

# Did the *Timaeus* Create a Textual Community?

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THE PHILOSOPHICAL CENTRALITY of the *Timaeus* in Hellenistic times is well established.<sup>1</sup> Questions regarding the identity of its readers, however, have so far been neglected. It is to this aspect that I wish to devote the present paper, asking whether some readers of Plato's *Timaeus* constructed this text as a significant foundation of their sense of community. Was the *Timaeus*, in other words, instrumental in defining identity, and if so, whose identity with respect to which other group? These questions obviously inquire into the connection between a particular text and a social group, examining which social effect the former may have had or rather to what social use it was put.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See esp. H. Dörrie, *Von Platon zum Platonismus. Ein Bruch in der Überlieferung und seine Überwindung* (Opladen 1976), who stressed, more than anyone else, the centrality of the *Timaeus* in the revival of the Platonic heritage after a phase of skepticism. He dated this development to the first century BCE, identifying Cicero's translation of the *Timaeus* as an expression of a revolutionary change. Dörrie speaks of a rather instantaneous event: "Suddenly, the *Timaeus* was in everybody's mouth, as much as every Greek knew his Homer well, thus from the middle of the century every educated man knew the *Timaeus*" (32). He explains this remarkable rise of interest in terms of *Ideengeschichte*: Stoic cosmology no longer satisfied ancient readers, because it was based too exclusively on the notion of an immanent Logos, and thus the *Timaeus* succeeded in attracting attention through its distinctly more transcendental message of a world-soul and Divine providence (33). More recent work testifies to an increasing interest in the role of the *Timaeus* in Hellenistic times: G. J. Reydam-Schils (ed.), *Plato's Timaeus as a Cultural Icon* (Notre Dame 2003); R. W. Sharples and A. Sheppard (eds.), *Ancient Approaches to Plato's Timaeus* (London 2003); H. Tarrant and D. Baltzly (eds.), *Reading Plato in Antiquity* (London 2006).

<sup>2</sup> I treat only the actual readers of the *Timaeus* (so far as these can be

I shall argue that a significant development took place in the reception history of the *Timaeus*. For centuries this book was not used to define boundaries. From the second century CE onwards, however, it became a focus of identity for certain Greek philosophers, who wished to assert traditional pagan culture against Christianity. Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch were important harbingers of this transformation. The *Timaeus* had its greatest impact when Celsus and Porphyry took it as a significant marker of their pagan Greek identity vis-à-vis Christianity. This happened after such thinkers as Clement of Alexandria claimed Plato for the new religion. Increasingly, the *Timaeus* became a central text, attracting significant commentary activity. More than other Platonic works it helped to construct a textual community, which sought to preserve the original Greek tradition against its appropriation by Christian readers.<sup>3</sup>

To address these issues, I have adopted a term introduced by B. Stock, who studied the implications of literacy in medieval Europe.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on the connection between texts and social formations, Stock coined “textual community” to refer to groups dissenting from the mainstream and justifying their particular position by recourse to an authoritative text. This text was shared by society at large, but interpreted differently. The dissenting group, led by a figure with direct access to the text, formed their sense of solidarity around their particular reading. The text thus provided structure for the group’s internal behaviour as well as a sense of community with respect to the outside world (Stock 90).

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reconstructed from the extant sources) and their sense of community, not society at large where other forms of identification often were more relevant.

<sup>3</sup> This argument is made in response to F. Millar, “The Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora,” in J. M. Lieu et al. (eds.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London/New York 1992) 97–123, at 105, who stressed the lacuna in modern scholarship regarding the changes pagans underwent during the first Christian centuries (repr. *Rome, the Greek World, & the East III* [Chapel Hill 2006] 432–456).

<sup>4</sup> B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy. Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton 1983), esp. 88–151.

