

Plato in Upper Egypt:
Greek Philosophy and Monastic Origenism in the
Coptic Excerpt from Plato's *Republic* (NHC VI,5)*

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In memoriam John D. Turner

The Coptic translation of the excerpt from Plato's *Republic* is quite unique as the only preserved Coptic translation of a Greek philosophical treatise, albeit just an excerpt. This dearth of Coptic sources corresponds to a steep decline in fourth-century Greek manuscripts containing philosophy. Roughly the first half of the present contribution will deal with this demise, and the absorption of Greek philosophy into the brand of Christian Platonism known as Origenism. In addition, I will consider the only Coptic text comparable to the Plato-excerpt, namely a collection of sayings of the philosophers, preserved in a medieval White Monastery codex. The second half will be devoted to the excerpt from Plato's *Republic*. Since Christian Askeland in this volume has already introduced the Coptic text and the history of research, and outlined some of the most intriguing discrepancies between the Greek source text and the Coptic "translation," I will deal with some important questions he left unanswered, to wit:

- Was the excerpt originally part of a Greek anthology of Hermetica?
- Was the translator a Gnostic?
- Are the interpolations in the translation tendentious?

To anticipate my results, I agree with Askeland that the translator was not a "Gnostic," in the sense of an adherent of "Biblical demiurgy,"¹ but I see it as

* I am grateful to John D. Turner, Ivan Miroshikov, and Lance Jenott for suggestions during our reading of the Plato-excerpt during a session of the annual Coptic Camp at John's house in Lincoln, Nebraska. Many thanks also to John's family, especially his wife Elizabeth, and Mike Sterns, for housing us and making us feel so welcome over the years.

¹ Cf. Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). He probably would have seen himself as a Gnostic in the sense of Clement of Alexandria or Evagrius Ponticus.

unlikely that the Greek original of the excerpt was ever part of a Hermetic anthology, and I will suggest that an Origenist affiliation of the translator may account for some of the strange departures from the Greek source text.² These conclusions support the hypothesis of a monastic provenance of the Coptic translation of our excerpt, and for the Nag Hammadi Codices as such.

1. Plato and Greek Philosophy in Late Antique Egypt

1.1 Sources in Greek

In Late Antiquity, Alexandria was alongside Athens a main center for Platonic teaching, and both pagans and Christians had varying levels of commitment to Platonic doctrines.³ Of course, Neoplatonism derives from Alexandria through Ammonius Saccas and his more famous pupil Plotinus, though in the course of the fourth century theurgic Neoplatonism in the tradition after the Syrian Iamblichus increasingly influenced Alexandrian Neoplatonists. Towards the end of the fourth century, theurgic Neoplatonists like Olympius and Antoninus came to blows with Christians as the temples of Serapis in Alexandria and Canopus were sacked, whereas non-theurgic Neoplatonists like Theon and his daughter Hypatia had a more appeasing approach, as witnessed by the latter's student Synesius who became a bishop while never renouncing his Neoplatonic adherence.⁴

On the Christian side, famous scholars like Clement and Origen of Alexandria had set the tone for a creative appropriation of Plato.⁵ That fourth-century

² A summary version of my findings on the question of Origenism has been published as Christian H. Bull, "An Origenistic Reading of Plato in Nag Hammadi Codex VI," in *Studia Patristica LXXV: Papers Presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2015. Volume 1: Platonism and the Fathers; Maximus the Confessor* (ed. Markus Vinzent; StPatr 75; Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 31–40.

³ Edward Jay Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (TCH 41; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). I am aware of the problems with the term "pagan," and the implied dichotomy between paganism and Christianity, but in Late Antiquity it would be fair to say that this discursive dichotomy is becoming reified. See Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 14–32, for a nuanced approach.

⁴ Watts, *City and School*, 187–203. On fourth-century cult in Canopus, see Christian H. Bull, "Prophesying the Demise of Egyptian Religion in Late Antiquity: The *Perfect Discourse* and Antoninus in Canopus," *Numen* 68 (2021): 180–203.

⁵ See Ilaria Ramelli, "Plato in Origen's and Gregory of Nyssa's Conception of the Ἀρχή and the Τέλος," in *Plato in the Third Sophistic* (ed. Ryan C. Fowler; Millennium-Studien 50; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 211–35; David T. Runia, "Cosmos, Logos, and Nomos: the Alexandrian Jewish and Christian Appropriation of the Genesis Creation Account," in *Cosmologies et cosmogonies dans la littérature antique* (ed. Pascal Derron; EAC 61; Vandœuvres:

giant of the Alexandrian patriarchate, Athanasius, gives only grudging credit to Plato, rejecting his idolatry while utilizing Platonic cosmology and ontology.⁶ It is doubtful if he read the works of the Athenian himself, or only second-hand, for in one of his few direct references to him he mistakenly states that it was Plato who went with Socrates to Piraeus to worship Artemis, a reference to the frame narrative of the *Republic* (1.327a).⁷ In fact it was Glaucon who went with Socrates to partake in the festival of the goddess.⁸ In his *De incarnatione*, the demise of Greek philosophy is celebrated on par with that of idolatry: “No longer does the wisdom of the Greeks prosper, but even that which does exist is now disappearing.”⁹

Alexandria cannot of course be equated with Egypt. Though the seat of the patriarch was naturally in contact with the rest of the *chora*, in many ways Alexandria was culturally more a Mediterranean city than an Egyptian one.¹⁰ While the reception of Plato and Greek philosophy in Alexandria is far too vast a subject to be dealt with in the present contribution, our sources dwindle when we move out into the Egyptian countryside and even the nome capitals. In the course of the fourth century, culture, literature, and education is much affected by the ongoing Christianization and the impetus of the monastic movement. One clear indication of this is the papyrological record.

We have a rich papyrological record for Plato in the second century, which starts to dwindle in the third, before grinding to near-halt in the fourth century.¹¹ In fact, besides our Coptic excerpt the only entries clearly dated to the

Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'Antiquité classique, 2015), 179–209. Pace Niketas Siniosoglou, “Plato Christianus: The Colonization of Plato and Identity Formation in Late Antiquity,” in *Pseudologie: Etudes sur la fausseté dans la langue et dans la pensée* (ed. Pascale C. Hummel; Paris: Philologicum, 2010), 147, I do not believe it is necessary to postulate an “essence” or “reality” of Hellenism and Christianity” to speak of appropriation.

⁶ See Eginhard P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius: Synthesis or Antithesis?* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 130–32; Robert W. Thomson, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), xxiv; Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11.

⁷ Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 10.

⁸ A similar mistake is found in Bar Koni, who says that Plato proposed to sacrifice a red cock to Asclepius, whereas this is of course Socrates’ last words (*Phaedo* 118a). See Yury Arzhanov, “Plato in Syriac Literature,” *Mus* 132 (2019): 12, proposing that the confusion is due to a gnomic source.

⁹ Athanasius, *Inc.* 55: καὶ οὐκ ἔτι μὲν ἡ Ἑλλήνων σοφία προκόπτει καὶ ἡ οὐσα δὲ λοιπὸν ἀφανίζεσται. Ed. & trans. Thomson, *Athanasius*, 270–71.

¹⁰ Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Conflict* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 7.

¹¹ See the Trismegistos database: www.trismegistos.org/authors/detail.php?author_id=694.

fourth century in the *Corpus dei papiri filosofici* are not fragments of the dialogues of Plato at all, only Pseudo-Plato: a parchment fragment containing the end of *Eryxias* and the beginning of *Demodocus*.¹² Another manuscript is dated to the 4th–5th century, consisting of two fragments from one page of a parchment codex containing the *Parmenides* (148c–149c) on both hair and skin sides.¹³ If this was an anthology it must have also contained somewhat lengthy excerpts, like that of Stobaeus. Another *Parmenides* (152b–d) fragment is listed as 5th century in the Trismegistos database: It is a palimpsest washed clean to make room for a Coptic letter. Willis dated the Greek text to the second century, and the Coptic between the 4th to 6th century, “diffidently” proposing the 5th century as likely.¹⁴ Cavallo, however, dated the Greek text itself to “no later than the end of the 5th century” and the Coptic to the 7th or 8th century or later.¹⁵ (see below for more on this text). This goes to show how uncertain palaeographical dating can be.¹⁶ A fragment of the *Theaetetus* (143c8–e5 & 144d7–145a8) dates from the late 5th or early 6th century and is provenanced to Antinoopolis.¹⁷

A 3rd–4th century Oxyrhynchus fragment of a papyrus roll contains part of the *Republic* (406a5–b5), though we cannot know if it contained the whole text or if it was a florilegium.¹⁸ Grenfell and Hunt date it to mid-late 3rd c., whereas Haslam dates it to the early 4th century.¹⁹ Another Oxyrhynchus fragment, published after the CPF, is also dated to the 3rd or early 4th century, from a papyrus roll containing the *Cratylus* (423e).²⁰ Perhaps it is these two 3rd or 4th c. papyri that Blumell lists among the Plato fragments from Oxyrhynchus dating from

¹² Francesco Adorno et al., eds., *Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini (CPF): testi e lessico nei papiri di cultura greca e latina. Parte I: Autori noti, vol. 1**** (2 vols.; Firenze: Olschki, 1989), 1:54–57 (CPF Plato 8); Pieter J. Sijpesteijn, “Die Platon-Papyri,” *Aegyptus* 44 (1964): 29 n. 2. Note that the order of the two pseudo-platonica is different from the *textus receptus*.

¹³ PVindob. G 3088 (P. Rainer Cent 23) = CPF Plato 36 in Adorno, *Corpus*, 146–51. Though see below on the uncertainty of the dating of this fragment.

¹⁴ P. Duke 5 (earlier G5) = CPF Plato 37 in Adorno, *Corpus*, 152–54. William H. Willis, “A New Fragment of Plato’s *Parmenides* on Parchment,” *GRBS* 12 (1971): 539–52; idem, “A Parchment Palimpsest of Plato at Duke University and the Ilias Ambrosiana,” in *Akten des XIII. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses* (ed. Emil Kießling and Hans-Albert Rupprecht; MBPAR 66; München: Beck, 1974), 461–67 (plate 6).

