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978-1-107-44577-2 - Three Teachers of Alexandria: Theognostus, Pierius and Peter: A Study in the Early History of Origenism and Anti-Origenism

Edited by L. B. Radford

Excerpt

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## THEOGNOSTUS.

PRACTICALLY nothing is known of the life of Theognostus. Eusebius and Jerome never mention his name in their accounts of early Christian writers and teachers. Philippus Sidetes<sup>1</sup> notes that he was head of

<sup>1</sup> The fragment of Philippus preserved by an unknown compiler (Cod. Bodl. Barocc. 142, fol. 216) and edited in 1689 by Dodwell (*Dissert. in Iren.* App. pp. 488–514) states the succession of catechists as follows: Dionysius, Pierius, Theognostus, Serapion, Peter. Dionysius became catechist in 231–2 when Heraclas, the successor of Origen in that office, became bishop of Alexandria. In 247–8 Dionysius succeeded Heraclas as bishop. By way of reducing the remarkably long interval between this date and the activity of Pierius in 309, if not later, Dodwell supposed that Dionysius retained the office of catechist during his episcopate (247–264). It is an unproven supposition. In any case the bishop would not be likely to retain the office for more than a short time, perhaps until a suitable successor could be found. Probably Philippus was wrong in his chronology here as elsewhere (e.g. in making Pantaenus the disciple and successor of Clement), and misplaced Pierius. Theognostus was probably the earlier of the two. Athanasius mentions Origen and Theognostus together as *παλαιοὶ ἄνδρες* (*Ep. 4 ad Serap.* c. xi.). Eusebius places the presbyterate of Pierius under the episcopate of Theonas, 281–2—300. Achilles, a fellow-presbyter of Pierius, afterwards an Arian, is described by Eusebius as *τῆς λεγῆς πίστεως τὸ*

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the catechetical school. Stephanus Gobar (so we learn from Photius, *Cod.* 28) was surprised to find Athanasius referring to him and to Origen in terms of commendation. George of Coreyra in the twelfth century mentions him in a curiously unchronological list of Church teachers, —“Dionysius of Alexandria, Methodius, Clement of Alexandria, Pierius, Pamphilus, Theognostus, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus,”—all of whom George describes as having been led astray from the truth by human infirmity. “Certain of their sayings we cannot accept, though in other respects they have our highest admiration<sup>1</sup>.”

It is as a writer that Theognostus is best known. Four fragments of his writings have survived. Athanasius in his fourth epistle to Serapion (c. xi.) quotes a passage on the sin against the Holy Ghost, and in his epistle on the definitions of the Nicene Council (c. xxv.)

*διδασκαλείον ἐγκεχειρισμένος.* The expression may be quite general, but it may refer to the catechetical office, in which case Achilles was either a colleague or assistant of Pierius (as Clement was of Pantaenus, and Heraclas of Origen for a time), or less probably his successor. Of Serapion nothing is known for certain. The whole succession should perhaps be stated thus : Pantaenus (180–200), Clement (200–203), Origen (203–231), Heraclas (231–2), Dionysius (231–2—247–8), Theognostus (247–8—282), Pierius (282–?), Serapion, Peter (?–300). But the records are so scanty that we cannot be sure that this list from Theognostus to Peter is complete. See Bardenhewer, *Gesch. d. altkirchl. Litt.* ii. 168, 195, 199, 203; Harnack, *Altchr. Litt.* ii. (*Chron.*) ii. 67, n. 4, and 71; Diekamp, *Theolog. Quartalschr.* 1902, p. 491.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Harnack, *Altchr. Litt.* i. 476.

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a passage on the relation of the *ousia* of the Son to that of the Father. Gregory of Nyssa (*Contra Eunom.* III. iii.) ranks Theognostus along with the Arian Eunomius on the ground that he describes the Son as an instrument in the work of creation. Diekamp<sup>1</sup> has lately printed and annotated a new fragment from an unknown compiler, which deals with the scriptural terms applied to the Son (λόγος, σοφία, εἰκών, ἀπαύγασμα and κάτοπτρον), and dwells upon the fulness of the Godhead in the Son and upon His likeness to the Father in unity and immutability.