I employ Stock's phrase in a somewhat broader and less technical sense. First, a quasi-monastic community around the *Timaeus* cannot be identified. It may perhaps have existed in the context of Plotinus' teaching activity, but its precise nature and origin cannot be established. Instead, an intellectual community-at-a-distance may be envisioned. Its members used the same text and began to rely on each other's interpretations in the face of the entirely different strategies used by Christian readers. Secondly, I wish to apply the phrase "textual community" to a period when pagan readers of the *Timaeus* were in the majority. Their new sense of identity around this text thus emerged in the face of other claims, but not with respect to a majority opinion. They did not dissent from the mainstream, but instead wished to counter new claims made by Christianity. The meaning of "textual community" assumed in this paper corresponds to some extent to Benedikt Anderson's notion of an imagined community which also relied to a significant degree on texts.<sup>5</sup> Stock's notion, however, remains especially relevant for this study, because it stresses the importance of a particular text as well as the polemical or dialogical nature of the identity emerging around it.

Moreover, the notion of a "textual community" must be distinguished from the emergence of a canon.<sup>6</sup> In both cases identity is constructed around a particular corpus of texts. However, the text that achieves canonical status has succeeded in acquiring ultimate authority, relegating other texts to relative marginality. A textual community, by contrast, is based on a particular interpretation of a known and accepted text. The emergence of a textual community is thus derivative and secondary. It relies on an established text, putting it to new social or ideological use. Whereas a society fixing a canon wishes to

<sup>5</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*<sup>2</sup> (London 1991); for critical discussions of his work see my review and comments, M. R. Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (Tübingen 2001) 1–2.

<sup>6</sup> See esp. two recent studies of canonization in Christianity, which have emphasized questions of identity: J. M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford 2004) 27–61; B. D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities. The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford 2003) 229–246.

define certain texts as ultimate expressions of truth, which cannot be questioned, a textual community operates within the framework of an accepted text and a variety of interpretations. Its innovation consists in providing a new focus. To study the effect of the *Timaeus*, I have found the concept of a textual community more suitable than that of a canon. The *Timaeus* hardly achieved canonical status, but it did, at some point, significantly contribute to shaping a sense of community among the pagan elite.

*Stage 1: the Timaeus did not define boundaries before the Common Era*

Initially, we have to register a negative result. In the centuries before the Common Era the *Timaeus* did not define the boundaries of a particular group or philosophical school. It did not become an exclusive text for Platonists, clearly distinguishing them from the adherents of Aristotle. It is, on the contrary, striking that both Platonists and Peripatetics referred to this text, overwhelmingly agreeing in their interpretation. This situation is all the more striking as Aristotle had exposed certain passages of the *Timaeus* to severe criticism, arguing that its notion of a literal creation of the cosmos is gravely mistaken.<sup>7</sup> Yet even he contributed to the circulation of this book by publishing extracts from it.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, no significant gap emerged between Aristotle's and Plato's students, because the latter promptly suggested a metaphorical reading of the *Timaeus*.<sup>9</sup> They argued that Plato had not described a real creation of the cosmos, but assumed, like Aristotle, that the world was eternally dependent on some external source. Aristotle himself was already familiar with the metaphorical approach among some

<sup>7</sup> See esp. *Cael.* 280a–283a25; cf. M. Baltes, *Die philosophische Lehre des Platonismus* (Stuttgart 1998) 377–384 with bibliography.

<sup>8</sup> Diogenes Laertius (5.25) mentions Aristotle's τὰ ἐκ τοῦ Τιμαίου.

<sup>9</sup> I take the literal meaning to be the original; see also G. Vlastos, "Creation in the *Timaeus*: Is It a Fiction?" in R. E. Allen (ed.), *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics* (London 1965) 401–419; R. Hackforth, "Plato's Cosmogony (*Timaeus* 27 D ff.)," *CQ* 9 (1959) 17–22; contrast, however, the majority opinion represented by F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London 1937) 24–27; A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary On Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford 1928) 59–63; and recently A. Finkelberg, "Plato's Method In *Timaeus*," *AJP* 117 (1996) 391–409.

of Plato's students, who said (*Cael.* 280a):

just as [the cosmos] was never created, but [presented thus] for the purpose of instruction (*διδασκαλίας χάριν*) so as to make things known better, in the same way as those who observe the diagram in the process of becoming.