¹⁵ Guglielmo Cavallo, “Considerazioni di un paleografo per la data e l’origine della ‘Iliade Ambrosiana,’” *Dialoghi di archeologia* 7 (1973): 79 (n. 44 for Coptic).

¹⁶ Brent Nongbri, *God’s Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 68–70.

¹⁷ P. Ant. II 78 = CPF Plato 77 in Adorno, *Corpus*, 466–69. See Cavallo, “Considerazioni,” 81; Turner, *Typology*, 113 (who dates it to the 5th c.).

¹⁸ POxy III 455 = CPF Plato 65 in Adorno, *Corpus*, 339.

¹⁹ Adorno, *Corpus*, 339.

²⁰ POxy LXXXVI 5083.

the fourth century, a number declining from 23 fragments in the third century and 39 fragments in the second century.²¹ The steep decline, which is matched by most other pagan writers, is unsurprisingly attended by an increase in Christian Greek and Coptic texts. It is this development that is applauded by Theodoret of Cyrus, when he rhetorically asks “who are those who have adopted the way of life described in the *Republic*?” and contrasts that with the universal success of Christianity:

the Hebrew has been translated, not only into Greek, but also into Latin, Egyptian (=Coptic), Persian, Indian, Armenian, Scythian, Sarmatian, in a word into all the languages that all peoples have continued to use. The all-wise Plato went on at length on the immortality of the soul, but he did not persuade his successor, Aristotle, to adopt his definition. Our fishermen, however, our tax-gatherers, and the tent-maker have persuaded the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, indeed, once and for all, every race on the earth that the soul is immortal, that it has been endowed with reason and is capable of controlling the passions ... This knowledge is possessed not just by city dwellers but also by country folk. And it is possible to find agricultural workers, drovers, and gardeners engaged in discussions on the blessed Trinity, and knowing much more than Aristotle or Plato about the Creator of the universe and the composition of human nature.²²

Christian and Hebrew wisdom has made Aristotle and Plato redundant, and unlike the Greek wisdom it is available even to the *hoi polloi*, not only the educated few. The statement linking translation of Scriptures into Coptic with the conversion of the Egyptians goes against the radical thesis of Ewa Zakrzewska, that far from being a vehicle for transmitting the Bible to the Egyptian populace at large, Coptic was developed as an elite language for the use of the monastic few.²³ Of course, Theodoret is writing from a vantage point

²¹ Lincoln H. Blumell, *Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus* (NTTSD 39; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 328.

²² Theodoret, *Cur.* 5.66–69: Καὶ ἡ Ἑβραίων φωνὴ οὐ μόνον εἰς τὴν Ἑλλήνων μετεβλήθη, ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰς τὴν Ῥωμαίων καὶ Αἰγυπτίων καὶ Περσῶν καὶ Ἰνδῶν καὶ Ἀρμενίων καὶ Σκυθῶν καὶ Σαυροματῶν καὶ ξυλλήβδην εἰπεῖν εἰς ἀπάσας τὰς γλώττας, αἷς ἅπαντα τὰ ἔθνη κεχρημένα διατελεῖ. Καὶ ὁ μὲν σοφώτατος Πλάτων, περὶ τῆς ἀθανασίας τῆς ψυχῆς παμπόλλους λόγους διεξελθὼν, οὐδ’ Ἀριστοτέλην τὸν φοιτητὴν ἔπεισε τόνδε στέρξει τὸν ὄρον· οἱ δὲ ἡμέτεροι ἀλειεῖς καὶ τελῶναί καὶ ὁ σκυτοτόμος καὶ Ἑλληνας ἔπεισαν καὶ Ῥωμαίους καὶ Αἰγυπτίους καὶ ἀπαξασπλῶς ἅπαν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων, ὅτι καὶ ἀθάνατος ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ λόγῳ τετιμημένη καὶ κρατεῖν τῶν παθῶν δυναμένη ... καὶ οὐ μόνον ἄστοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ χωρικοί τήνδε τὴν γνῶσιν ἐσχῆκασιν· καὶ ἔστιν εὐρεῖν καὶ σκαπανέας καὶ βοηλάτας καὶ φυτουργοὺς καὶ περὶ τῆς θείας διαλεγόμενους Τριάδος καὶ περὶ τῆς τῶν ὄλων δημιουργίας καὶ τὴν ἀνθρωπεῖαν φύσιν εἰδότας Ἀριστοτέλους πολλῶ μᾶλλον καὶ Πλάτωνος. Ed. Pierre Canivet, *Theodoret de Cyr: Thérapeutique des maladies helléniques, tome I (Livres I-VI)* (rev. ed.; SC 57.1; Paris: Cerf, 2000), 248. Trans. Thomas Halton, *Theodoret of Cyrus: A Cure for Pagan Maladies* (ACW 67; Mahwah: Newman, 2013), 129–30.

²³ Ewa D. Zakrzewska, “The Coptic Language,” in *Coptic Civilization: Two Thousand Years of Christianity in Egypt* (ed. Gawdat Gabra; Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2014), 79–89.

in fifth-century Syria, yet Jean-Luc Fournet has recently argued that the papyrological record indicates that Coptic arose in 3rd c. bilingual milieus aiming to produce a vernacular version of the Scriptures.²⁴

In a recent anthology, Samuel Rubenson and Lillian Larsen talk about a “transformation of classical paideia,” in which the Bible largely substitutes for Greek classics as the contents, whereas the structure of education remains the same, or is at least recognizable.²⁵ In that volume, Anastasia Maravela shows that mainstays of Greek education like Homer and the *Menandri Sententia* were preserved and used in Egyptian monasteries,²⁶ Lillian Larsen argues that gnomic sources bridge monastic and pagan elementary education,²⁷ Henrik Rydell Johnsén shows how the ideal of being uneducated is rooted in Epicurean and Cynic philosophy,²⁸ Arthur Urbano shows how Theodoret and Marinus use biography “in a struggle over the reception and authority of Plato in the face of a rapidly Christianizing educational field,”²⁹ while Daniele Pevarello shows how early monasticism likely was inspired by Pythagorean gnomic material.³⁰ Despite all this, it is clear that for the classical texts of Greek philosophy the image is one of decay, if not outright demise. Even if there were structural and functional similarities between monastic and philosophical schools, the contents taught were quite different, and we can hardly be in any doubt that a student such as Proclus, after his initial studies in Alexandria, would have been shocked and dismayed had he gone to a monastic school in Upper Egypt instead of the revived Athenian academy.

Greek philosophy thus disappears from the historical record in Egypt outside Alexandria, to be replaced with “monastic philosophy.” When Epiphanius of Salamis is extolled as the most famous man under heaven for the monastic philosophy he picked up in Egypt, it is not his ability as a deep and analytical thinker that is emphasized, nor his familiarity with the corpus of classical philosophers, instead it is his ascetic ability coupled with his moral and theological

²⁴ Jean-Luc Fournet, *The Rise of Coptic: Egyptian versus Greek in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 15.

²⁵ Samuel Rubenson and Lillian I. Larsen, eds., *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²⁶ Anastasia Maravela, “Homer and Menandri Sententiae in Upper Egyptian Monastic Settings,” in Rubenson and Larsen, *Transformation*, 147: “the presence of Classical Greek paideia is meagre.”

²⁷ Lillian I. Larsen “‘Excavating the Excavations’ of Early Monastic Education,” in Rubenson and Larsen, *Transformation*, 101–24.

²⁸ Henrik Rydell Johnsén, “The Virtue of Being Uneducated: Attitudes towards Classical Paideia in Early Monasticism and Ancient Philosophy,” in Rubenson and Larsen, *Transformation*, 219–35.

²⁹ Arthur Urbano, “Plato Between School and Cell: Biography and Competition in the Fifth-Century Philosophical Field,” in Rubenson and Larsen, *Transformation*, 255.

³⁰ Daniele Pevarello, “Pythagorean Traditions in Early Christian Asceticism,” in Rubenson and Larsen, *Transformation*, 256–77.

insight.³¹ For contemporary Platonists, theology was an advanced course offered only to students who had mastered the branches of logic, physics and ethics, the first two of which have been disposed of and the third heavily modified in monastic philosophy.³² Of course, as Rubenson points out, monasticism shares with philosophical schools an emphasis on a specific way of life, in which the main focus is spiritual exercises rather than theoretical systematization, as outlined by Pierre Hadot.³³ But the authorities to be emulated and read had changed; out with Plato and Aristotle, in with sacred scripture, apocrypha, and the desert fathers.

One Plato fragment dramatically demonstrates the development. The palimpsest parchment fragment of Plato's *Parmenides* mentioned above has been reused as a Coptic Sahidic letter, the latter of which has been dated on paleographic grounds alternately to the 5th, or 7th–8th century. Cavallo groups this fragment together with the *Theaetetus* fragment and the Ambrosiana Iliad, claiming they all derive from the milieu of the last generation of educated pagans in Alexandria, reflected in Zacharius Scholasticus' *Life of Severus*.³⁴ At any rate it is clear that the parchment codex containing the *Parmenides* was not highly valued by the later Copt who used it as letter material, and nothing indicates that it was copied anew when it became too old to use.

The lack of interest in Plato displayed in Coptic and Late Egyptian-Greek sources was not universal however.³⁵ An interesting question is why Plato and Greek philosophers have next to no representation in Coptic sources, while there is a rich dossier in Syriac.³⁶ Here too Plato's original dialogues were not translated, while sayings often derived second hand from Patristic quotations

³¹ Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.32.4; see also Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 114.

³² Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.12.1–2 on monks: "They neglect many branches of mathematics and the technicalities of dialectics because they regard such studies as useless ... They apply themselves exclusively to the cultivation of natural and useful wisdom." See Johnsén, "Virtue," 224. It is hardly the case, *pace* Johnsén, that mathematics and dialectics were *only* part of the preparatory stage of philosophical education in Platonic schools.

³³ See Samuel Rubenson, "Early Monasticism and the Concept of a 'School,'" in Rubenson and Larsen, *Transformation*, 15.

