actions as the Creator and Governor of the Universe. Here, we encounter one of the most difficult fragment of his doctrine – the teaching of the Powers (δυνάμεις).<sup>58</sup> The substance of God, transcendent and impossible to comprehend, is simultaneously present and recognizable in creations. Philo often speaks about two main powers: Kingly and Creative,<sup>59</sup> but he also mentions three other: Injunctive, Prohibitive, and Gracious.<sup>60</sup> The structure of powers is hierarchical, and they play an important role in the ascent of the soul towards God, being at the same time subsequent levels of knowledge. When the faithful ascends towards God, he first encounters the prohibition of sin (Injunctive Power), then obedience of the Law (Prohibitive Power), and then repentance in the face of mercy (Gracious Power); next he acknowledges the sovereignty of God (Kingly Power); and he finally discovers creative love (Creative Power). The knowledge of God is, then, an essential part of Philo's doctrine, where the way of the Powers constitutes a positive way (small mysteries) and the knowledge of the cloud becomes a negative way (higher mysteries).<sup>61</sup> But what the initiate really knows when he approaches those powers? Philo claims that this is not the knowledge of the powers themselves, which stay incomprehensible, like the essence of God, but rather of activities which are the effects of those powers. We can see it in the following fragment of *De posteritate Caini*:

“This meant that all that follows in the wake of God is within the good man's apprehension (καταληπτά), while He Himself alone is beyond it (ἀκαταληπτος), 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

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58 Jean Daniélou (*op. cit.*, pp. 116–117) underlines that for Philo, there are two ways of knowing God. First way depends on Gods actions as Creator and second is possible thanks to ideas (*logos*) which are given to the soul by illumination of Logos. The first one is more important to our study since it is deeply connected to the division between God's essence and his Powers, and activities and will be discussed in chapter 4. Daniélou also underlines that the teaching of the Powers of God stays the most difficult to interpret (*op. cit.*, p. 117).

59 *Abr.* 121 (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 6, pp. 62–63).

60 All five of them are driven from symbolic explanation of the Arc of Covenant *cf. Fug.* 95–104 (F Colson/Whitaker, vol. 5, pp. 60–67).

61 *Cf.* A. Louth, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–25.

brought within ken by the powers that follow and attend Him; for these make evident not His essence but His subsistence from the things which He accomplishes.”<sup>62</sup>

Philo then says clearly that the only outcome of man’s effort is the knowledge of the subsistence (ὑπαρξιν) of God and that He is the Creator of the Universe.<sup>63</sup> So, not knowing the Face of God, Moses knows “what is behind God” (Ex 30:23), and when God comes before him, he will know the wake (ὀπίσθια) of God. “Wake of God” is for Philo the symbol of what God’s action establishes in the world. Despite the lack of clarity and symbolism of Philo’s ideas for the first time, we can see how the division between essence and power is used to express the possibility of knowing God. There seems to be no separation between power and action yet, but in his discussion of powers, Philo clearly points out that they must be taken into account when we try to see the Creator and Governor of the Universe because otherwise we must admit that we can gain the knowledge of the essence of God, who stays incomprehensible. Powers, then, are necessary as a consequence of God’s incomprehensibility, and as such, they seem to have a philosophical rather than biblical origin. Tracing differences between Philo and Clement of Alexandria, David T. Runia points out that for the former δύναμις is a philosophical term “which allows the exegete to explain and expound activity of God as it is manifested in creation and humanity.”<sup>64</sup> So the primary function of Philo’s use of the concept of power is to secure incomprehensibility of God’s essence rather than to open up the possibility of knowing it. As we shall see, when discussing the meaning of this concept in Clement of Alexandria, Philo’s claims on the remoteness and unknowability of God are much more radical than those of his Christian successor, who was so profoundly influenced by him.

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62 *Post.* 169 (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 2, pp. 428–429).

63 *Post.* 166–167 (Colson/Whitaker, vol. 2, pp. 426–427).

64 D. T. Runia, *Clement of Alexandria and the Philonic Doctrine of the Divine Power(s)*, *VCh*, vol. 58, no. 3 (Aug. 2004), p. 275. The author also shows that although Philo is primarily an exegete, in *Pentateuch*, which he comments, the term δύναμις is almost non-existent and Septuagint uses ισχύς (strength) rather to describe metaphorical expressions on the strength of God’s hand. While Philo refers only to *Pentateuch*, Clement of Alexandria quotes various texts from the Psalms and the New Testament, which shows a more biblical character of Clement’s δύναμις (*Ibid.*, p. 260).

### 1.3 The apologetic usage of negative theology in the 2nd century

The Bible's ambiguity on whether we can know God is still present in the 2nd century AD. However, the defence of the Christian religion in the Roman Empire brought about a new background to it. Apologists must face pagan religions and answer serious accusations of atheism, immorality, and even cannibalism. Since Romans refuted anything that was new, including new religions, Christian writers try to argue that Christianity is nothing new. The only possible way to do it was to find something in ancient pagan cultures that could be seen close to Christian beliefs. As Benedict XVI notes, Christians did not see any connection between Christianity and pagan religions, but they saw such a link in philosophy.<sup>65</sup> In a way, such connection was obvious since, as we have seen above, St Paul himself suggested that Greek philosophers found God by means of reason. Their fault was only not giving worship and thanks to such Deity. However, showing that Christianity was a philosophy was not enough – it was presented as the only true philosophy. St Justin Martyr is probably the best example of such argumentation. He claims without hesitation that Christianity is “the only sure and useful philosophy.”<sup>66</sup> As A.J. Droge points out, the background of this claim could be found in the writings of various Greek philosophers of his time, who viewed philosophy after Aristotle as the history of corruption and decay. Posidonius of Apamea claimed that philosophy was given to humans by gods in primordial times, but later became corrupt and lost its unity by splitting into various schools.<sup>67</sup> But the most interesting similarity can be found in Numenius of Apamea, who not only viewed himself as the restorer of the dogmatic teaching of the Platonic Academy, which

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65 Benedict XVI shows the unity of theology and philosophy in early Christianity, which is so deep that it could be seen even in Christian art. Cf. Benedict XVI, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, tr. Adrian Walker, San Francisco 1995, pp. 13–16.