Without naming these Platonists, Aristotle dismissed their exegesis as simply “not true” (279b34). These anonymous interpreters of Plato's *Timaeus* can be variously identified on the basis of the fragmentary evidence. Xenocrates, for example, who was Plato's disciple and head of the Academy for more than twenty years, is known as a metaphorical interpreter of Plato's creation account.<sup>10</sup> Plutarch and Proclus mention in this context also Crantor, Xenocrates' student and, according to Proclus, the “first interpreter of Plato.”<sup>11</sup> One scholiast identifies Speusippus, the first head of the Academy after Plato, as a metaphorical interpreter of the *Timaeus*.<sup>12</sup> These ancient identifications confirm our impression from Aristotle's own discussion, namely that Plato's immediate successors and leaders of his school turned to a metaphorical interpretation of the *Timaeus*. According to Plutarch, this approach continued to enjoy wide success later on as well (*An.Procr.* 1012D). This implies a substantial convergence of Platonic and Peripatetic views. While Aristotle rejected such a rapprochement, his immediate successor, Theophrastus, seems to have taken a far more lenient view. Taurus in the second century CE recorded him as saying: “the cosmos according to Plato was created ... he assumes that the cosmos is generated as if for the purpose of illumination.”<sup>13</sup> The phrase *σαφηνείας χάριν* closely echoes

<sup>10</sup> Xenocrates' views are attested by anonymous scholiasts and Plut. *An.Procr.* 1013A, collected by R. Heinze, *Xenokrates. Darstellung der Lehre und Sammlung der Fragmente* (Hildesheim 1965) 180 fr.54. See also J. Dillon, “The *Timaeus* in the Old Academy,” in Reydam-Schils, *Plato's Timaeus* 80–94.

<sup>11</sup> Plut. *An.Procr.* 1012D–F, 1013A–C; Procl. *In Ti.* I 277 (ed. Diehl). On his exegetical activities, see below.

<sup>12</sup> L. Taran, *Speusippus of Athens* (Leiden 1981) 156–157 fr.61a–b (Arist. *Cael.* 279b is one of the two fragments quoted), with comments at 383–386 in defense of the authenticity of the scholiast's evidence.

<sup>13</sup> In John Philoponus *Aet.* 6.8 (ed. Rabe 145; Diels, *Dox.Graec.* 485 fr.11);

Aristotle's report about contemporary Platonists who took their master to have written διδασκαλίας χάριν. Taurus thus suggests that Theophrastus, unlike his teacher, did not dismiss the interpretation of Plato's students, but accepted it. Plato's notions were thus accommodated among the Peripatetics, while Plato's students were invited to feel intellectually welcome. Academy and Peripatos read the same text, interpreting a crucial passage in virtually the same way and taking a keen interest in each other's comments.

It is furthermore remarkable that both Platonists and Peripatetics referred to central passages in the *Timaeus* without yet developing the form of a running commentary.<sup>14</sup> Even

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see also M. Baltes, *Die Weltentstehung des Platonischen Timaios nach den antiken Interpreten* (Leiden 1976–78) I 22. On Taurus' life and works see J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London 1977) 237–240; H. Baltussen, "Early Reactions to Plato's *Timaeus*: Polemic and Exegesis in Theophrastus and Epicurus," in Sharples and Sheppard, *Ancient Approaches* 49–71, at 61–65.