³⁴ Cavallo, "Considerazioni," 81–85. For the *Life of Severus*, see Edward Watts, "Winning the Intracomunal Dialogues: Zacharias Scholasticus' Life of Severus," *J ECS* 13 (2005): 437–64.

³⁵ Basil of Caesarea, in his *Address to young men*, exhorted young men to take what is of value in Greek literature, including philosophy, leaving what is harmful aside. Taken to heart by Theodoret, who discusses Plato at length in his *A Cure for Pagan Maladies*: "I will approve some of Plato's ideas, while others of them I will refute as being not well founded." (4.32). See also Niketas Siniosoglou, *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); idem, "Plato Christianus"; Urbano, "Plato," 244.

³⁶ Arzhanov, "Plato in Syriac."

were, and Plato's status as a sage secured him Christian pseudepigrapha.³⁷ It is likely that the Schools of Nisibis and Edessa, where Evagrian Origenism mediated Greek philosophical thought,³⁸ had something to do with the survival of the Syriac Plato-dossier, while intellectual Origenists were purged from Egyptian monasteries in 400 and subsequently departed for Palestine.³⁹ What passed for high philosophy in Egyptian monasteries before this time were gnomologies such as the *Sentences of Sextus* and the sentences of Evagrius Ponticus, both affiliated with Origenism, and even these disappear from the record in Egypt after 400, though preserved in other languages including Armenian and Syriac.⁴⁰ Naturally there remained Origenists in 5th century Egypt, as witnessed by the attacks against them by Dioscorus and Shenoute, as well as the 5th century Greek papyri of Origen and Didymus found in Tura, but apparently the vitality had gone out of the movement after 400. It seems that what remains of what we can vaguely call "Platonism" in Christian Egypt outside of Alexandria, in the fourth century, is mainly transmitted in the works of Origen and his followers.

1.2 Greek philosophy in Coptic

Our excerpt from the *Republic* is the only Coptic translation – or rather adaptation – of Plato, and in Coptic literature it is nearly alone in translating any Greek philosopher. With the sharp decline of even Greek manuscripts, the

³⁷ Yury Arzhanov, *Syriac Sayings of Greek Philosophers: A Study in Syriac Gnomologia with Edition and Translation* (Leuven: In Aedibus Peeters, 2019).

³⁸ Han J. W. Drijvers, "The School of Edessa: Greek Learning and Local Culture," in *Centres of Learning: Learning and Location in Pre-Modern Europe and the Near East* (ed. Jan Willem Drijvers and Alasdair A. MacDonald; BSIH 61; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 49–59; Gerrit Jan Reinink, "'Edessa Grew Dim and Nisibis Shone Forth': The School of Nisibis at the Transition of the Sixth-Seventh Century," in *Centres of Learning: Learning and Location in Pre-Modern Europe and the Near East*, (ed. Jan Willem Drijvers and Alasdair A. MacDonald; BSIH 61; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 77–89; Erica C. D. Hunter, "The Transmission of Greek Philosophy via the School of Edessa," in *Literacy, Education and Manuscript Transmission in Byzantium and Beyond* (ed. Catherine Holmes and Judith Waring; TMM 42; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 225–39; Adam H. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis* (TTH 50; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 91–92; idem, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 4, 126ff., 208 (but see p. 92 on lack of evidence for formal study of Greek philosophy).

³⁹ There were also later purges of Origenists in Egypt, but none seem to be of the magnitude of that of 400. Glen W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 32, 36–37, connects the strong presence of Plato in Syria with Bardaisan and later Iamblichus.

⁴⁰ Only one Coptic fragment of Evagrius is extant, and its attribution to Evagrius is spurious: cpg2481.3. See Joseph Muyldermans, "Euagriaana coptica," *Mus* 76 (1963): 271–76. The Origenist Didymus the Blind is preserved in Greek, in the 5th century Tura papyri.

dearth of Coptic translations should hardly be surprising. The only other known instance of Greek philosophers in Coptic is a collection of sayings, preserved in a ca. 10th century parchment codex of miscellanies from the White Monastery (MONB.BE).⁴¹ Yet the only Greek philosophers mentioned by name here is the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope, a certain Dios, said to be pupil of the legendary Linos, and the equally legendary Anacharsis of Scythia (hardly a Greek!).⁴² Sayings of Diogenes were highly popular as school-exercises in Graeco-Roman Egypt,⁴³ and the Greek originals to some of the Coptic sayings attributed to him have been found in sources such as Diogenes Laertius and Stobaeus.⁴⁴ Most of the other sayings are credited to anonymous philosophers, introduced by phrases like “a philosopher said,” “a sage (*sophos*) said,” and “another philosopher said.” Of this codex, the leaves from Vienna edited by Walter Till and those from London edited by Walter Crum are already known, yet more leaves from the National Library in Paris have recently been identified as part of the same collection of sayings.⁴⁵ I here provide a sample for the purposes of illustration:

<p>ΔΙΧΘΟΟΣ ἵβι οὐφιλοσοφος χε ἀγενεναγ ἱκαταδικος μητρο· ἐάγερ νοβε ἔν οἴνοβε ἵογωτ ἱπεεναγ· οὔα οὐρῆμαλο η̅ε· ἀγω</p>	<p>A philosopher said: “Two were brought to the king’s judge who both had com- mitted the same crime. One was a rich</p>
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⁴¹ See Enzo Lucchesi, “Les recensions sahidique et bohairiques d’une prière attribuée à Sèvre d’Antioche,” *Aegyptus* 90 (2010): 119–42; Paola Buzi, “Miscellanea e florilegi. Osservazioni preliminari per uno studio dei codici copti pluritestuali: il caso delle raccolte di *excerpta*,” in *Christianity in Egypt: Literary Production and Intellectual Trends. Studies in Honor of Tito Orlandi* (ed. Paola Buzi and Alberto Camplani; SEA 125; Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2011), 195ff.; idem, “Remains of gnomic anthologies and pagan wisdom literature in the Coptic tradition,” in *Beyond Conflicts. Cultural and Religious Co-habitations in Alexandria and in Egypt, between the 1st and 6th cent. CE* (ed. Luca Arcari; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 140–44; Tito Orlandi and Alin Suci, “On the Codex[es] MONB.BE” (unpublished).

⁴² Trevor Curnow, *The Philosophers of the Ancient World: An A-Z Guide* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2006), 109, identifies Dios as a 7th c. Pythagorean.

⁴³ Raffaella Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (ASP 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 46–47.

⁴⁴ Maria Serena Funghi, “Su alcuni testimoni di ‘chreiai’ di Diogene e di ‘detti dei Sette Sapienti,’” in *Aspetti di letteratura gnomica nel mondo antico II* (ed. Maria Serena Funghi; ATSLC.S 225; Firenze: Olschki, 2004), 375–80, who also discusses Arabic sayings of Diogenes.

⁴⁵ I thank Alin Suci for sharing images of the mss. with me. The other fragments edited by Walter E. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1905), 97–99 (no. 217.1) = BL Or. 3581A ff. 105–11; Walter Till, “Griechische Philosophen bei den Kopten,” in *Mélanges Maspero II: Orient grec, romain et byzantin* (MIFAO 67; Cairo: IFAO, 1934), 165–75 = Vienna, ff. K 944–46. Anthony Alcock, “Greek Philosophy in Coptic,” (unpublished, available on academia.edu [cited 20. January 2022]. https://www.academia.edu/36764358/Greek_philosophy_in_Coptic) contains translations of many of the Vienna and London sayings.

πκεουα ουζηκε πε' απρ̄ιμαο (κβ) † χρ̄ιμα
 λυκααυ εβολ' πρηκε δε ετεμπεφσινε ετ'
 λγεζοριζε ἰμοϋ λοιπον' αϋωϋ εβολ εϋαϋ
 ἰμοσ δε οη βια' δε φαρ̄ετ̄ῑντρ̄ιμαο τωτ'
 ἰπρητ ἰπρεϋ†ζαπ ναϋ ἰζε' αϋω τῑντρ̄ηκε
 ζωωσ φασωωπε ζα πζαπ:—

ερ̄ηνη̄ια:—

Καλωσ ουν αϋχοοσ ἰσι πειφιλοσοφοσ δε ταῖ
 γαρ τε θε ετ̄ναωωπε' ζ̄ῑη ἰπκερῑτ̄ησ ἰμε'
 δε ἰρ̄ιμαο ζ̄ῑη ναρετ̄η' νατωτ ἰπρητ
 ἰπκερῑτ̄ησ ἰμε' πειρηκε δε ἰτοϋ ζ̄ῑη
 τ̄ᾱικαῖοσϋνη' φναωωπε vac ζαπζαπ:—

man, and the other was a poor man. The rich man gave payment, and was acquitted, but the poor man who did not find anything to give was banished in the end. He cried out, saying: Further violence! For how does wealth persuade the judge, while poverty is submitted to judgment?"

Interpretation:

This philosopher spoke well, for this is indeed how it happens before the true judge, namely that those wealthy in virtues will persuade the true judge. But the one poor in justice will be submitted to judgment.⁴⁶

Clearly we are not dealing with a high level of philosophical abstraction, but rather apophthegmata akin to those of the desert fathers, pithy moralizing sayings sometimes accompanied by a brief narrative.⁴⁷ In this sense it is similar to the gnomologies attributed to Menander and Sextus, both of which are found in partial Coptic translations.⁴⁸ Interestingly, as in the case quoted above, many of the sayings are also equipped with an explanation, clearly marked *ερ̄ηνη̄ια* in a reclined script, which has been added by a Christian compiler, in some cases applying a Christian allegorical interpretation.

What is likely a later redactor has also added Christian philosophers to the collection, such as the saying attributed to “a sage among those who belong to God”:

αϋχοοσ ἰσι οϋσοφοσ ζ̄ῑη ναπμοϋτε δε
 ναρενω̄ῑνε ζ̄ῑη οϋωπεῑσῑσε νασ νεπ̄νικον̄
 ἰμοη πεχαϋ.⁴⁹ οϋεν ζ̄ῑημ̄ηνω̄ε εϋ† ἰπ̄μ̄εεϋε
 ναη ενενσαρκ̄ικον:—

A sage among those who belong to God said: “Let us laboriously seek after the spiritual things.” Indeed, he said: “There are multitudes who cause us to think about our fleshly things.”