Fortunately Photius (*Cod.* 106)<sup>2</sup> has preserved for us an account of a great work of Theognostus which consisted of seven books and bore the title τοῦ μακαρίου Θεογνώστου Ἀλεξανδρέως καὶ ἐξηγητοῦ Ὑποτυπώσεις. The term “exegete” marks doubtless the catechetical office of Theognostus. The title Ὑποτυπώσεις should probably be translated “outlines” rather than “sketches.” It denotes at once brevity and system. From the account which Photius gives of the work it was evidently a comprehensive view of Christian doctrine. The following is a table of its contents framed from the information given by Photius:

<sup>1</sup> *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 1902, lxxxiv. pp. 481–494. The earlier fragments are printed and annotated by Routh in his *Reliquiae Sacrae*, iii. 407–422, and all four by Harnack in *Texte u. Untersuch.* xxiv. (N. F. ix.) 3, pp. 73–92.

<sup>2</sup> Routh, *R. S.* iii. 412–414.

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- I. The Father.
- II. The Son.
- III. The Holy Ghost.
- IV. Angels and Demons.
- V. } The Incarnation of the Saviour.
- VI. }
- VII. Creation.

The remarks of Photius are clearly not a complete account of the contents of each book, but merely comments on various points which seemed to deserve praise or blame. The style of the work, he says, was simple and vigorous; its diction had all the grace of the Attic school without its affectation; its sentences ran easily; and the claims of accuracy and clearness were not allowed to impair the dignity of the subject. In the first book Theognostus set himself to prove that God is the creator and to refute those who supposed that matter is coeternal with God. In the second he argued "that the Father must have a Son"; but in speaking of the Son he described Him as a creature (*κτίσμα*) and as exercising authority only over rational beings, and said other things too in derogation of the Son, like Origen. Photius tries to give Theognostus the benefit of the doubt. He may have been actually guilty of "irreverence" (i.e. heterodoxy) like Origen; or, to stretch a point in his favour, he may have been stating an argument rather than laying down a doctrine; or again he may have been accommodating himself to the lower

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level of a hearer altogether unfamiliar with the Christian religion and unable to receive the whole system of the faith, and perhaps he held back part of the truth in the belief that any sort of knowledge of the Son was better for the hearer than absolute unfamiliarity and ignorance. Still, Photius proceeds, although such a hesitation to state the true faith might be neither unsuccessful nor unworthy as a method of oral discussion, it is a feeble defence to offer this excuse for the “irreverent” language of a written treatise intended for general circulation as a common standard of teaching. Similarly in the third book Theognostus stated the grounds for the belief in the personal existence (*ὑπαρξιν*) of the Holy Spirit, but on other points was as wide of reason as Origen in his work *De Principiis*. In the fourth book he followed Origen in clothing spirits with attenuated bodies. In the fifth and sixth books he endeavoured to prove the possibility of the Incarnation, but much of the language of these books was absurd and reckless, especially his statement that the Son was limited in His presence on earth by time and space and only unlimited in His activity. In the seventh book, which (Photius says) bore the title “Of God’s creative work,” Theognostus was more orthodox in his teaching, and especially in what he said of the Son at the close of this section.

Upon these last remarks of Photius Diekamp built an ingenious theory with regard to the theological history

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of Theognostus himself (*Theol. Quart.* 1902, pp. 489–491). The seventh book unlike the others has a special title (*περὶ Θεοῦ δημιουργίας*) which carries us back to topics already discussed in book i. It deals also with the Son, and in this respect goes back also to the subjects of book ii. and possibly books v. and vi. The first six books are a systematic sequence; the seventh is apparently a supplementary section of the work. Photius expressly states that it was more orthodox, especially in its Christology. Probably therefore it was a revision or correction of earlier statements. Diekamp ventures even to suggest a possible occasion for this reconsideration. Dionysius of Alexandria in his controversy with the Sabellians of the Pentapolis had made incautious use of the terms *ποίημα* and *γενητὸν* with reference to the Logos, and in reply to a letter from Dionysius of Rome had partly indeed protested against misrepresentation of his earlier language, but had also partly corrected or abandoned the expressions that had given offence. Perhaps Theognostus learned from his bishop's experience, and took this opportunity to revise his view of the Logos and His relation to the Father and to the world, and in particular to explain or recall such a dangerous expression as the word *κτίσμα*. Harnack however (*T. U.* pp. 79–82) gives good reason for doubting the premises upon which this theory is built. It is true that Photius quotes the actual words of the title in the case of one book only, viz. the seventh; but he mentions the sub-