<sup>14</sup> The first author whose writings were retroactively described by the technical term ὑπόμνημα is Taurus in the mid second century (Philoponus *Aet.* 13.15 [520 Rabe]). Porphyry mentions Plotinus' use of commentaries by various authors (*V.Plot.* 14). None of these, however, antedates the second century, while some may not have been commentaries in the technical sense. Plutarch significantly refrained from using this term in connection with the *Timaeus*, speaking instead of "interpreters" (τοῖς ἐξηγουμένοις, *An.Procr.* 1012D) and those "studying Plato" (οἱ πλείστοι τῶν χρωμένων Πλάτωνι, 1013E). Plutarch referred to his own treatise *On the Generation of the Soul* as "a unified collection of the various statements that I have frequently made and have set down sporadically in various writings explaining what I suppose to be the opinion held by Plato concerning the soul" (1012B). Similarly, he referred to his no longer extant work on the creation of the cosmos as a λόγος (1013E). See also M. Baltes, *Der Platonismus im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart 1993) 165–166, who identifies Galen (*De plac. Hipp. et Plat.* V 508.7 ff. K.) as the first witness to regular commentary activity among Platonists. Baltes, however, assumed that earlier commentaries must have existed, but were not preserved because of the overwhelming success of Porphyry's work (170–171). J. Dillon, "Pedantry and Pedestrianism? Some Reflections on the Middle Platonic Commentary Tradition," in Tarrant and Baltzy, *Reading Plato* 19–31, identifies Eudorus (first century BCE) as the first commentator of an individual Platonic treatise. R. Lamberton, "The Neoplatonists and their Books," in G. G. Stroumsa and M. Finkelberg (eds.), *Homer, the Bible and Beyond* (Leiden 2003) 195–211, stressed that Platonism only gradually privileged certain texts, never assigning them

Crantor, who was identified by Proclus as ὁ πρῶτος τοῦ Πλάτωνος ἐξηγητής, did not systematically interpret the text.<sup>15</sup> In the extant sources nothing suggests that he set about a comprehensive appreciation of the *Timaeus*. His interpretations are cited only with regard to a few controversial passages.<sup>16</sup> Thus he took a firm position in the dispute over whether the myth of Atlantis should be interpreted as history or as mere fiction.<sup>17</sup> Well aware of critics who accused Plato of plagiarism from Egyptian sources, Crantor insisted on the historical truth of the Atlantis myth.<sup>18</sup> He also took a position in the discussion of *Ti.* 28B, where Plato asked whether the cosmos is eternal and lacking a beginning of *genesis*, or is created, starting from some beginning. Crantor emerges as an influential, metaphorical, interpreter who gathered around him other “exegetes.”<sup>19</sup> In his view Plato’s description of the cosmos as γενητός meant “that the cosmos is said to be created in the sense that it is contingent upon another cause, being neither self-created nor self-substantial.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, Crantor participated in the discussion about the nature of the world-soul (*Ti.* 35B). While Xenocrates had interpreted the soul to be a “number which moves itself,” Crantor ascribed to the soul a primarily epistemological function. Both, however, insisted that the soul, according to Plato, “did not come to be in time and is not subject to generation.”<sup>21</sup> All of

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canonical status, but commenting on them. Contra P. Hadot, *Etudes de philosophie ancienne* (Paris 1998) 3–11, who highlighted the exegetical aspects of ancient philosophy, without, however, acknowledging a significant shift from single interpretations of particular passages to running commentaries.

<sup>15</sup> Procl. *In Ti.* I 76. H. Dörrie, *Die geschichtlichen Wurzeln des Platonismus* (Stuttgart 1987) 328, and Dillon, in Reydam-Schils, *Plato’s Timaeus* 87–89, reached the same conclusion.

<sup>16</sup> These are quoted and translated by Dörrie, *Die geschichtlichen Wurzeln* 102–108.

<sup>17</sup> This discussion revolved around *Ti.* 20D, where Critias says ἀκουε δὴ, ὦ Σώκρατες, λόγου μάλα μὲν ἀτόπου παντάπασί γε μὴν ἀληθοῦς.

<sup>18</sup> Procl. *In Ti.* I 76.

<sup>19</sup> οἱ δὲ περὶ Κράντορα τοῦ Πλάτωνος ἐξηγηταί (Procl. *In Ti.* I 277).

<sup>20</sup> Procl. *In Ti.* I 277. See also Dörrie’s important comments on this passage, *Die geschichtlichen Wurzeln* 331–332.