⁴⁶ The Coptic text can be found in Crum, *Catalogue*, 97. The translation is mine, as is the transcription from photos of BL Or. 3581A f. 105r–v.

⁴⁷ Buzi, “Miscellanea e florilegi,” 197.

⁴⁸ I have not included the sayings of Menander and of Sextus as Coptic translations of philosophers, since the prior was a comic writer and the latter a Christian (even though certain Christians believed he had been a pagan philosopher). See Buzi, “Remains of gnostic anthologies”; idem, “Egypt, crossroad of translations and literary interweavings (3rd–6th centuries). A reconsideration of earlier Coptic literature,” in *Egitto crocevia di tradizioni* (ed. Franco Crevatin; Trieste: EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2018), 15–67.

⁴⁹ Note the lacking *xe*: In one other saying too we find a loose *πεχαϋ* that indicates a direct translation of a Greek *ε̄φη* or something similar embedded in the direct speech.

ΕΡΗΝΗΙΑ:—

†Μεεγε δε εφθαδε ετβε ἰλογισμος ετροου
ετογνουχ μμοου ετμητρωμε τηρε ετε
νετρίβολ ετε νετρίουη.

Interpretation:

I think he speaks about the wicked thoughts that are thrown into all of humanity, either those on the outside or those on the inside.⁵⁰

The anonymous Christian sage exhorted his listeners to seek what is spiritual and not be distracted by the multitudes who direct the thoughts to fleshly things. The commentator interprets the multitudes to refer to wicked thoughts that are thrown into humans. They either assault the outer humans through the senses, or they assault the inner senses, through cognitive vices such as pride. Clearly the interpretation is akin to the monastic psychology of Evagrius Ponticus, whose most well-known works concern precisely distinguishing and avoiding unwelcome thoughts, *logismoi*, as also our commentator calls them. The concern with the outer and inner human is also, as we shall see, key to the rewritten Coptic Plato fragment.

Another very fragmentary apophthegm concerns apa Antony in discussion with some philosophers, a motif also known from his *Life*. Unfortunately, it is hard to make sense of what is going on, but the presence of Antony in this collection means that whoever compiled it regarded him to be a prime representative of a Christian philosopher.⁵¹ This is in line with Samuel Rubenson's portrayal of Antony as an Origenist with philosophical learning, based on his letters.⁵²

Pending a better understanding of the codex as a whole, all statements about the collection (or collections) of sayings contained in MONB.BE must remain conjectural. At the present stage of research, I can only suggest that it seems at first to have been a perhaps Cynic collection of deeds and sayings of philosophers, of whom the few named ones were Diogenes of Sinope, Anacharsis, and Dion.⁵³ One (or several) Christian redactor(s) added a saying of Antony and an anonymous Christian philosopher, and a series of interpretations appended to many of the sayings. As Samuel Rubenson has shown, sayings-collections are especially prone to textual fluidity,⁵⁴ and it is impossible to pinpoint when the

⁵⁰ BL Or. 3581A f. 106r. See Crum, *Catalogue*, 98.

⁵¹ See also the mention of Ben Sirach on BnF Copte 131^f, f. 92 (page 57, line 12).

⁵² See Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (SAC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

⁵³ See Funghi, "Su alcuni testimoni," 377–78: "La scelta di Anacarsi, la cui figura si distingueva per la critica ai costumi greci, e in particolare a quello del simposio, può essere già di per sé rivelatrice di ambito cristiano. A leggerla in chiave di cinismo cristianizzato ... induce anche la presenza immediatamente successiva di Diogene."

⁵⁴ Samuel Rubenson, "Textual Fluidity in Early Monasticism: Sayings, Sermons and Stories," in *Snapshots of Evolving Traditions Jewish and Christian Manuscript Culture, Textual Fluidity, and New Philology* (ed. Liv Ingeborg Lied and Hugo Lundhaug; TUGAL 175; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 178–200.

Cynic gnology was first redacted by Christians, but it might be a witness to the influence several scholars have proposed Cynicism had on Egyptian monasticism.⁵⁵ The redactor seems to have been vaguely Origenist in orientation, at least he evinces concern with unwelcome thoughts assailing the inner and outer human in a manner akin to Evagrius Ponticus and indeed our Plato-excerpt. Interestingly, certain sentences from the collection were reused in the Coptic Pseudo-Evodius, *Homily on the Passion and Resurrection*, likely around the 6th–7th century.⁵⁶

1.3 Origenism as Christian Platonism

Of course, the foregoing is in no sense a complete dossier of Coptic involvement with Greek philosophical *concepts* and *ideas*, just the Coptic translations of texts explicitly attributed to Greek philosophers, which are as noted extremely sparse. The Nag Hammadi Codices contain several texts that engage with the Platonic tradition, especially the Platonizing Sethian treatises, so masterially dealt with by John D. Turner.⁵⁷ Plato hovers more or less imposingly in the background of these treatises, but is not invoked by name or quotation. Another text, the *Sentences of Sextus* (NHC XII,1), known and admired by Origen, is a Christian gnology based on Pythagorean precursors, but is again

⁵⁵ See Derek Krueger, “Diogenes the Cynic among the Fourth Century Fathers,” *VC* 47 (1993): 29–49; Johnsen, “Virtue,” 233; Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *Cynicism and Christianity in Antiquity* (trans. Christopher R. Smith; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 238–43 esp. 241.

⁵⁶ Buzi, “Remains of gnostic anthologies,” 142; Dylan M. Burns, “More Greek Philosophers Among the Copts: The Notes on Some Philosophers (MONB.BE) and the ‘Wisdom that is Outside’ in Pseudo-Evodius of Rome’s *Homily on the Passion and Resurrection*,” in *Parabiblica Coptica* (ed. Ivan Miroshnikov; Parabiblica; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming). I take the latter reference from the author’s presentation at the 12th International Congress of Coptic Studies, Brussels, July 11, 2022.

⁵⁷ John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (BCNH.É 6; Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 2001), idem, “Coptic Renditions of Greek Metaphysics: The Platonizing Sethian Treatises *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*,” in *Christianity in Egypt: Literary Production and Intellectual Trends in Late Antiquity: Studies in Honor of Tito Orlandi* (eds. Paola Buzi and Alberto Camplani; SEA 125; Rome: Istituto Patristico Augustinianum, 2012), 523–54; idem, “Plato in the Sethian Platonizing Treatises,” in *Nag Hammadi à 70 ans. Qu’avons-nous appris?* (eds. Eric Crégheur, Louis Painchaud, and Tuomas Rasimus; BCNH.É 10; Leuven: Éditions Peeters, 2019), 251–74; and esp. idem “The Reception and Transformation of Philosophical Literary Genres in the Nag Hammadi Writings,” in *Die Nag-Hammadi-schriften in der Literatur und Theologiegeschichte des frühen Christentums* (eds. Jens Schröter and Konrad Schwarz; STAC 106; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 37–66. See also Alexander Böhlig and Frederik Wisse, *Zum Hellenismus in den Schriften von Nag Hammadi* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 34–53.

not attributed to any non-Christian philosopher, though some later Christians refused to believe Sextus was a Christian and labelled him a Pythagorean.⁵⁸

These texts illustrate that in fourth-century Egypt the Platonic tradition – here understood in a wide sense – was now transmitted within Christian texts and teachings, and such texts were also translated into Coptic, whereas people largely no longer read Plato or his successors outside Alexandria. We have seen what little remains of Plato on fourth-century papyri, and later on he in fact most prominently appears in quotations in the works of Didymus the Blind, found in the sixth(-seventh?) century Tura papyri, which also contained works of Origen. Didymus followed Origen in considering Greek philosophy as auxiliary to theology,⁵⁹ and as such used Plato – at least in excerpts – in his teaching at Alexandria.⁶⁰ Ludwig Koenen and Wolfgang Müller-Wiener plausibly suggest that the books of Origen and Didymus might have been brought from Scetis by Arsenius when he fled to Tura following a Berber attack in 434, where they were preserved in the monastery raised in his honor some time after his death in 449.⁶¹ As for the Origenists of Nitria and Scetis there is no evidence that they read Plato, even in anthologies, and the Platonism evidenced by Evagrius Ponticus is likely second hand, through Origen, though he might of course have read Plato before he relocated to the Egyptian desert.

Epiphanius of Salamis testifies that there were monks in Upper Egypt too with heterodox ideas and reading habits, labelled ‘Origenists’ by the tireless heresy-hunter, who catalogued them together with ‘Gnostics’ and other sects affiliated with many of the Nag Hammadi treatises. What Origen had in common with other sectarians condemned by Epiphanius was allegorical reading of the scriptures in light of Platonic philosophy, leading them to propose – or

⁵⁸ On *Sent. Sextus* see Daniele Pevarello, *The Sentences of Sextus and the Origins of Christian Asceticism* (STAC 78; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); idem, “Pythagorean.”

⁵⁹ Henri Crouzel, *Origène et la philosophie* (Paris: Aubier, 1962).

⁶⁰ Blossom Stefaniw, “The School of Didymus the Blind in Light of the Tura Find,” in Rubenson and Larsen, *Transformation*, 153–81

⁶¹ Ludwig Koenen and Wolfgang Müller-Wiener, “Zu den Papyri aus dem Arsenioskloster bei Turā,” *ZPE* 2 (1968): 49–50, though claiming that the destruction took place 410, not 434, possibly misreading Hugh G. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wādi 'n Natrūn Part II: The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis* (ed. Walter Hauser; New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1932), 162, who only mentions 410 as the sack of Rome. Arsenius avoided the purge following the first Origenist controversy in 400, and if it was indeed he who brought the books to Tura, then they must have been preserved after his death by his disciples before the monastery was founded in the late fifth or early sixth century, after which they were copied into the codices we have today, probably discarded after the anathematization of Origen and Didymus in the second council of Constantinople, 553 (White, *Monasteries*, 52). Cf. also Stefaniw, “School,” 155, who follows the Arsenius hypothesis, insisting he must have purchased the books in Alexandria. But they might have been in Scetis before Arsenius got there, and must anyway have been ancestors of the later Tura papyri.

to be accused of proposing – such things as that human souls existed before they came into the body, that the current fleshly body would not be resurrected after death, and that there would be a universal restoration of all souls at the eschaton.⁶² It is in this environment I shall argue the rewriting and translation of the Plato-excerpt took place.