66 *Dial.* 8, 1, 4–6 (PTS 47, p. 84; tr. Halton, p. 15).

67 Cf. A.J. Droge, *Self-definition vis-à-vis the Graeco-Roman World*, in: *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1. *Origins to Constantine*, ed. M.M. Mitchell, F.M. Young, Cambridge 2008, p. 235. A.J. Droge also sees the same idea in Antiochus of Ascalon.

was abandoned by Plato's successors, but also argued for the barbarian sources of philosophy (especially Platonism and Pythagoreanism). The true philosophy of Plato can be restored only by tracing it back to Pythagoras and from Pythagoras to the most ancient barbarians.<sup>68</sup> Numenius precedes Justin in claims of the origins of philosophy in Pentateuch asking: "What is Plato but Moses speaking Attic Greek?"<sup>69</sup> Justin similarly claims that Plato took many ideas from Moses, especially on evil, fate, free will,<sup>70</sup> and on the creation of the universe.<sup>71</sup> He even found in Pentateuch the teaching about the triad of gods which was in a sense Trinitarian.<sup>72</sup> Christian teaching is then something older than all the Greek writers who ever lived.<sup>73</sup> It is also described as the restored philosophy of ancient times unfolded by various philosophical schools which deviated from the truth. Justin shows this clearly when he recounts his philosophical journey through various schools (Stoic, Peripatetic, Pythagorean, and Platonist), which ended in his conversion to Christianity – the true philosophy.<sup>74</sup>

It is significant that Platonism of young Justin, which could be seen in the famous scene of meditation by the sea, was corrected by the old man who used Moses and prophets, but the young Platonic was converted to Christianity, not Judaism.<sup>75</sup> Christianity is truer than philosophy not only because it is older, but it is founded on true revelation of Christ whose teaching contains the true knowledge of God. Justin describes the Incarnation of Christ as theophany and epiphany, and also transforms some pagan models to describe it.<sup>76</sup> Without doubt, he wants to show the Incarnated as the one who reveals and teaches the true knowledge of God that is proclaimed by Christians. Therefore, Justin, as well as other Apologists, claimed that the

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68 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

69 Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* I, 150, 4. Τι γάρ ἐστι Πλάτων ἢ Μωυσῆς ἀπτικίζων (SC 30, p. 153; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 334).

70 1 *Apol.* 44, 1 (Minns/Parvis, pp. 192–193).

71 *Ibid.* 59, 1–5 (Minns/Parvis, pp. 232–233).

72 Cf. A.J. Droge, p. 234.

73 1 *Apol.* 23, 1 (Minns/Parvis, pp. 138–139).

74 Justin, *Dial.* 2, 6, 36–43 (PTS 47, p. 73; tr. Halton, pp. 6–7).

75 Cf. A.J. Droge, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

76 Cf. C.H. Talbert, *The Development of Christology during the First Hundred Years*, Leiden, Boston 2011, pp. 21–22. Justin Christology is also often perceived as "an appropriation of the Stoic logos thought" (pp. 98–99).

knowledge of God is possible and was very careful not to rely too much on using negative terms in showing how Christians know Him. Such an approach could be seen already in the Letter to Diognetus, where Christ is presented as the one who provides the knowledge of God: “For, who of men at all understood before His coming what God is?”<sup>77</sup> Arguing against the accusations that Christians are atheists, Justin claims that it was Christ who taught them the true worship of true God.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, there is one place where negative theology seemed to be indispensable. It helped to distinguish the true Christian God from the false pagan gods, which often appears in a wider perspective of the accusation that Christians are atheists and negative theology is used in the writings of Apologists almost exclusively in this context.<sup>79</sup> The same accusation of atheism is for Justin not only an occasion to indicate Christ as the source of the knowledge of God, but also so-called Christian “atheism” is in fact the rejection of pagan deities, who are corruptible and in need of man’s care. On the contrary, the Christian God does not need any material offerings and is “called by no proper name.”<sup>80</sup> Justin repeats this statement in *Second Apology*, but this time the lack of the proper name of God is derived from the fact that he is unbegotten:

“However, the Father of all has no given name, since he is unbegotten. For whoever is addressed by some name has as older than him the one who gave him the

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77 *Ep. ad Diog.* 8, 1 (SC 33, pp. 70–71; tr. ANF, vol. 1, p. 28).

78 Justin, *1 Apol.* 13, 3 (Minns/Parvis, pp. 110–111); 23, 2 (pp. 136–137).

79 D.W. Palmer underlines that the proper understanding of the usage of negative theology in the writings of Apologists of the 2nd century is possible only with regard to the goals of their works and claims: “When modern scholars have given attention to the apologists’ use of negative theology, they have frequently fitted it into a systematic framework, which is not in keeping with the method and purpose of the apologists themselves” (*Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, VCh, vol. 37, no. 3 (Sep. 1983), p. 236). R. Mortley challenges Palmer’s opinion. He argues that Justin the Martyr’s theology confirms that negative theology was not limited to refuting the false pagan gods, but also had a more systematic formulation (*cf.* R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence, op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 33–34).