<sup>21</sup> Plut. *An.Procr.* 1012D, 1013A.

this evidence suggests that the lively discussion of key-passages in the *Timaeus* attested by Aristotle continued to flourish later on as well. Prominent Platonists participated in it, often setting out their interpretation in the context of other views.<sup>22</sup> It is precisely in this spirit that Plutarch was asked by a friend “to write something about [the subjects] in the *Timaeus* which require more careful elucidation” (ἐπιμελεστέρας ἐξηγήσεως, *An. Tranq.* 464E). Proclus, too, who collected these materials in the fifth century, tended to describe the hermeneutic efforts of his predecessors as “exegesis.”<sup>23</sup>

Peripatetics similarly participated in the discussion of Plato’s works. It is striking that the *Timaeus* does not seem to have provoked controversy, but rather hermeneutic efforts in the same spirit as those of Plato’s direct successors. Already Theophrastus relied on the *Timaeus* in his refutation of Stoic theories of recurrent creations and destructions of the cosmos. He refers to what “Plato says in the *Timaeus*,” paraphrasing the myth of Atlantis.<sup>24</sup> He assumes the literal sense of the myth to be historically true, thus sharing Crantor’s position on the issue. Clearchus of Soli moreover wrote an encomium on Plato as well as a “treatise concerning the things expounded so learnedly in Plato’s *Republic*” (fr.2–3 Wehrli). Plutarch mentions him as an interpreter of the mathematics in the *Timaeus* who followed Crantor (*An.Procr.* 1022C).

Strato of Lampsacus, Theophrastus’ successor as head of the Peripatetic school, is of particular interest in this context. To explain his notion of the soul he quoted a passage from Plato’s *Phaedo* rather than one of Aristotle’s treatises. He also discussed

<sup>22</sup> Also Eudorus, mentioned by Plutarch at *An.Procr.* 1013B.

<sup>23</sup> As mentioned above, Proclus identified Crantor as the “first exegete” (*In Ti.* I 76). Proclus’ terminology requires further study in the context of his entire work. It is surprising, for example, that he applies the term “exegete” neither to Porphyry, whom he identifies as “the philosopher,” nor to Iamblichus whom he regularly calls “the divine.” We must also take into account the possibility that Proclus used terminology reflecting his own time, attributing it somewhat anachronistically to figures living much earlier, thus editing and modernizing the traditions he received.

<sup>24</sup> In *Philo Aet.* 141, paraphrasing *Ti.* 25D; the Stoic argument Theophrastus rejects is quoted at 117–123.



*Ti.* 37D in a highly sympathetic manner.<sup>25</sup> According to Proclus, Strato moreover suggested in his book *On Being* that being is the cause of permanency. Strato seems to have made these statements in the context of reading the *Timaeus*. Proclus, at any rate, collected his views in connection with *Ti.* 37D. While Proclus disagreed with this interpretation, he treated it as any other piece of exegesis forwarded by a student of Plato.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, “Adrastus the Peripatetic” is mentioned as having expounded astronomic, geometric, and musical passages of the *Timaeus* ἐν τοῖς Εἰς τὸν Τίμαιον.<sup>27</sup> Various parts of the *Timaeus* thus drew attention from different quarters. The book did not define boundaries between Platonists and Peripatetics, both of whom agreed that the world was not literally created. While students of Plato would express this by holding that Plato had talked about creation in a metaphorical sense, students of Aristotle explicitly stated that the world is uncreated and therefore indestructible. Fundamental disputes over the nature of the soul, for example, focused instead on the earlier Platonic dialogues where more extreme views were expounded.<sup>28</sup>

A fragment found in Philo of Alexandria confirms this picture of syncretistic harmony around the *Timaeus*; it is quoted in support of the Aristotelian phrase that the cosmos is indestructible and therefore also uncreated:<sup>29</sup>

Testimony is [to be found] also in the words of the *Timaeus* concerning the fact that the cosmos is free from sickness and will not be destroyed: “The composition of the cosmos has taken up the whole of each of the four elements, for the framer put it together

<sup>25</sup> Fr.122–127 Wehrli, with commentary pp.75–76 and 105–106.

<sup>26</sup> Proc. *In Ti.* III 15–16.