2. Did the Plato-Excerpt circulate in a Hermetic Anthology?

Louis Painchaud has proposed that the Greek *Vorlage* of our translation had already been excerpted from the *Republic* and included anonymously in a Hermetic anthology, together with the *Vorlagen* of the three final texts of Codex VI, before it was translated into Coptic.⁶³ This would entail that the excerpt was passed off as a teaching of Hermes, implying that the Egyptian sage was the ultimate source of Plato. It was indeed a familiar *topos* in antiquity that Plato had supposedly spent time in Egypt, where he had learnt the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus from the priests.⁶⁴ Cyril of Alexandria made much of this in his polemics against Greek philosophy in *Against Julian*, but also committed Platonists like Iamblichus accepted the view.⁶⁵ If the excerpt from the *Republic* circulated in a Greek Hermetic anthology, then the reader was presumably expected to believe that Hermes originally authored the simile of the three parts of the soul as a many-headed beast, a lion and a human, and that his later successor, Plato, then appropriated it.

However, the excerpt does not really resemble a Hermetic treatise. Yes, Platonic concepts are appropriated and adapted in the Hermetic corpus, but there

⁶² Cf. especially Jon F. Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism in Early Christianity: Epiphanius of Cyprus and the Legacy of Origen* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988). On Epiphanius and Egypt, see Christian H. Bull, “The Coptic Translation of Epiphanius of Salamis’s *Anchoratus* and the Origenist Controversy in Upper Egypt,” *ZAC* 26 (2022): 230–63.

⁶³ Louis Painchaud “Fragment de la République de Platon,” in *Les sentences de Sextus (NH XII, 1), Fragments (NH XII, 3), Fragment de la République de Platon (NH VI, 5)* (ed. Paul-Hubert Poirier and Louis Painchaud; BCNH.T 11; Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1983), 109–61. This was already suggested by Hans-Martin Schenke, “Zur Faksimile-Ausgabe der Nag Hammadi-Schriften: Nag Hammadi-Codex VI,” *OLZ* 69 (1974): 229–43, repr. in *Der Same Seths: Hans-Martin Schenkes Kleine Schriften zu Gnosis, Koptologie und Neuem Testament* (ed. Gesine Schenke Robinson, Gesa Schenke, and Uwe-Karsten Plisch; NHMS 78; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 316; Böhlig and Wisse, *Zum Hellenismus*, 36–37.

⁶⁴ See Christian H. Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom* (RGRW 186; Leiden: Brill, 2018), 38–44.

⁶⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian* 1.18–19; Iamblichus, *Response of Abammon* 1.1–2. See Christian H. Bull, “Hermes between Pagans and Christians in Fourth Century Egypt: The Nag Hammadi Hermetica in Context,” in *The Nag Hammadi Codices and Late Antique Egypt* (ed. Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott; STAC 110; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 239–43 for Cyril.

is no wholesale quotation from Plato, and certainly not such a lengthy passage.⁶⁶ Also, the style of the dialogue is not like that found in the Hermetica, which are generally not narrated in the first-person past tense like the *Republic* passage, narrated by Socrates in the Greek original. The *Poimandres* is an exception to this, where Hermes narrates his revelatory dialogue with the titular Poimandres.⁶⁷ Otherwise, the Hermetica largely consist of question-and-answer between a teacher, Trismegistus, addressed as “father,” and a disciple, most often Asclepius or Tat, addressed as “my son” by Hermes. There is generally no narrative framework, except for the *Asclepius*, though of course our Plato-excerpt has also lost its narrative framework.

These stylistic issues aside, the differences in the Coptic translations of the last four treatises of Codex VI also speak against the idea of one Greek Hermetic anthology as *Vorlage*. Wolf-Peter Funk did not include the Plato-excerpt in his consideration of dialectal clusters in Codex VI, since it is too short, but his analysis indicates that the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* and the *Prayer of Thanksgiving* were translated by someone else than the translator of *Asclepius*.⁶⁸ Even though our excerpt is too brief to compare its dialect statistically with the Coptic Hermetica, it is obvious from the passages to which we have Greek parallels – the *Prayer of Thanksgiving* and parts of the *Perfect Discourse* – that the Coptic Hermetica are far more faithful to their Greek originals than the Plato fragment, and their Coptic is far better. This could in part be due to the higher difficulty of Plato’s Greek, but the general impression is that there is a real concern with getting it right in the Hermetic translations which is just not the case with the Plato-excerpt. Simply put, there is no way that the skilled translators of the Hermetic texts could be behind the shoddy translation of Plato, nor that they would have altered the text so much from the Greek original.⁶⁹ It is admittedly possible that three different translators, with different dialects and varying skill-levels, translated separate parts of the same anthology.

⁶⁶ The closest would be Stob. Herm. I, which bears a strong resemblance to Plato’s *Ti-maeus* 28c; see Walter Scott, *Hermetica: the ancient Greek and Latin writings which contain religious or philosophic teachings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus* (4 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1924–1936), 3:301–2; Arthur D. Nock and André-Jean Festugière, *Hermès Trismégiste: Corpus Hermeticum* (4 vols.; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1942–1953), 3:xiv, 2.

⁶⁷ Hermes is identified as the narrator in the title and a passage in CH XIII, 15.

⁶⁸ Wolf-Peter Funk, “The Linguistic Aspect of Classifying the Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Anne Pasquier; BCNH.É 3; Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1995), 112, 117.

⁶⁹ See Alberto Camplani, “Sulla multifunzionalità del tradurre in copto: note sparse su frammenti copti tardoantichi, Cicerone e moderne ipotesi di ricerca,” in *Egitto crocevia di traduzioni* (ed. Franco Crevatin; EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2018), 127; James Brashler, “NHC VI,5: Plato, Republic 588b–589b,” in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2–5 and VI* (ed. Douglas M. Parrott; NHS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 325.

Yet it seems more likely that our copyist found the *Republic*-excerpt, the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* + the *Prayer of Thanksgiving*, and *Asclepius* as three separate text-units.

Codicologically too, the Plato fragment fits better with the foregoing texts, the *Authentikos Logos* and the *Concept of Our Great Power*, than with the *Hermetica*.⁷⁰ In the manuscript, the text is only separated from the subscript title of the *Concept of Our Great Power* with a paragraphus cum corona, making it seem somewhat like an appendix because of its lack of title.⁷¹ By contrast, a third of a page separates the ending of our excerpt from the beginning of *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, which begins on a new page. The *Authoritative Treatise* is in fact a treatise on the soul, fully at home in the Alexandrian theological tradition,⁷² to which our excerpt would have made a perfect appendix. As it is, *The Concept of Our Great Power* lies in between. Yet this enigmatic text too contains passages which our excerpt might have been thought to elucidate: “The powers (i.e., of the soul) desired (ἐπιθυμεῖν) to see my image (εἰκόν), and the soul became the imprint (τύπος) of it.”⁷³ As in our excerpt, we are explained how the soul is an image of a higher power, the one speaking in first person, and later we are told how the souls are begotten into bodies: “Now the soul-endowed aeon is a small one, which has congress with bodies but begets in souls and defiles (them), for the original defilement of the creation has gained strength.”⁷⁴ We then learn how this soul-endowed aeon begot many influences (ἐνέργεια) related to vices of the soul. The text features antagonistic

⁷⁰ Pace Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte* (2 vols.; BCNH.T 3 & 7; Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1978–1982), 1:14, 25, 2:6 n. 15, 54, 216, 460. Mahé claims the excerpt of Plato is put in relation to the *Hermetica* either by the Nag Hammadi scribe or a pre-existent anthology.

⁷¹ Martin Krause, “Die Veröffentlichung der Nag Hammadi-Texte,” in *Le origine dello gnosticismo (Colloquio di Messina, 13-19 aprile 1966)* (ed. Ugo Bianchi; SHR 12; Leiden: Brill, 1967), 86; Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (trans. Philip Mairet; New York: Viking, 1960), 242–43. Doresse thinks the Plato-excerpt continues *Great Pow.* (NHC VI,4), but does not know the excerpt is by Plato and thinks both texts are Hermetic. See also Michael A. Williams and Lance Jenott, “Inside the Covers of Codex VI,” in *Coptica – Gnostica – Manichaica: mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNH.É 7; Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006), 1030–31.

⁷² See Ulla Tervahauta, *A Story of the Soul's Journey in the Nag Hammadi Library: A Study of Authentikos Logos (NHC VI,3)* (NTOA 107; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

⁷³ NHC VI,4 38.6–9: ἀνοσον ῥεπιθυμει εναχ εταρικων· αγω ατψγχι ωωπε ἡπνεστγπος· Trans. Francis E. Williams, *Mental Perception: A Commentary on NHC VI,4 The Concept of Our Great Power* (NHMS 51; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 5.

⁷⁴ NHC VI,4 39.16–21: τῆνογ τψγχικος ἡδωων ρωωφ· ογκογει πε εφτηε ἡν ἡωωμα· εφχπο εἷν ἡψγχι εφχωεἷν· δε πχωεἷν ἡωωρῆ ἡτκττικε αφωἷν χιν· Trans. *Ibid.*, 7.

creative archons (*passim*), and an eschatology in which the souls become images in the light of the great power (NHC VI,4 47.23–25), unless they are too beholden to the fleshly creation of the archons (NHC VI,4 48.4–18). All of these elements resonate with our excerpt. However, although we do not have any Greek witnesses of the *Concept of Our Great Power*, it is like the Hermetica clearly competently translated (at least it reads well in Coptic), and it is therefore unlikely that it had the same translator as our excerpt.