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jects of all the others but the second so distinctly that he seems to be recalling an actual heading of each book, and his reference to the contents of the second makes it quite clear that that book did deal with the Son, as we should expect from its place in the series. The supposition that the seventh book was a *retractatio* of topics already discussed is uncertain and unnecessary. The subject of creation indeed occurs in the first book and again in the seventh; but in the first Theognostus is dealing with the creative function of God and His relation to the material world, i.e. with the presuppositions of the Christian doctrine of creation, while the seventh apparently deals with the results of that creative action, i.e. with the world itself<sup>1</sup>. It is surprising perhaps to find this subject postponed to the end, but Harnack sees in this arrangement an illustration of the Alexandrian view which set the Incarnation in close connexion with the preexistence of the Son and in priority to the work of creation. We might add that this recalls the language of S. Paul, to whom the Incarnation was not only a historical fact but also the eternal purpose of God (e.g. *Eph.* iii. 11). As for the greater orthodoxy of this book, there was less room here for the peculiar views which would naturally come out

<sup>1</sup> Krüger (*Gesch. d. altchr. Litt.* 1893, p. 133) takes this book as dealing with the divine government of the world (*Gottes Weltregiment*), but surely *δημιουργία* is not *οικονομία*. Zahn (*Forsch. z. N. T. Kanon*, iii. 130) thinks it was a recapitulation of the whole theological system of the *Hypotyposes*.

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in the discussion of the Son, eternal or incarnate. The emphasis which Photius lays upon this orthodoxy need not be interpreted as implying a correction of earlier contents of the work; it is due rather to his desire to bring out the good points in Theognostus and in other ante-Nicene theologians as a set-off against the bad points which he cannot extenuate<sup>1</sup>.

Harnack remarks that it is surprising to find no book in the *Hypotyposes* dealing with man or with redemption or with Holy Scripture; but he suggests that the seventh book would naturally include the subject of man, and the fifth and sixth the subject of redemption. The subject of Scripture he thinks it was not necessary for Theognostus to discuss, as Origen had already devoted one of the books of his "First Principles" to that subject. But surely this reason would apply equally well to many other subjects in the "Outlines" of Theognostus, who would have been reduced to scanty materials indeed if he had abstained from anything more than gleaning or even from gleaning in fields already reaped. It would have been an instructive task to set the two works in detailed comparison; but the work of Theognostus has only survived in a few fragments and in a brief analysis by a late critic. As it is, we can only contrast the general plan of the two works. Origen divided his great work into four books. The first dealt with the nature of God, the

<sup>1</sup> Harnack, *op. cit.* p. 81.



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Logos, the Holy Spirit, and the angels; the second with the world and man, his restoration through the Incarnate Word, and his destiny, eternal life; the third with the freedom of the human will, the conflict between good and evil, and the final triumph of good; the fourth with the interpretation of Holy Scripture as the basis of Christian doctrine. It is impossible to construct a parallel in detail between the *De Principiis* and the *Hypotyposesis*. We can only note that the first book of the *De Principiis* contained the subjects which occupied the first four books of the *Hypotyposesis*, viz. the Holy Trinity and the angels, i.e. the invisible world of spiritual beings. The second book contained the subjects which occupied the last three books of the work of Theognostus, viz. creation and redemption, i.e. the visible world and the destiny of man. Origen's last two themes, freewill and revelation, i.e. the relation of man to God and the relation of God to man, either lay outside the scope of Theognostus or fell into a subordinate or incidental position under the head of one or other of the subjects for which he did find a distinct place. It is just in those two great subjects that the difference between the work of Origen and that of Theognostus lies. They are strictly questions rather than subjects. The very title of Origen's work (*περὶ ἀρχῶν*), denoting as it does not the elements of the universe but the first principles of a philosophy of religion, describes the character as well as the contents of the work. Origen is endeavouring to construct a science

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of faith. The centre of Christian truth is the teaching of Christ and His apostles, preserved and interpreted by the Church, and received by the Christian in simple faith which issues in holy living. But there is a circumference as well as a centre, and it is within this circle that knowledge (*gnosis*) finds its scope. It is the work of Christian *gnosis* first "to trace the *how* and the *why* of the simple *that* of apostolic teaching<sup>1</sup>," and secondly to investigate those questions on which the tradition of the Church is silent or undecided. The basis of this investigation is Holy Scripture in all its bearings, historical, moral and spiritual, or in other words literal and allegorical. This was the work of Origen. Theognostus on the other hand seems to have set himself not to discuss principles of theology but rather to give a systematic statement of Christian doctrine. His material is subdivided more distinctly than Origen's; and speculation seems to have found but slight space in Theognostus in comparison with positive teaching, though that teaching altogether was not free from ideas that belonged to the speculative rather than to the traditional side of Origenistic theology.

The aims of the two works were different; but that the contents of the *Hypotyposeis* bore witness to the Origenistic sympathies of their writer it is impossible to doubt in view of the comments of Photius. Theognostus denied the eternity of matter; he

<sup>1</sup> Bardenhewer, *Gesch. d. altk. Litt.* ii. 135.