80 *1 Apol.* 10,1, 6. τῷ μηδενὶ ὀνόματι θετῷ καλουμένῳ (Minns/Parvis, pp. 96–98; tr. ANF, vol. 1, p. 165).

name. But ‘father’ and ‘god’ and ‘creator’ and ‘lord’ and ‘master’ are not names, but appellations derived from his beneficence and works.”<sup>81</sup>

Thus Justin claims that those words are mere expressions (προσρήσεις), and they rather describe the deeds and works of God (τῶν εὐποιῶν καὶ τῶν ἔργων). What is interesting in the context of the Arian controversy is that Justin clearly thinks that the term “unbegotten” has a strong negative meaning. The name “Christ” also refers to the one who is unknown:

“This name also has an unknown meaning, just as the designation ‘god’ is not a name but a notion implanted in the nature of human beings about something difficult to set forth.”<sup>82</sup>

Such a negative statement that name “Christ” has in fact an unknown significance (ἄγνωστον σημασίαν) is rather surprising when formulated by one of the Apologists, who want to defend the truth and fullness of Christian revelation. Although man cannot know its significance, it is somehow implanted in human nature as an opinion (ἔμφυτος τῇ φύσει τῶν ἀνθρώπων δόξα). Therefore, it is not of human origin and this opinion could be seen as an earlier formulation of the theory of names, which was the key doctrine of Anomeans during the Arian controversy.

It is not clear whether Justin builds negative theology here, or simply wants to refute the accusations aimed at Christian beliefs, but we can observe a similar pattern in the writings of other Apologists.<sup>83</sup> Tatian argues that God is neither visible nor comprehensible by human skill, and he has no name; therefore, the Apologist is not willing to worship anything which is created by God (stars, elements), or by man (idols).<sup>84</sup> The most systematic rejection of the accusation that Christians were atheists was

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81 2 *Apol.* 5(6), 1, 1–2, 3. “Ὄνομα δὲ τῷ πάντων πατρὶ θετόν, ἀγεννήτω ὄντι, οὐκ ἔστιν· ὃ γὰρ ἂν καὶ ὄνομά τι προσαγορεύηται, πρεσβύτερον ἔχει τὸν θέμενον τὸ ὄνομα. τὸ δὲ πατὴρ καὶ θεὸς καὶ κτίστης καὶ κύριος καὶ δεσπότης οὐκ ὀνόματά ἐστιν, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τῶν εὐποιῶν καὶ τῶν ἔργων προσρήσεις (Minns/Parvis, pp. 284–285).

82 2 *Apol.* 5(6), 3, 5–8. ὄνομα καὶ αὐτὸ περιέχον ἄγνωστον σημασίαν, ὃν τρόπον καὶ τὸ θεὸς προσαγόρευμα οὐκ ὄνομά ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ πράγματος δυσεξηγήτου ἔμφυτος τῇ φύσει τῶν ἀνθρώπων δόξα (Minns/Parvis, pp. 286–287).

83 J.R. Lyman sees the similarities in stressing God’s otherness in Justin and Irenaeus, cf. *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius, and Athanasius*, Oxford 1993, p. 26.

84 Tatian, *Or. ad Graec.* 4, 1–3 (PTS 43/44. p. 13; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 66).

presented by Athenagoras in his *Plea for the Christians*. He divides the answer to the charge into the consideration of theoretical and practical atheism.<sup>85</sup> For him the charge of atheism is irrational since Christians distinguish God from matter and thus it can only be seen by reason.<sup>86</sup> In such claims, Christians are in agreement with the philosophers, chiefly Pythagoras, who said that God was an “ineffable number,” and Plato, who also thought that the maker of the universe had been uncreated God.<sup>87</sup> Such God must be perceived as “uncreated, impassible and indivisible; therefore, not consisting of parts.”<sup>88</sup> Rejecting the accusations of practical atheism, he uses standard arguments that Christians do not worship idols because they are creations made by man. He also makes a distinction between the statues of gods and gods themselves, and claims that the gods of myths are perishable and, therefore, they cannot really exist.<sup>89</sup> The gods worshiped by the Greeks are corporeal and, therefore, they have humanlike passions (such as anger and desires), whereas true God is incorporeal and free from passions.<sup>90</sup> Athenagoras also uses the Stoic belief of final conflagration of all things, which results in the destruction of all material deities. As D.W. Palmer points out “negative theology is used to counter not only the gods of Greek myth, but also the philosophical interpretations of myth and Stoic religious philosophy.”<sup>91</sup> The most interesting use of negative theology in the context of any possible knowledge of God is that of Theophilus of Antioch, who addressed his apology to pagan Autolycus. He asked Theophilus to describe to him God in whom he believes; therefore, he starts his discussion with the presentation of the Christian idea of deity. True God can be seen only by the man whose soul is pure, and the eyes of the soul can see only

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85 *Libellus pro christianis* 4–12 (SC 379, pp. 82–111).

86 *Libellus pro christianis* 4, 1–2 (SC 379, pp. 82–84).

87 *Libellus pro christianis* 6, 1–2 (SC 379, pp. 86–88).

88 *Libellus pro christianis* 8, 3. (SC, 379, pp. 94–95; tr. ANF, vol 2, p. 132). Later on, in conclusion, he adds that: “It has been adequately shown by me that we are not atheists, since we believe in one God, uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible and illimitable, comprehended by mind and reason alone...” (10, 1; SC, 379, pp. 100–101; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 133).

89 *Libellus pro christianis* 19, 1–2 (SC 379, pp. 130–132).

90 *Libellus pro christianis* 21, 1 (SC 379, pp. 138–139).