In conclusion, then, it is more likely that our Coptic excerpt was taken from a florilegium of Greek philosophers, not too unlike the *Syntagma philosophorum* we just considered, although not as aphoristic but with larger excerpts.⁷⁵ It is possible that this entire florilegium was imperfectly translated into Coptic, or perhaps only our excerpt was translated; in fact, its poor quality raises the suspicion that it was translated from a Greek florilegium ad hoc by our scribe, who also wrote the clumsy scribal note (NHC VI 65.8–14). This must however remain hypothetical.

3. Was the Coptic Translator a Gnostic?

Whether our translator was the scribe of Codex VI or someone else, a common supposition has been that he was a Gnostic.⁷⁶ The hypothesis rests on the presence of certain key terms that are also found in cosmogonies such as that of the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4). Chief among these terms are the Greek terms *eikōn* (“image”) and *archōn* (“ruler”), and the Coptic *eine* (“likeness”). But is overlapping vocabulary enough to identify the Coptic fragment as a Gnostic cosmogony?⁷⁷ Let us revisit the basic outline of the jumbled narrative of the Coptic, disregarding Plato’s Greek original. Initially we are told that “the

⁷⁵ Howard M. Jackson, *The Lion Becomes Man: The Gnostic Leontomorphic Creator and the Platonic Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 205 n. 35, is skeptical since no doxography containing the passage is known to him. But it is contained in the early fifth-century anthology of Stobaeus, *Anthology* 3.9.62, in the section on justice.

⁷⁶ Notably Elias G. Matsagouras, “Plato Copticus: *Republic* 588B–589B Translation and Commentary” (M.A. diss.; Dalhousie University, 1976); Tito Orlandi, “La traduzione copta di Platone,” *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 32 (1977): 45–62; Painchaud “Fragment”; and Jackson, *Lion*, who interprets the excerpt in light of *Gos. Thom.* logion 7. Schenke stated that the text is nothing but an impossible translation of Plato, not a gnostic redaction (“Zur Faksimile-Ausgabe,” 316).

⁷⁷ Of course, *εἰκων* and *εἶνε* can both be found in the Coptic translation of Gen 1:26; see Rodolphe Kasser, *Papyrus Bodmer III: Évangile de Jean et Genèse I-IV, 2 en bohairique*, (CSCO 177, *Scriptores coptici* 25; Leuven: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1958), 48; Édouard Massaux, “Quelques variantes importantes de P. Bodmer III et leur coïncidence avec la gnose,” *NTS* 5 (1959): 210–12. Massaux’s argument that the reading variants in this manuscript demonstrate that the translator or scribe was a gnostic is not very convincing.

one who is treated completely unjustly, is justly glorified,”⁷⁸ a cryptic statement that we will revisit, and that both the unjust and the just has a certain power. This is followed by the statement “The logos of the soul is an image that has no likeness,”⁷⁹ which introduces the subsequent passage on the archons and likenesses: After some missing lines we have the likely reading “but all the [myths] that they told, [namely the] rulers, these are the ones that now became natural beings.”⁸⁰ Painchaud points out that εἴθε is a viable alternative for νοῖ in line 5, which would mean that the myths were told *about* the rulers. However, the first option is the best one, since we are subsequently told that those who have created the images have done so by means of the word (NHC VI,5 49.32: εἰπὼν παρὰ λέξιν), echoing Johannine logocentric cosmogony (John 1:1–3). In other words, the archons by speaking produced several forms and likenesses, which combined into singular likenesses; one such singular likeness is the many-headed beast, another is the lion, and a third is the human. These three likenesses are combined inside the outward appearance of the human.

Is this really a Gnostic account of creation? Notwithstanding the similarities in language with the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the emphasis here is not on the creation of the world, but rather on the inner human.⁸¹ The rulers have created likenesses of a many-headed beast and a lion that dwells within the human, very much in line with what is actually argued by Plato, only there these shapes are mere metaphors and there are no (presumably hostile) rulers involved.

In the subsequent passage the anonymous narrator tells us about the consequences for human conduct that derive from this anthropology:

I spoke to the one who said that it is useful for the human to act unjustly; rather, as for the one who acts unjustly (even) *moderately* (ἡτμῆτε), it is not useful for him nor is it of any help. But what is useful for him is this: to cast down every likeness of the wicked beast and to trample them along with the likenesses of the lion.⁸²

⁷⁸ NHC VI,5 48.21–22: πενταχχιτῆ ἄβρονῆ τελῶος· φαρξί σοοῦ δικαίως·

⁷⁹ NHC VI,5 48.31–32: οὐρεῖων ἐμῆταφ εἶνε πε πλογοῦ ἡτμῆτε·

⁸⁰ NHC VI,5 49.4–7: ἀλλὰ ἡ[μυθῶος] τηροῦ ἐνταχχοοῦ [νοῖ ἡ] ἀρχων· καὶ τῆνοῦ πενταχχοοῦ πε φῶξίς·

⁸¹ See Christoph Marksches, “Die Platonische Metapher vom ‘Inneren Menschen’: Eine Brücke Zwischen Antiker Philosophie und Altchristlicher Theologie,” *IJCT* 1 (1995): 3–18; “Innerer Mensch,” *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum* 18 (1997): 266–312. The literature on the subject of the inner human is copious.

⁸² NHC VI,5 50.19–28: πεχάει δε ἡπενταχχοος χε εἴ πορε ἡπχι ἄβρονῆ ἡπρωῆ· πετχι ἄβρονῆ ἡτοφ ἡτμῆτε εἴ πορε ναφ ἀν· οὔτε ἡἡταφ οφέλει ἡμαγ· ἀλλὰ πετῆρ πορε ναφ πε καὶ εἴρετεγο εἴραῖ ἡπνε νη ἡἡριον εἴθοοῦ· ἀγῶ ἡχρομοῦ ἡἡ ἡεἡε ἡπμογεῖ·

This reading is different from those of earlier translators. One crux is what to do with “in the middle,” ⲛⲧⲙⲏⲧⲉ. Orlandi does not translate it, citing an unknown use of ⲙⲏⲧⲉ in the Manichaean *Kephalaia*,⁸³ whereas Brashler reads it as ⲙⲏⲉ and translates “truly.”⁸⁴ Painchaud, on the other hand, sees ⲧⲙⲏⲧⲉ as the Valentinian technical term for the “psychics,” the soulful people who are between the spiritual and material people, and gives the translation “The one who commits injustice, (being) in the middle, it is not useful to him, nor is advantageous to him.”⁸⁵ My tentative solution, following a suggestion by John D. Turner, is to read ⲛⲧⲙⲏⲧⲉ adverbially as “moderately.” This meaning is not attested in Crum’s dictionary for the Coptic word, but it is for its Greek counterpart μέσως. Neither this word nor any other word corresponding to ⲛⲧⲙⲏⲧⲉ is however present in the *textus receptus* of Plato’s original.

There is nothing here that is specifically Gnostic. The rulers could easily correspond to Pauline “powers and principalities,” (Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Rom. 8:38) and if one wants to argue that they are related to the Sethian *Hypostasis of the Archons*, it is definitely a stretch to also identify “the middle” as the Valentinian designation for psychics. On the other hand, we shall see that the excerpt resonates well with Origenist views on the tripartite soul, and the daily battle with likenesses produced by demons therein.

4. An Origenist Reading of the Platonic Excerpt

4.1 The Origenist Leitmotif of the Rational Soul and the Image & Likeness of God

Plato explicitly employs the many-headed beast, the lion, and the human as symbols for respectively the appetitive, spirited and rational parts of his tripartite soul.⁸⁶ However, this is not spelled out in the excerpt, and it is therefore left to the reader to make this association. The key passage, in my view, for understanding the Coptic excerpt is the statement that “the logos of the soul is an image that has no likeness.”⁸⁷ The Origenist connotations of this phrase has

⁸³ Orlandi, “Traduzione,” 54, with reference to Rodolphe Kasser, *Compléments au dictionnaire copte de Crum* (Cairo: IFAO, 1964), 31, who cites *Kephalaia* 76.9; 91.14; 93.5; to which Orlandi adds 79.5.

⁸⁴ Brashler, “NHC VI,5,” 337.

⁸⁵ Painchaud “Fragment,” 131: “Celui qui commet l’injustice, (étant) dans le milieu, cela ne lui sert à rien ni ne lui est d’aucun profit.”

⁸⁶ On the tripartite soul in Neoplatonism, see John F. Finamore, “Proclus and the Tripartite Soul in Plato’s *Republic*,” in *The Byzantine Platonists, 284-1453* (ed. Frederick Lau-ritzen and Sarah Klitenic Wear; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 63–74.

⁸⁷ NHC VI,5 48.31: ⲟⲩⲗⲓⲕⲟⲛ ⲉⲓⲛⲧⲁⲩ ⲉⲓⲛⲉ ⲛⲉ ⲛⲓⲟⲩⲟⲥ ⲛⲧⲣⲩⲭⲏ.

so far, to my knowledge, not been pointed out. The words ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ allude to Gen 1:26, and one branch of Christian exegesis, reported by Clement of Alexandria, interpreted the Genesis passage so that the image of God corresponds to the inner, immaterial man, while the likeness of God can only be attained at the perfection of man.⁸⁸ Origen follows suit, and states that the “inner, invisible, incorporeal, incorruptible, and immortal man” was made according to the likeness of the image of God, which he identifies as Logos, the son of God,⁸⁹ but in his fallen state man has lost this image, and have “put on the image of the evil one” (*maligni imaginem induxisse*).⁹⁰ It is by “beholding the image of the devil” that man was made like him, that is, by sinning. When the Savior saw this state of affairs he put on the image of the human (*imagine hominis assumpta*), which is the form of a servant in the appearance of a human (*formam servi accipiens in similitudinem hominum factus*). Because the savior thus humbled himself (see Phil 2:6–8), humans can become “participants in the spiritual image,” and through daily progress they can regain the image of God so as to be eventually transformed to his likeness.