<sup>27</sup> Porph. *In Ptol. Harm.* 5 (p.96 Düring), quoted by Baltes, *Platonismus* 50 with comments at 214.

<sup>28</sup> On Plato’s more compromising position in the *Timaeus*, see T. Johansen, “Body, Soul, and Tripartition in Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 19 (2000) 87–111.

<sup>29</sup> *Aet.* 25–57. For detailed arguments in support of identifying this passage as a fragment from a Peripatetic source, see M. R. Niehoff, “Philo’s Contribution to Contemporary Alexandrian Metaphysics,” in D. Brakke et al. (eds.), *Beyond Reception: Mutual Influence between Antique Religion, Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Frankfurt 2006) 35–55, at 44–45.

out of all the fire and water and air and earth, leaving no part or power of any outside. This was his purpose: first that it might be as much as possible a Living Creature, perfect and whole, with all its parts perfect; ... furthermore, that it might be free from age and sickness" [32C–33A]. Take this as evidence from Plato for the indestructibility of the cosmos; that it is uncreated deduce from natural consequence. For dissolution follows from *genesis*, whereas indestructibility [follows] from the lack of *genesis*.

The author of the fragment clearly uses Aristotelian language, arguing that the cosmos is uncreated and therefore indestructible. His proof-text, however, is not taken from the founder of his own school, but from Plato. He has chosen a passage from the *Timaeus* that indeed shows that Plato thought of the cosmos as existing forever, since it is subject neither to disease nor to aging. At the same time, however, our interpreter is highly conscious that Plato himself did not represent the cosmos as uncreated. Yet this follows, he insists, *παρὰ τῆς φυσικῆς ἀκολουθίας* ("from natural consequence"). He thus suggests that Plato, who explicitly spoke about the indestructibility of the cosmos, must have implied its lack of creation.

This remarkable fragment confirms our view of a high degree of syncretism. The *Timaeus* was not only read by Plato's direct followers, but was respected also among Peripatetics. Both schools invoked it, interpreting it in basically the same vein. In particular, Platonists and Peripatetics agreed that Plato had not meant his creation account literally, but used it merely for purposes of instruction. In the centuries before the Common Era no textual community emerged around the *Timaeus*: no particular group grounded its identity on a particular interpretation of this text, constructing divergent readings as belonging to a complete Other, who falsifies the truth.

*Stage 2: Philo and Plutarch read the Timaeus as an authoritative text*

A new stage is ushered in by Philo of Alexandria. His precise contribution to the emergence of Platonism has perhaps not yet been noticed because he was primarily concerned to create a community of Jewish readers around the Hebrew Scriptures, to which he referred as "holy books" or "holy writings."<sup>30</sup> It has

<sup>30</sup> αἱ ἱερὰ βιβλῶν (e.g. *Conf.* 3); αἱ ἱερὰ γράφαί (e.g. *Opif.* 77); for a fine

thus been overlooked that he is in fact the first writer to refer to the *Timaeus* in terms which Boys-Stones in an important book identified as characteristic of the emergence of Platonism.<sup>31</sup> Philo indeed read Plato's text as authoritative and true, dismissing other readings as falsifications.<sup>32</sup> He thus laid the foundation for subsequent reading strategies, among both pagans and Christians, and, ultimately, also for the emergence of a new sense of community around the *Timaeus* in the second century CE.

For Philo, the priority of the Pentateuch was a given. He argued that Moses "in the holy books" expressed the idea of creation "long before" Hesiod and Plato (*Aet.* 19, μακροῖς δὲ χρόνοις πρότερον). He moreover suggested that many Greek writers had copied ideas from the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>33</sup> This temporal priority implied also superior value. In Philo's view, the Torah had a unique standing as reflecting unblemished truth.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, however, the *Timaeus* and, more generally, Plato's writings were raised to a status of hitherto unknown authority. Plato is mentioned as "one of the ancients," and is the only non-Jewish writer in this category whose work is directly quoted. While Philo generally recommended "feeding on ancient and primeval thoughts and pursuing the ancient

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discussion of the Hellenistic Egyptian background of these terms and their innovative theological significance in Philo's writings, see H. Burkhardt, *Die Inspiration heiliger Schriften bei Philo von Alexandrien* (Giessen 1988) 79–91; see also the recent exchange by F. Siegert and J. Herzer, in R. Deines and K.-W. Niebuhr (eds.), *Philo und das Neue Testament* (Tübingen 2004) 205–240; D. T. Runia, "Was Philo a Middle-Platonist?" *StudPhilon* 5 (1993) 112–140, at 126–129.