91 D.W. Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

when the man is free from sin and evil deeds.<sup>92</sup> God cannot be seen with the eyes of the flesh and, therefore, “the appearance of God is ineffable and indescribable.”<sup>93</sup> But seeing Him through the eyes of the soul does not provide any positive knowledge: “For in glory He is incomprehensible, in greatness unfathomable, in height inconceivable, in power incomparable, in wisdom unrivalled, in goodness inimitable, in kindness unutterable.”<sup>94</sup> If there is any knowledge which is possible, it can only be based on what is derived from God. Thus, Theophilus writes:

“For if I say He is Light, I name but His own work; if I call Him Word, I name but His sovereignty; if I call Him Mind, I speak but of His wisdom; if I say He is Spirit, I speak of His breath; if I call Him Wisdom, I speak of His offspring; if I call Him Strength, I speak of His sway; if I call Him Power, I am mentioning His activity (*δύναμιν ἐάν εἴπω, ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ λέγω*); if Providence, I but mention His goodness; if I call Him Kingdom, I but mention His glory; if I call Him Lord, I mention His being judge; if I call Him Judge, I speak of Him as being just; if I call Him Father, I speak of all things as being from Him; if I call Him Fire, I but mention His anger.”<sup>95</sup>

Theophilus then testifies that at this early stage of Christian reflection on God to know His nature is possible through His attributes. He also seems to suggest that even the attributes of God are only vaguely known to us. We rather know how an attribute is connected with the corresponding activity in created world. Saying that God is light we rather say something about how it is visible in His works, calling Him word means rather His sovereignty, etc. Among those attributes, we also find the Power of God

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92 *Ad Autol.* I, 2, 3 (SC 20, pp. 60–61).

93 *Ad Autol.* I, 3, 2–3. τὸ μὲν εἶδος τοῦ θεοῦ ἄρρητον καὶ ἀνέκφραστον ἐστὶν (SC 20, pp. 62–63; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 89).

94 *Ad Autol.* I, 3, 4–6. δόξη γάρ ἐστιν ἀχώρητος, μεγέθει ἀκατάληπτος, ὕψει ἀπερινόητος, ἰσχύϊ ἀσύγκριτος, σοφίᾳ ἀσυμβίβαστος, ἀγαθωσύνη ἀμίμητος, καλοποιᾷ ἀνεκδιήγητος (SC 20, pp. 62–63; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 89).

95 *Ad Autol.* I, 3, 2, 6–13. εἰ γὰρ φῶς αὐτὸν εἴπω, ποίημα αὐτοῦ λέγω· εἰ λόγον εἴπω, ἀρχὴν αὐτοῦ λέγω· νοῦν ἐάν εἴπω, φρόνησιν αὐτοῦ λέγω· πνεῦμα ἐάν εἴπω, ἀναπνοὴν αὐτοῦ λέγω· σοφίαν ἐάν εἴπω, γέννημα αὐτοῦ λέγω· ἴσχυν ἐάν εἴπω, κράτος αὐτοῦ λέγω· δύναμιν ἐάν εἴπω, ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ λέγω· πρόνοιαν ἐάν εἴπω, ἀγαθωσύνην αὐτοῦ λέγω· βασιλειαν ἐάν εἴπω, δόξαν αὐτοῦ λέγω· κύριον ἐάν εἴπω, κριτὴν αὐτὸν λέγω· κριτὴν ἐάν εἴπω, δίκαιον αὐτὸν λέγω· πατέρα ἐάν εἴπω, τὰ πάντα αὐτὸν λέγω· πῦρ ἐάν εἴπω, τὴν ὀργὴν αὐτοῦ λέγω (SC 20, pp. 62–64; tr. ANF, vol. 2, pp. 89–90).

(δύναμις), which is known thanks to God's activity (ἐνέργεια). Theophilus does not specify the kind of activity and does not explain what he means by this particular one. But it is important to note that like other enlisted attributes, activity is a comprehensible effect of the incomprehensible power of God. Theophilus repeats this in the fifth chapter and provides various metaphors to show that since human eyes cannot see the invisible God, He is beheld and perceived through His providence and works.<sup>96</sup> Man cannot even look upon the Sun, so it is all the more difficult to see the glory of God.<sup>97</sup> However, it is possible indirectly, like the existence of the soul, which can be recognized only by seeing the movements of the body. Similarly, seeing a ship sailing in the sea, one presumes that there is somebody who steers her. The government of the world and providence of God are also compared to an earthly ruler who is not seen by everybody, but everybody presumes his existence by his laws, ordinances, forces, and statues.<sup>98</sup> The Apologist also provides a very interesting metaphor of a pomegranate, which is composed of the rind containing many cells with seeds inside. In the same manner, the whole universe is like those seeds contained in the spirit of God.

“As, therefore, the seed of the pomegranate, dwelling inside, cannot see what is outside the rind, itself being within; so neither can man, who along with the whole creation is enclosed by the hand of God, behold God.”<sup>99</sup>

All those metaphors are presented to prove that direct cognition of God is impossible, but still we are able recognize Him vaguely by the effects of His works. In the next chapter, Theophilus describes the beauty and harmony of creation which is a visible testimony of the glory and greatness of God,<sup>100</sup> and after a short exposure of the need for believing in such great God who creates man, he passes to typical criticism of idolatry. It is worth mentioning that he also attacks major Greek thinkers including Plato, Stoics, and

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96 *Ad Autol.* I, 5, 19–20. Apologist asks how Autolytus cannot admit the existence of such God seeing his works and power: Τὸν δὲ θεὸν οὐ βούλει σὺ νοεῖσθαι διὰ ἔργον καὶ δυνάμεων (SC 20, p. 68).

97 *Ad Autol.* I, 5, 9–10 (SC 20, pp. 66–69).

98 *Ad Autol.* I, 5, 6–8 (SC 20, p. 66).

99 *Ad Autol.* I, 5, 10, 14 (SC 20, p. 66; tr. ANF, vol 2, p. 90).

100 *Ad Autol.* I, 6, 1–7, 1 (SC 20, pp. 70–73).

Epicureans. He claims that they were atheists and doing that he intends to defend Christians accused with the same charge.<sup>101</sup>

D.W. Palmer notes that the use of negative theology by the Apologists of the 2nd century was significant, and its source was undoubtedly contemporary Middle Platonism, but at the same time, it was very selective.<sup>102</sup> Their intention was not to give the systematic teaching about the nature of God and of how we can conceive it, but it rather served a particular purpose of defending Christianity. However, it is also noticeable that the difficulty of knowing God is contrasted with Christian Revelation. Thanks to the teaching of Jesus, this difficulty is overcome, and Christians not only know the truth about God but also know better how to worship Him and gain final happiness in the afterlife. There is yet another aspect which is important. The Apologists underlined that God's glory and greatness is visible in His creations and in the way they are governed by providence. Such reasoning which leads from the works of God to God Himself, from the creations to the Creator helped to distinguish Christian God from false gods. Even if pagans are unable to accept the Christian belief, they surely should conceive on philosophical ground that the harmony of the Universe leads to the acceptance of its Maker and Governor.