What this means can be seen in Origen’s allegorical reading of the verse “as male and female he made them” (Gen 1:27), relying heavily on 1 Cor 15:42–49: The inner man consists of a male spirit and a female soul, and when the two are united they preserve the image. However, when the soul follows passions instead, it turns away from the spirit and loses the image.⁹¹ The image is never entirely lost however, for in homily thirteen on Genesis we hear that the image of God is like “a well of living water,” which the Philistines, representing demonic powers, have filled with filth. It has thus become the “image of the earthly” instead of the “image of the heavenly,” but the earthly can be cleansed with the Word of God, once again making the heavenly image shine.⁹²

Origen is more specific on the likeness of God, which he distinguishes from the image, in *On First Principles*: Since God first said “Let us make man in our own image and likeness,” but is then described as actually making him in the image alone, Origen supposed that “man received the honor of God’s image in his first creation, whereas the perfection of God’s likeness was reserved for

⁸⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.22, 38; Protr 12.122. See Henri Crouzel, *Theologie de l’image de Dieu chez Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1956).

⁸⁹ Origen, *Princ.* 1.2.5 & 2.6.1, referring to Col 1:15 & Heb 1:3.

⁹⁰ Origen, *Hom. in Gen.* 1.12–13. See Crouzel, *Theologie*, 147–79, and 217–45 for his distinction between the image and the likeness. John 14:9–10 is adduced for identifying the Word with the Image.

⁹¹ Origen, *Hom. in Gen.* 1.15. Cf. *Princ.* 3.5. This corresponds precisely to *Exeg. Soul* (NHC II,6); see Hugo Lundhaug, “Monastic Exegesis and the Female Soul in the Exegesis on the Soul,” in *Women and Knowledge in Early Christianity* (ed. Ulla Tervahauta, Ivan Miroshnikov, Outi Lehtipuu, and Ismo Dunderberg; VCSup 144; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 221–33.

⁹² Origen, *Hom. in Gen.* 13.3–4. Cf. 1 Cor 15:49.

him at the consummation.”⁹³ Thus the image of God lies latent in all people, but it is only through conscious effort that the image can be made into a perfect likeness with God, and this can moreover only be fully achieved at the consummation.

Origen’s allegorical interpretations were widely popular in Egypt in the fourth century, before the controversy erupted in the last years of the century. Both a city-dwelling ascetic and intellectual such as Didymus the Blind, and a desert monastic such as Evagrius testify to the influence of Origen’s exegeses, but likewise the writings of Athanasius and the letters of Antony bear the imprint of Origenism.⁹⁴ It is therefore likely that both the translator as well as any reader of our Coptic text in the fourth century would be familiar with Origenism, which was often associated with the reading of apocrypha by its detractors.⁹⁵ It is therefore worthwhile to investigate if an Origenist reading of the excerpt would make more sense of it than a Gnostic one.

4.2 The Compound Soul

After the first few lines, which underline that it is better to suffer injustice than to act unjustly, quoted above, we get the key sentence that introduces the leitmotif of image and likeness, as already discussed: “the logos of the soul is an image that has no likeness.”⁹⁶ Now, this is a far shot from Plato’s Greek original, where the sentence explains that what follows is only a mental image, a

⁹³ Origen, *Princ.* 3.6.1: *imagineis quidem dignitatem in prima conditione percepit, similitudinis uero ei perfectio in consummatione seruata est.* Ed. Henri Crouzel and Manlio Simonetti, *Origène: Traité des Principes, tome III (Livres III et IV)* (SC 268; Paris: Cerf, 1980), 236 & n. 4. Trans. George W. Butterworth, *Origen On First Principles* (London: S.P.C.K., 1936), 245 n. 6, pointing out further sources for the distinction between image and likeness: Origen, *c. Cels.* 4.30; *in Ep. ad Rom.* 4.5; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.6; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.38.5. For the first and last Adam, cf. 1 Cor 15:45.

⁹⁴ See Richard Layton, *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Julia Konstantinovskiy, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism*; Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Samuel Rubenson, *Letters of St. Antony*; idem. “Origen in the Egyptian Monastic Tradition of the Fourth Century,” in *Origeniana Septima: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts* (ed. Wolfgang A. Bienert and Uwe Kühneweg; BETL 137; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 319–37; Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (STAC 97; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 238–56.

⁹⁵ See Hugo Lundhaug, “Shenoute’s Heresiological Polemics and its Context(s),” in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity* (ed. Jörg Ulrich, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and David Brakke; ECCA 11; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2012), 239–61.

⁹⁶ NHC VI,5 48.31–32: οὐ γέγραπτον ἐν ἡμῶν εἶνε πε πλογοῦς ἡττύχη

metaphor: “By forming in speech an image of the soul.”⁹⁷ This is not difficult Greek and it is unlikely that the translator has made a mistake. There is nothing corresponding to “likeness” in the Greek text, and we must be dealing with a conscious interpolation. An Origenist interpretation would make sense here: the Logos, or rational part of the soul, is an image of God, but does not possess his likeness in the present fallen condition, as we have seen. In addition, the statement that the image has no likeness could be understood to refer to the invisibility of the original, incorporeal image. Next, we should consider if there are other passages in the text that might bear the mark of Origenism. Lacunae make the following few lines difficult to make sense of, before we come to the passage where the utterances of the ruling powers (ἀρχῶν) become nature or living beings (φύσις), such as the Chimaera and Cerberus. They all descend, and produce forms and likenesses, and become one single likeness (NHC VI,5 49.4–17). It is not clear if *physis* here refers to the nature of humans or of the world. If the descent of the utterances of the archons is in fact cosmogonic, this is not without parallel in Origen. In *On First Principles*, we are told that the diversity of the world is due to the diversity of rational beings that fell, some of which are identified as the ruling powers of the world, and that “the universe is as it were an immense, monstrous animal, held together by the power and reason of God as by one soul.”⁹⁸ The reader could easily have identified the Chimaera, Cerberus, and the rest, who descend, produce forms and likenesses, and become one single likeness, as such an Origenist “monstrous animal.”⁹⁹ Consequently, if the passage is in fact cosmogonic it does not necessarily reflect a “Gnostic” myth of creation by wicked archons, but may reflect the Origenist proposition that the world is manifold because of the diversity of the fallen souls, some of which became antagonistic “rulers.”

Further on in the Coptic excerpt, it seems that the many-headed beast produces rough, moulded forms (πλάσματα) with effort from itself, while other likenesses are formed (πλάσσειν) with words, and that the likenesses of the lion and the humans belong to the latter category (NHC VI,5 49.16–35). It is unclear if the ruling powers also spoke the latter likenesses into being, as the next few lines on top of page 50 are highly lacunose. When we once more get continuous text there is an imperative and a conjunctive in the second person plural, ordering to unite the three into a single likeness, no doubt referring back to the likenesses of the many-headed beast, the lion and the human. These three are however grown together as a single likeness *outside* the image of the human (50.11–12: οὔρεινε οὔτωτ ραβολ ἡϊκῶν ἡπρωμε), which must mean that the

⁹⁷ Plato, *Tim.* 588b: Εἰκόνα πλάσαντες τῆς ψυχῆς λόγῳ.

⁹⁸ Origen, *Princ.* 2.1.3: *uiuersum mundum uelut animal quoddam inmensum atque inmane opinandum puto, quod quasi ab una anima uirtute dei ac ratione teneatur.*

⁹⁹ In fact, the adjective used in Rufinus’s Latin translation of *Princ.* for “monstrous,” *inmanis*, is used to describe Cerberus in Horace, *Car.* 3.11.15.

likeness of the human is not identical with the image of the human. Again, utilizing Origenist hermeneutics, we can identify the likeness of the human as the fallen rational soul that has taken on the likeness of a man, whereas the image of the human inside is the spiritual latent image of God, which may attain the likeness of God and thus reach perfection. Thus the prelapsarian soul becomes split during the fall; the rational part assumes the likeness of a human grown together with the irrational lion and beast, whereas the spiritual part is described as the image of the human, which can be cultivated into the image of God. Again it is said that “his likeness” is inside a living creature formed (πλάσσειν) in a human likeness, meaning that the threefold single likeness is inside a human body. That the outer human has been shaped (πλασσεῖν), not made, both in Plato and the Coptic excerpt, would be central for an Origenist understanding, since Origen in his *Homilies on Genesis* underlines that the outer body in Genesis 2:8 has been shaped, not made, and is therefore a *figmentum*, i.e. πλάσμα, not an image of God as the human in Genesis 1:26.¹⁰⁰ It seems then that the anthropology of our adaptation of Plato is doubly threefold: there is an interior image, a tripartite soul, and finally the fleshly body. This does correspond to what Origen maps out in *On First Principles*, where the will of the soul is said to be caught in the middle between the flesh and the spirit,¹⁰¹ a tripartite Pauline anthropology that was of course common enough among early Christian theologians.¹⁰² As we have seen, the image of God is realized when the soul is perfectly united with the spirit, forsaking the body.

As for the soul itself, Origen broaches the possibility that it is tripartite, as Plato held, in *On First Principles*. He finds that this has scant scriptural support, but does not actually pronounce against it.¹⁰³ Elsewhere he does talk about three parts of the soul, and in the *Homily on Ezekiel* he actually identifies the rational part with the human of the vision of Ezekiel, the irascible part with the lion, and the appetitive part with the bull. The eagle in the vision is said to correspond to the helping power (τὴν βοηθοῦσαν δύναμιν).¹⁰⁴ Later the Origenist Eusebius of Caesarea would claim that the vision of Ezekiel was in fact Plato’s source for his tripartite image of the soul.¹⁰⁵ It is consequently likely

¹⁰⁰Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 1.13: *Non enim corporis figmentum Dei imaginem continent, neque factus esse corporalis homo dicitur, sed plasmatus.*

¹⁰¹Origen, *Princ.* 3.4.3.

¹⁰²See George H. van Kooten, *Paul’s Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity* (WUNT 232; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), chap. 5; idem. “St Paul on Soul, Spirit and the Inner Man,” in *The Afterlife of the Platonic Soul: Reflections of Platonic Psychology in the Monotheistic Religions* (ed. Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth and John M. Dillon; SPNPT 9; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 25–44.

¹⁰³Origen, *Princ.* 3.4.1.

¹⁰⁴Origen, *Hom. Ezech.* (PG 12) 340.20–22. See also *Sel. Gen.* (PG 12) 125.2–5.