<sup>31</sup> G. R. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford 2001), esp. 102–103.

<sup>32</sup> Boys-Stones identified Plutarch and especially Celsus as the first representatives of Platonism (*Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* 99–150), while appreciating Philo as a harbinger, who adopted the Stoic view of ancient wisdom but did not yet apply it to Plato's writings (90–95).

<sup>33</sup> For details see Niehoff, *Philo* 138–142; Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* 92.

<sup>34</sup> Niehoff, *Philo* 187–209; *eadem*, "Philo's View of Paganism," in G. N. Stanton and G. G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge 1998) 135–158.

tradition of noble deeds,”<sup>35</sup> he distinguished Plato’s texts. Close paraphrases from the *Timaeus* and the *Theaetetus* are introduced by the phrase ὅπερ καὶ τῶν ἀρχαίων εἶπε τις.<sup>36</sup> On other occasions Philo refers to Platonic texts simply as ὡς εἶπε Πλάτων or ὡς ἔφη τις.<sup>37</sup> Not even Homer, who is frequently paraphrased or quoted by Philo, is called “one of the ancients,” but is instead identified as the most pre-eminent of the poets (*Abr.* 10). While Philo uses many Homeric expressions as winged words or known sayings, it is to Plato that he turns as a source of ancient truth which corroborates the Hebrew Scriptures.

Most strikingly, Philo once introduces a quotation from the *Phaedrus* as κατὰ τὸν ἱερώτατον Πλάτωνα (*Prob.* 13). This is in the context of a treatise which altogether lacks biblical exegesis and probably addressed a wider audience, including general Greek readers.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, in a treatise on Mosaic law, clearly intended for members of the Jewish community in Alexandria, Philo introduces the same line from the *Phaedrus* by the more modest ὡς ἔφη τις (*Spec. Leg.* 2.249). While Philo thus always attributes exceptional importance to Platonic texts, he refers to Plato in terms otherwise reserved for Moses, when addressing a non-Jewish audience. Philo calls Moses seventeen times “most holy,” often with the phrase κατὰ τὸν ἱερώτατον Μωυσέα.<sup>39</sup> It is moreover significant that the description of Moses as “most holy” always appears in connection with specific scriptural verses. This epithet stresses the truth and authority of the Torah authored by him. Sometimes the term is

<sup>35</sup> *Sacrif.* 78, καὶ τὸ παλαιαῖς καὶ ὠγυγίοις ἐντρέφεσθαι δόξαις καὶ ἀρχαίαν ἀκοὴν ἔργων καλῶν μεταδίδωκειν. Cf. *Sacrif.* 101, *Her.* 283, *Mos.* 1.3.

<sup>36</sup> *Opif.* 21, cf. *Her.* 181.

<sup>37</sup> *Opif.* 119, 133; *Spec. Leg.* 2.249.

<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, Philo’s works are still discussed more in terms of their internal chronology rather than their possible audience, which seems to be the main factor determining their divergent nature. On the *status questionis* on *Quod Omnis Probus Liber* and *De Aeternitate Mundi*, see J. Morris, “The Jewish Philosopher Philo,” in G. Vermes et al., *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ III* (Edinburgh 1987) 856, 858–859; on the audience of *De Aeternitate Mundi* and other general philosophical treatises, see Niehoff, in Brakke et al., *Beyond Reception* 53–55.