#### **1.4 Clement of Alexandria – the unknown Father revealed in the Son of God**

In the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Christian theodicy was finally freed from the strictly apologetic context and acquired a more systematic shape. He, of course, wanted to preach the Gospel to the Greeks, but he intended to do it by making a methodical inquiry into the nature of God. Eric Osborn proposes to read Clement's understanding of God in the light of the prologue to the Gospel of John, especially verse 1:18,<sup>103</sup> which shows two aspects of God's nature. God was not seen by anyone; thus, He is unknown, but the Son of God made Him known to mankind. This verse not only raises the question of how God can be known, but states

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101 *Ad Autol.* II, 4 (SC 20, pp. 102–104); III, 2, 6 (SC 20, pp. 206–208); III, 6 (SC 20, pp. 214–216).

102 *Cf.* D.W. Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 251–252.

103 *Cf.* E. Osborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 111, 113.

strictly that He is unknown and can be revealed only by the Son of God. Therefore, the writings of Clement of Alexandria are important for our study since the question is raised in the context of the relationships of the Divine Persons and a distinction between theology and economy. Analysing Clement's exegesis of J 17:21–26, Eric Osborn says that the Father of the Church speaks of God beyond God (the Father), God within God (the Son) and God beside God (the Son of God incarnated), and that he turns to philosophy in an attempt to shed some light onto the dilemma of one God being two Persons.<sup>104</sup>

The key to understanding Clement's use of negative theology is his reference to the hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides* and their explanation presented by Middle Platonists. *Parmenides* is a dialogue with the reputation of being the most difficult to understand.<sup>105</sup> However, there are two main hypotheses on the nature of the One in the second part of the dialogue. The first one is the principle of unity which transcends all plurality to such an extent that it refuses every predicate. We cannot even say of it that it exists.<sup>106</sup> The second one is the unity of parts, which contains in it the "seeds of contraries – a principle which, if we grant it existence, proceeds to pluralize itself indefinitely in the universe of existent unities."<sup>107</sup> In the interpretation of Middle Platonists, those two hypotheses were seen as two Gods who are two main principles of reality. Fiskå Hägg says that there were three main thinkers who forged the Middle Platonic doctrine of the divine: Alcinous, Numenius, and Atticus, and that the latter is often regarded as the most

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104 *Ibid.*, pp. 112–113.

105 In the 5th century AD, Neoplatonic Proclus reported that there were four interpretations of *Parmenides*: two metaphysical and two logical (cf. H.A.S. Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters*, New York 2000, p. 185). This dialogue constantly focuses scholars' interest, and new interpretations are proposed. C.C. Meinwald mentions two common types of approach (*Good-bye to the Third Man*, in: *Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut, Cambridge 1992, pp. 366–367). Recently, a new interpretation was proposed by Graham Priest (*The Parmenides: a Dialetheic Interpretation*, in: *Plato, The Electronic Journal of the International Plato Society*, 12, 2012, p. 1).

106 *Parm.* 141 E-142 A (Hermann, pp. 124–125).

107 E.R. Doods, *The Parmenides of Plato and the Origin of Neoplatonic One*, CQ 22 (1928), p. 132.

typical representative of their doctrine.<sup>108</sup> Unfortunately, the most typical does not mean the clearest. There have been some differences among scholars about how to understand his teaching on first principles. We will come back to Middle Platonists in the next part of our study, but for now, it is important to note that the relation between the two principles is unclear.<sup>109</sup> In Chapter 10 of *Didaskalikos*, Alcinous treats God as the third of first principles (two others are matter and ideas). He argues that there must be divine intellect that thinks the ideas. But this divine intellect is twofold. The intellect which thinks of the ideas is an active intellect, but there must also exist the intellect which transcends any substratum and this highest principle is the same with the unmoved mover of Aristotle.<sup>110</sup> First, the intellect thinks of itself (contemplates itself), and this is the most supreme activity, which is motionless and directed towards the second intellect. Such God is simultaneously characterized by Platonic terms and forms the combined notion of good from the *Republic*, and *Philebus*, with the demiurge from *Timaeus*. He is characterized by two fundamental attributes of ineffability (ἄρητος) and eternity (ἄδιος) and lesser ones like being self-perfect

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108 H. Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, Oxford 2014, pp. 93–97.

109 Eric Osborn strongly opposes A.J. Festiguière’s interpretation of the Middle Platonist teaching on the First Principles (*La révélation d’Hermès Trismégeste, IV, Le dieu inconnu et la gnôse*, Paris 1986, pp. 92–140). He notices that the example of Clement’s usage of the Middle Platonist teaching shows the clarity of their interpretation of Plato’s *Parmenides* (E. Osborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–122). Referring to the doctrine of Alcinous, Fiskå Hägg notes that: “there is little doubt that there exist in the *Didascalicus* two conflicting views on the nature of the first God, most probably due to the complication from different sources” (F. Hägg, *op. cit.*, p. 105). What he calls conflicting views for E. Osborn is the “ultimate duality” and reciprocity of the first principles, where the first god cannot exist without the other (E. Osborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 115; 122). I will follow E. Osborn’s interpretation in my inquiry, because it seems clearer and better explains the Middle Platonist doctrine.

110 *Didasc.* X, 164, 10–27 (Wittaker, p. 22). As A.H. Armstrong points out, this is the first time when Aristotle’s concept of the Prime Unmoved Mover was incorporated into Platonic theology (*The Background of the Doctrine that Intelligibles Are Not Outside the Intellect*, in: *Les sources de Plotin*, Entretiens Hardt, vol. 5, Vandoeuvres, Geneva, 1960, p. 402).

