

SOUL-FOOD OF PLATO'S *PHAEDRUS*
IN THE LATER PLATONIST TRADITION

by

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the food allegory in the *Phaedrus*, traces the history of its interpretation from early Jewish literature through Middle Platonism down to Renaissance Neo-Platonism, and juxtaposes Plato's own viewpoint with the exegetical tradition.

1. PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS

The *Phaedrus* is the richest in imagery of all the Platonic dialogues¹. It teems with myths, fables, images, symbols, and allusions to the mysteries or religious cults. Plato builds the allegories² employing several different kinds of metaphors, such as visual, vehicular, culinary, medical, botanical, palpable, dancing, banqueting, and so on³. All of them always depict the 'states and functions' (*Phdr.* 245 c 3) of the human soul and especially its cognitive abilities. Besides, the distinct types of metaphors are interwoven with each others so as to create a poetic, dreamlike atmosphere. For example, in the central chariot myth⁴, the thought is illustrated by the images of a heavenly journey (a driving metaphor), of gazing upon the above World (a visual metaphor), of touching something sacred (a palpable metaphor), and of feasting and pasturing on the Plain of Truth (a culinary metaphor). Plato uses figurative expressions such as 'to gaze on', 'to touch', 'to be initiated into the mysteries', 'to eat', and 'to feast', instead of the usual phrase 'to get to know'.

¹ This is an opinion commonly shared by most scholars, e.g. see DORTER 1971: 280; LEBECK 1972: 267.

² The allegories, parables, and myths are often combined and difficult to distinguish. I assume that an allegory is an extended metaphor, a parable is an extended simile, and a myth, very close to a fable, is an extended image. See LEBECK 1972: 286; VAN DIJK 1997: 327 note 84.

³ See DORTER 1971 (the tree symbolic, the religious allusions); LEBECK 1972 (the medical, botanical, vehicular imagery, the language of mysteries); ANTINOPOULOS 1992 (the visual metaphor); BELFIORE 2006 (the dance imagery).

⁴ For the particular sections of the *Phaedrus* in full details see fig. 1 in the appendix.