¹⁰⁵Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praep. ev.* 12.46 on Ez 1:40.

that a reader steeped in either Platonism or Origenism would have recognized a reference to the tripartite soul in the three likenesses.

4.3 *Trample the Likenesses!*

The Coptic excerpt departs from Plato in recommending that one should trample the likenesses of the beast¹⁰⁶ as well as that of the lion, whereas Plato's recommendation was to make an ally of the lion, and to check the growth of the heads of wild beasts on the many-headed beast, while the heads of tame animals might be cultivated. The injunction in the Coptic version, to trample the likenesses, lends itself to three interpretations, which may all be valid at the same time. First, the reader who has identified the many-headed beast and the lion with respectively the desires and irascibility of the irrational soul would be likely to understand the trampling to refer to ascetic discipline. Unlike Plato's recommendation that the tame beasts should be cultivated, and the lion should be made an ally to keep the beast in check, all irrational passions are commonly decried in monastic asceticism. The passions are thus demonized and both the beast and the lion would be apt images of the devil. 'Beast' is of course a well-known designation for the adversary, and the roaring lion appears as the adversary in 1 Pet 5:8, a passage that Origen also refers to twice in *On First Principles*. Likewise, the *First Greek Life of Pachomius* (135) interprets Paul's statement "I was rescued from the lion's mouth" (2 Tim 4:17) with the devil as a roaring lion who devours souls in 1 Pet 5:8, a passage also evoked by Horsiesios (*Test.* 6). Elsewhere in the same text, Pachomius is lauding the ascetic discipline of the young Silvanos in front of the other monks, saying that while they have bound "the beast that wars against you" under their feet, Silvanos has wholly destroyed it.¹⁰⁷ In the same vein, the learned anchorite Diocles of the Thebaid is said to have identified irascibility as demonic and desire as bestial.¹⁰⁸ Evagrius Ponticus also identifies the passions with animals quite often, and in the *Kephalaia Gnostica* he states that the *nous* is most characteristic of angels, irascibility of the devil, and desires of humans.¹⁰⁹

Evagrius is quite striking in this regard, for he states in the *Letter to Melania* that when the soul fell and ceased being an image of god, it acquired "the image of animals," alluding to Romans 1:23: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal

¹⁰⁶ A possible subtext here is 1 Cor 15:24–25, when Paul states that Christ will destroy every ruler, authority and power and put all his enemies under his feet, and chap. 32, when he himself fought wild beasts at Ephesus.

¹⁰⁷ G¹ 105; cf. 1 Cor 15:25; Luke 10:19. See also Paral. 4 & 24; Pachomius, *First Instruction* 47. Translations of the Pachomian texts can be found in Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia* (3 vols.; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980–1982).

¹⁰⁸ Palladius, *Laus. Hist.* 58.3: ἐπιθυμία ας κτῆνος, not θῆριον.

¹⁰⁹ Evagrius, *Keph. Gnost.* 1.68, 3.34–35. See Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 77.

man and birds and animals and reptiles.”¹¹⁰ Although clearly speaking about idols here, Paul immediately goes on to speak about lust, and Evagrius thus links the soul’s acquisition of the irrational parts during its descent with idolatry. The link is not merely symbolic. The irrational faculties of the soul are particularly susceptible to the influence of demons, if not somehow demonic themselves, and it is demons that create disturbing fantasies in the mind of the monk, just as it is demons that are worshipped as gods in the idolatrous cult of the pagans.¹¹¹ That is the lesson Athanasius wants to impart in his *Life of Antony*, in the very final passage:

the Christians who are sincerely devoted to him and truly believe in him not only prove that the demons, whom the Greeks consider gods, are not gods, but also *trample* (Cf. Luke 10:19; Ps 90:13 LXX) and chase them away as deceivers and corrupters of mankind.¹¹²

The injunction in our excerpt to trample the likenesses might thus naturally be interpreted as a call to destroy pagan idols, which would indeed have been a pressing concern for many Egyptian monks in fourth century Egypt.

Third and finally, the injunction to trample the likenesses could have been read as an exhortation to imageless prayer, so important for the practice of Evagrius and for the Origenist controversy in the late fourth century.¹¹³ During prayer, the monk would sometimes be distracted by thoughts that present images, and these distractions were often the result of demonic machinations. Pure prayer should avoid these images and instead the mind should be filled by light. Evagrius seems to have been influenced here by John of Lycopolis, “the Seer of Thebes,” whom he travelled to consult together with Ammonius of the Tall Brothers from Nitria.¹¹⁴ In the *Historia Monachorum* John of Lycopolis is made to warn against indecent images during prayer (1.22), and he instead recommends a contemplative prayer with pure mind (1.62). It is consequently

¹¹⁰ Evagrius, *Ep. ad Melaniam* 9. Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 73.

¹¹¹ See David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹¹² Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 94.2: οἱ τούτῳ γνησίως λατρεύοντες καὶ πιστεύοντες εὐσεβῶς εἰς αὐτόν, τοὺς δαίμονας, οὓς αὐτοὶ οἱ Ἕλληνες νομίζουσιν εἶναι θεοὺς, τούτους οἱ χριστιανοὶ ἐλέγχουσιν, οὐ μόνον μὴ εἶναι θεοὺς, ἀλλὰ καὶ πατοῦσι καὶ διώκουσιν, ὡς πλάνουσιν καὶ φθορέας τῶν ἀνθρώπων τυγχάνοντες.

¹¹³ See Columba Stewart, “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” *J ECS* 9 (2001): 173–204. See also John Cassian, *Conf.* 10.3–6; Mark DelCogliano, “Situating Sarapion’s Sorrow: The Anthropomorphite Controversy and the Historical and Theological Context of Cassian’s Tenth Conference on Pure Prayer,” *CSQ* 38 (2003): 377–421; Hugo Lundhaug, “The Body of God and the Corpus of Historiography: The *Life of Aphou of Pemdje* and the Anthropomorphite Controversy,” in *Bodies, Borders, Believers: Ancient Texts and Present Conversations: Essays in Honor of Turid Karlsen Seim on Her 70th Birthday* (ed. Anne Hege Grung, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, and Anna Rebecca Solevåg; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 40–56.

¹¹⁴ Evagrius Ponticus, *Antir.* 6.16. Cf. Stewart, “Imageless Prayer,” 194.

likely that some kind of imageless prayer was practiced in Upper Egypt before the time of Evagrius, and thus close in both time and space to the manuscript of our Coptic Plato. An objection to this interpretation is that only the likenesses of the lion and the beast should be destroyed, whereas one would expect true imageless prayer also to get rid of the likeness of the human. A possibility would be that the lion and the beast are considered “second-order images,” belonging to the lower realm of creation, whereas the human likeness is considered to belong to the “first-order” images which may fruitfully be employed in contemplation in order to reach the pure imageless prayer.¹¹⁵ The beast and probably the lion were spawned by the ruling powers, in our excerpt, whereas the likeness of the human would probably have been interpreted as the rational soul, thus belonging to the noetic order. At any rate, the injunction to trample the likenesses might have been understood by a fourth- or fifth-century monastic reader as an exhortation to imageless prayer, even if this was not the original intent of the interpolation of the Coptic translator.

4.4 Daily Ascetic Discipline

The remainder of the excerpt does not contain significant departures from the text of Plato, but it should be pointed out that the text would be highly conducive to monastic discipline, stating that the one who speaks and acts justly will cultivate the inner human (ὁ ἐντὸς ἄνθρωπος / ἰφογν ἱπρωμε). A straightforward mistranslation will have increased the focus on discipline: with regards to the many-headed beast, Plato claims that one should act like a good husbandman and rear the heads of tame animals (τὰ ἡμερα) while hindering the wild ones (τὰ ἄγρια). The Coptic translator here reads instead ἡμερα as days, and the resulting sentence reads that like a good husbandman one should *daily* (ἡμηνε) nourish one’s produce (πεφρηνμα, not found in the Greek). Also, in the Coptic excerpt it is the wild animals who hinder the good husbandman, in contrast to Plato’s Greek. This brings to mind the ideal of the fastidious monk who daily follows his spiritual discipline while tormented by the attacks of wicked demons, where Plato had the husbandman checking the heads of wild animals with the lion as his ally. What started with a simple mistranslation of a single Greek word makes the translator subtly change the meaning of the whole sentence, the last one of the excerpt.

¹¹⁵ Blossom Stefaniw, “Evagrius Ponticus on Image and Material,” *CSQ* 42 (2007): 126–31.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many indications that the departures from Plato in our Coptic ‘translation,’ or rather ‘version,’ are not only caused by the lacking familiarity of the translator with Classical Greek and Plato’s philosophical idiom, but also by the kind of teachings that by this time were considered to belong to Origenism, and which would shortly be denounced as such, in the first Origenist controversy. This does not mean that the translator necessarily had *On First Principles* or the homilies of Origen lying in front of him as he completed his task, nor even that he was necessarily personally familiar with the works of Origen. But it is likely that he worked in an environment where such teachings were prevalent, as we know to be the case in monasteries of both Upper and Lower Egypt. This strengthens the case that the Nag Hammadi Codices were likely owned by monks that were branded as Origenists, and lumped together with all kinds of heterodox Christians by such tireless heresiologists as Epiphanius of Salamis.¹¹⁶

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¹¹⁶ See Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism*, 206–18; Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*, 263–68. Jackson, *The Lion Becomes Man*, 206–7, suggests the Origenist Hierakas of Leontopolis or his disciples could have translated and interpolated the excerpt and sent it to their Pachomian brethren down south. This is a compelling scenario, and totally in harmony with the Origenist interpolations proposed here, but the Origenists of the Thebaïd mentioned by Epiphanius, supposedly inspired by Hierakas, could equally well be behind it. See Christian H. Bull, “The Panopolis Connection: The Pachomian Federation as Context for the Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *Coptic Literature in Context (4th-13th cent.): Cultural Landscape, Literary Production, and Manuscript Archaeology* (ed. Paola Buzi; PAST 5; Roma: Edizioni Quasar, 2020), 133–47.

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