(αὐτοτελής), ever-perfect (ἀειτελής), and all-perfect (παντελής).<sup>111</sup> Alcinous also says that the first God can be also characterized as the divinity (θεϊότης), essentiality (ουσιότης), truth (ἀλήθεια), commensurability (συμμετρία), and good (ἀγαθόν). All those attributes are not distinct because they characterize the same object.<sup>112</sup> The first way of understanding God is a negative one (ἀφαίρεσις), since He is ineffable, and can be grasped partially by intellect only when all categories of Aristotle are denied of Him. Therefore, intellect cannot form any scientific knowledge on Him, and can grasp Him only in an intuitive way.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, any description of the first hypothesis of Parmenides can be applied to Him, since He transcends all opposites such as good/bad, qualified/unqualified, part/whole, etc. The negative way is ἀφαίρεσις – an abstraction, which means that all attributes must be denied of the first God to reach Him.<sup>114</sup> God is also without parts, without motion, and without body. The former two negative descriptions are also based on the arguments from Plato’s dialogues,<sup>115</sup> while the third one is made by Alcinous himself. The second God – second Intellect – is the place where ideas dwell because ideas are the thoughts of this intellect. Since there is intellect, there also must be the object of intellect. As E. Osborn puts it: “if God is *nous* there also must be *noeton*.”<sup>116</sup> The second intellect has all the properties of the second hypothesis of Parmenides. It generates all beings in motion and is connected with both the sensible and the intelligible.<sup>117</sup>

The doctrine of incomprehensibility of God in Middle Platonism brings about new conceptions in the development of Plato’s teaching. As Fiskå Hägg points out, Plato himself never used the term “ineffable,” but this expression is the central point of Alcinous’ negative theology.<sup>118</sup> Although

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111 E. Osborn, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

112 *Didasc.* X, 164, 31–42 (Wittaker, p. 23).

113 E. Osborn, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

114 *Didasc.* X, 165, 5–15. (Whittaker, p. 24). The negative way is supported by the way of analogy (Alcinous uses for illustration the analogy of the Sun – *Republic* 507 F) and the way of preeminence (here, he refers to the description of ultimate Beauty – *Symposium* 201 A).

115 God without parts refers to *Parm.* 137 C; *Soph.* 245 A, immobile to *Parm.* 138 B - 139 B; *Resp.* 380 D-F.

116 E. Osborn, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

118 H. Fiskå Hägg, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

there are doubts whether this theology can be called truly apophatic, he himself calls his method ἀφαίρεσις and explains it using a geometrical example of getting to the point by cutting off the plane, surface, and line.<sup>119</sup> The problem is whether the use of such method is sufficient to admit that the First God is perceived in a truly negative way.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, Alcinous admits that there is a possibility to know God by an intuitive way, and he does not hesitate to call Him substance or being. There is yet another aspect which allows to treat the negative theology of Alcinous and Middle Platonism in general as a less radical version of negative theology, because the first God is placed within the realm of intellect, not above it.<sup>121</sup>

For Clement of Alexandria, negative theology seems to have a more important role to play when man tries to reach God. The aphaeretic method is used in the famous fragment of *Stromata* in the context of the soul ascending to God. He evokes pagan mysteries which start with purification and are followed with the teaching aimed at preparing an adept for the next stage. The higher mysteries grant a higher kind of intuitive knowledge (νοήσις), which consists in seeing rather than reasoning.<sup>122</sup> For Christians, purification means the confession of sins, but next steps are similar: they must engage in reasoning which would lead to the first concept (πρώτην νόησιν). Such reasoning is in fact cutting off subsequent elements in an

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119 *Didasc.* X, 165, 16–19. Ἔσται δὴ πρώτη μὲν αὐτοῦ νόεσις ἢ κατὰ ἀφαίρεσιν τούτων, ὅπως καὶ σημεῖον ἐνόησαμεν κατὰ ἀφαίρεσιν ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰσθητοῦ, ἐπιφάνειαν νοήσαντες, εἶτα γραμμὴν, καὶ τελευταῖον τὸ σημεῖον (Whittaker, p. 24). “The first way of conceiving God is by abstraction of these attributes, just as we form the conception of a point by abstraction from sensible phenomena, conceiving first a surface, then a line, and finally a point” (tr. Dillon, p. 18).

120 D. Carabine refers to a discussion about the origin and significance of this method in Alkinous between A.H. Wolfson who states that Middle Platonist took this method from Euclid and J. Whittaker, who sees its Pythagorean origin. There is also a question of how it refers to Aristotle’s understanding of abstraction (D. Carabine, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–78).

121 D. Carabine, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

122 *Strom.* V, 11, 71, 2 (GCS 15, pp. 374; 5–6). See also, A. Van den Hoek, *Good beyond Knowing: Clement of Alexandria and Discourse on God*, in: *God in Early Christian Thought*, ed. A.B. Mc Govan, B.E. Daley, T.J. Gaden, Leiden, Boston 2009, p. 43.

abstract fashion. It is the rejection of bodily properties: depth, width, and length, which leads to a point which must be conceived non-materially as a mental point (νοεῖται μόνως).<sup>123</sup> Finally:

“If, then, abstracting all that belongs to bodies and things called incorporeal, we cast ourselves into the greatness of Christ, and thence advance into void (ἀχανές) by holiness, we may reach somehow to the conception of the Almighty, knowing not what He is, but what He is not (οὐχ ὃ ἐστίν, ὃ δὲ μὴ ἔστι γνωρίσαντες).”<sup>124</sup>

In another fragment, Clement shows a similar usage of the method of dialectic, which also allows to follow up step by step to the most ultimate substance (τὴν πάντων κρατίστην οὐσίαν).<sup>125</sup> Dialectic can lead to true wisdom, but for Christians, even this method is impossible without the help of the Divine Logos, who purifies the soul from the remains of ignorance caused by sinful life. Only Christ can show the Father to whom He pleases, and the ultimate seeing of God comes from the Son of God alone.<sup>126</sup> God is also beyond any of human categories, because He is “neither a genus, nor a species, nor an individual, nor a number, and on the other hand is neither an accident nor that to which an accident pertains.”<sup>127</sup> God is then beyond any kind of human knowledge,<sup>128</sup> but in all those fragments, we can see the ambiguity of Clement’s claims on the knowledge of God. On the one hand “The First Cause is not then in space, but above both space and time, and name, and conception. Wherefore also Moses says, ‘Show yourself to me’, intimating most clearly that God is not capable of being taught by man, or expressed in speech, but to be known only by His own power (δυνάμει)” – meaning that God is incomprehensible, but at the same time God can be known thanks to grace given through Christ: “For inquiry was obscure and dim; but the grace of knowledge is from Him by the Son.”<sup>129</sup> Incomprehensibility then can somehow be overwhelmed by grace, which makes it possible to see God who is above all knowledge.

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123 *Strom.* V, 11, 71, 2 (GCS 15, pp. 374; 11).

124 *Strom.* V, 11, 71, 3–4 (GCS 15, p. 374, 11–15; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 461).

125 *Strom.* I, 28, 177,1 (GCS 15, p. 109, 8).

126 *Strom.* I, 28, 178,1 (GCS 15, pp. 109; 20–25).

127 *Strom.* V, 12, 81, 5 (GCS 15, p. 380, 18–20; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 463).

128 In the *Protreptic*, Clement uses negative theology in the Apologist way explaining that He is beyond any idols (E. Osborn, *op. cit.*, p. 123).

129 *Strom.* V, 11, 71, 4 (GCS 15, pp. 374; 22–25; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 461).

This fragment is also crucial for the entire tradition of Christian theology because Clement makes a distinction between the essence and power of God and admits that it is possible to know God by His power. This seems to be the first step to what in the 4th century would become knowing the energies of God. But for Clement himself, this distinction, which is consistent with the theory of *creatio ex nihilo*, explains not only the transcendental character of the essence of God, but also shows that He is very close to the creations. In His essence, He is remote, but is very close and accessible to us in His power.<sup>130</sup> As we know, Clement refers to Philo's conception of the Powers of God, but he significantly modifies it.<sup>131</sup> David T. Runia notes, on the example of multiple quotations from the Holy Scripture, that for Clement "the term *dynamis* is biblical and represents the concept shared by the Scripture and the philosophers."<sup>132</sup> The fragment of *Stromata* quoted above shows that Clement prefers to speak of one power rather than many powers of God, and one of the reasons for this is to secure a proper character of our knowledge of God. He admits that God has many names, and we can call Him One, Good, Being, Intellect and the Father, but none of those names should be taken as His definitive name since they all only indicate the infinite power of God.<sup>133</sup>

There is, however, yet another significant change in the doctrine of Divine Power. David T. Runia suggests that although for both Philo and Clement God is present in His Creations by His Power, Clement has a more positive attitude when describing its role in keeping us away from the remote essence of God. Referring to the mysterious expression of *δυνάμει δύναιμις* from *Stromata* II, 5,5, David T. Runia suggests that Clement wishes to emphasize the presence of God in the form of the Logos who is our instructor and guide.<sup>134</sup> It could be seen in the above-quoted text referring to the ascent of Moses, where a long fragment on transcendence and incomprehensibility of God ends with the following phrase: "but the grace of knowledge is

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130 A. C. Itter, *Esoteric Teaching in the Stromateis of Clement of Alexandria*, Leiden, Boston 2009, pp. 168–169.

131 Cf. D. T. Runia, *Clement of Alexandria and the Philonic Doctrine of the Divine Power(s)...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 261–263.

132 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

133 *Strom.* V, 12, 82, 1–2 (GCS 15, pp. 380; 25–81; 5).

134 D.T. Runia, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

from Him by the Son.”<sup>135</sup> This is a characteristic difference between Philo and Clement. While the former connects the powers with the creation and presence of God in the cosmos, the latter uses the power to describe how we can know unknowable God in the Divine Logos – the Son of God. This indicates that for Clement the ultimate manifestation of the power and action of God is not the Creation and Governing of the Universe, but the act of Incarnation and the salvific activity of Christ.<sup>136</sup> This shift of perspective to the Christian one also includes the conviction that man can experience to much broader extent the divine power as an active agent in his life. That is why while for Philo one of the main functions of divine powers was to secure incomprehensibility of God’s essence, for Clement (although this aspect is still present) another role of power is more important – an in-depth connection between the power and the Logos perceived in a new Christian way. As the expression and realization of the divine power, the Logos now overrides incomprehensibility by means of grace.

The primary concept in Clement is thus reciprocity of the Father and Son. Eric Osborn underlines that the same duality of the first cause is found in Middle Platonists, such as Moderatus and Alcinous. They also understood their first principle as having a dual nature, both simple and transcendent, as well as multiple and inclusive. Later, in the Neoplatonic system of Plotinus, those aspects were separated to make up two different hypostases, but for Clement, such twofold nature of the first principle perfectly fits Christian theology, having its sources in the prologue of the Gospel of John.<sup>137</sup> Such a view on the nature of God is also the reason why Clement’s apophatic statements are much weaker than those which we will see in the writings that sprung from the confrontation with Eunomius. But Clement saw no need for such a tight formulation of relations between the Father and the Son as it was later forced by the radical claims of Anomeans, and Middle Platonism was a great tool for explaining reciprocity of the Father and the Son as a twofold account of the divine mind.<sup>138</sup> In his writings, he describes God with the term οὐσία as Middle Platonists did. He also goes a step

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135 *Strom.* V, 71, 3–5 (GCS 15, p. 374, 23–24; tr. ANF, vol. 2, p. 461).

136 D.T. Runia, *op. cit.*, pp. 267–270.

137 Cf. E. Osborn, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

138 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

further because he seems to be closer to the famous Platonic expression of the First cause as beyond being (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας).<sup>139</sup> But in his writings, he does not explicitly pose the question, which is so crucial in the discussion with Eunomius, about the possibility of knowing the essence of God.

## 1.5 The incomprehensible Father in Origen

Before we turn to the Arian conflict at the beginning of the 4th century, it is necessary to have a quick look at yet another phase of the shaping of early Christian doctrine of God which could be observed in the writings of Origen. Although he is not recognized as having influence on the development of negative theology, his statements about the knowledge of the Father and the Son are very important because of their influence on the theology of Arius and all of the Alexandrian tradition. Origen is also a very important participant in the discussion between Greek philosophy and Christian dogma. Traces of that discussion are to be observed in *Peri archon*, which can be interpreted as a Christian answer to the Platonic accusation that they believe in God as having a corporeal nature.<sup>140</sup> Origen seems to be aware of the discussion going on in philosophical schools on the nature of light,<sup>141</sup> whether it is corporeal or not, but what is more important he uses the example of light to show that man cannot comprehend God. Clearly referring to the Sun Simile of the *Republic*, Origen writes:

“For whatever may be the knowledge which we have been able to obtain about God, whether by perception or reflection, we must of necessity believe that he is far and away better than our thoughts about him. For if we see a man who can scarcely look at a glimmer or the light of the smallest lamp, and if we wish to teach such a one, whose eyesight is not strong enough to receive more light than

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139 Cf. H. Fiskå Hägg commentary on the use and meaning of οὐσία by Middle Platonists and Clement (*op. cit.*, pp. 164–179) and his commentary on Clement being close to famous Plato’s statement in the *Republic* 509 B (*op. cit.*, p. 175).

140 Such interpretation was proposed by J. Dillon, who argues that the understanding of God as light in *Peri archon* shows complicated relations which Origen had with contemporary Platonism. Cf., *The Knowledge of God in Origen*, in: *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. R. van den Broeck, T. Baarda, J. Mansfeld, Leiden: Brill 1988, p. 221.

141 Cf. J. Dillon, *op. cit.*, pp. 222–223.

we have said, about the brightness and splendour of the sun, shall we not have to tell him that the splendour of the sun is unspeakably and immeasurably better and more glorious than all this light he can see?”<sup>142</sup>

Origen then admits that human mind cannot grasp the essence of God, and no object present in human cognition can give man a means to grasp His nature. But this does not make him turn to negative theology and use of negative language. It seems that impossibility of knowing God is not essential to him. It is best seen in the fragment of the *Commentary of John* where he speaks about darkness which man meets on the mystical path leading towards God. On the one hand: “For if someone should perceive the mass speculations about God, and the mass of knowledge which is incomprehensible to human nature, and to other creatures too, perhaps except Christ and the Holy Spirit, he will know that darkness surrounds God,”<sup>143</sup> but this darkness is not something final and permanent which stays and awaits man ascending to God at the end, because on the other hand, this darkness finally becomes light.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, it seems that Origen does not want to admit that God is ultimately unknown, but on the contrary, he frequently talks about knowing or seeing God.<sup>145</sup> But the fragment above shows well the aspect of his doctrine which he shared with the entire Alexandrian tradition. God is incomprehensible to all creation, but is known by the Logos

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142 *De Princ.* I, 1, 5, 116–125. “Si quid enim illud est, quod, sentire vel intellegere de deo potuerimus, multis longe modis eum meliorem esse ab eo quod sensimus necesse est credi. Sicut enim si uideamus aliquem uix posse scintillam luminis aut breuissimae lucernae lumen aspicere et eum, cuius acies oculorum plus luminis capere quam supra diximus non ualet, si uelimus de claritate ac splendore solis edocere, nonne oportebit nos ei dicere quia omni hoc lumine quod uides ineffabiliter et inaestimabiliter melior ac praestantior solis est splendor?” (SC 252, 96–98; tr. ANF, vol. 4, p. 243).

143 *In Ioann.* II, 28, 172. Ἐὰν γὰρ τις κατανοήσῃ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν περὶ θεοῦ θεωρημάτων καὶ γνώσεως ἄληπτον τυγχάνον ἀνθρωπίνῃ φύσει, τάχα δὲ καὶ ἑτέροις παρὰ Χριστὸν καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα γενητοῖς, εἴσεται πῶς περὶ τὸν θεὸν ἔστι σκότος (SC 120, p. 322–324; tr. FCH, 80, p. 141).

144 *In Ioann.* II, 28, 174. εἶναι ἐν φωτὶ, ἀπαγγέλλειν παντὶ τῷ γινομένῳ φωτὶ (SC 120, 324).

145 Cf. A. Louth, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–71.

and the Spirit.<sup>146</sup> As we will see in the next chapter, this is fundamentally different from what Arius will say about the knowledge that the Son has of the Father. But we can also observe here the same pattern which we saw in Clement of Alexandria. While God is incomprehensible, the Son of God, who is the Logos, can be grasped by the mind, and he reveals to some extent the nature of God. Origen constantly tests the idea of the Logos, which constitutes the means to attain the knowledge of God.<sup>147</sup> It seems that he never formulated an ultimate answer to this dilemma, though he certainly saw the difference between the unknowability of the Father and the knowledge which we can attain about the Logos.

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146 The role of Christ as a mediator who allows man to have the knowledge of the Father has been well described recently, *cf.* J.M. Robertson, *Christ as Mediator. A Study of the Theologies of Eusebius of Caesarea, Marcellus of Ancyra and Athanasius of Alexandria*, Oxford 2007, pp. 34–36.

147 *Cf.* J.M. Dillon, *op. cit.*, p. 226. J. Dillon notes that Origen also seems to be aware of the development of the Platonic concept of the possibility to know God.