<sup>39</sup> *Gig.* 67, *Agr.* 85, *Plant.* 86, *Migr.* 131, *Mut.* 30 and 189.

used in reaction to more critical colleagues, who found fault with the text or the contents of Scripture.<sup>40</sup> Philo rejected such approaches, emphasizing the holiness of its author, whose writings were in his view beyond reproach. Attributing holiness to Plato has the same effect. Philo thus wishes to establish the authority of a specific quotation from his works. Describing Plato as “most holy” in a treatise addressed to a general audience, Philo seems to suggest that this Greek philosopher should be to the pagans what Moses is to the Jews. Plato is thus advocated as someone who wrote a text of similar authority as Moses, conveying basically the same ideas as the Jewish Scriptures.

In another treatise addressed to a general audience, Philo further establishes the authority of the *Timaeus*: he discusses for the first time Greek philosophy in terms of its faithfulness to Plato. Metaphorical interpretations of the *Timaeus* are harshly dismissed as corruptions of Plato’s thought, while Aristotle is praised as a trustworthy witness to Plato’s original message. Those departing from the master receive the following review:

Some, falsifying [the text],<sup>41</sup> think that the cosmos according to Plato is said to be created, but not on this account to have a beginning of creation, but if it were created thus, it would not have come together in any other way than the one described; or else [that Plato spoke thus] because the parts are observed to be in a process of becoming and change (*Aet.* 14).

Philo, like Cicero, read the *Timaeus* literally. The latter, however, simply stated that “Plato’s god in the *Timaeus* created the world,” distinguishing this approach from Aristotle according to whom things “have always existed.”<sup>42</sup> It is striking that Cicero did not philosophically assess these different views. While assuming a literal meaning, he did not discuss the tradition of metaphorical interpretations. Plato and Aristotle, in his

<sup>40</sup> *Immut.* 140, *Agr.* 85, *Cher.* 45.

<sup>41</sup> σοφίζόμενοι; Philo used this verb only five times in his extant writings, giving it an even stronger negative connotation than it usually conveys, namely that of fraud and dishonesty (see esp. *All.* 3.64, *Det.* 164, *Mut.* 240).

<sup>42</sup> in *Timaeo mundum aedificavit Platonis deus* (*Tusc.* 1.63); *si haec nata sunt, ut Platoni videtur, vel, si semper fuerunt, ut Aristoteli placet* (1.70).

eyes, presented different, yet equally legitimate approaches.

Philo clearly took a different route. He is the first writer who expresses a fundamental belief in the authority of Plato, assuming that his account is true and all deviations must necessarily be false. In the passage quoted above he rejects two versions of the metaphorical reading of the *Timaeus*. Such readings, he stresses, cannot be true, because they militate against the wording of the text where Plato often speaks of god as creator and father (*Aet.* 15). Readers who ignore this fact “falsify” the *Timaeus*. This judgement is remarkably harsh as it assumes that thinkers with different views have malicious intentions. Philo’s position is extraordinary and requires an explanation. Is it possible that he defends the authority and truth value of the *Timaeus* so vehemently because it corroborates the biblical creation account? In other words, was his concern for Plato’s creation story derivative and connected to his primary concern for the Hebrew Scriptures? This is supported by the fact that he stressed the correlation between the biblical and Platonic accounts.<sup>43</sup> He moreover made considerable efforts to convince his Jewish readers of the creation of the world in its literal sense, thus opposing the influence of metaphorical interpretations similar to those proposed for the *Timaeus* (*Opif.* 9–22).

Yet Philo’s emphasis on Plato’s authority goes beyond an apologetic concern for the Hebrew Scriptures. In a way, it is the other way round: rather than enhancing Plato’s authority in order to safeguard the contents of Scripture, Philo extends the authority of Scripture to Plato’s works. Writing for an audience consisting mostly of non-Jews, he suggests that the *Timaeus* should receive the same reverence that the Torah enjoys among Jews. Philo’s exceptional praise of Aristotle as a faithful student of Plato further illuminates his position (*Aet.* 16):

Aristotle testifies to these things concerning Plato—[Aristotle] who, on account of his reverence for philosophy, would never have falsified anything and therefore nobody is more reliable to

<sup>43</sup> *Aet.* 19; cf. D. T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden 1986); *On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses* (Leiden 2001) esp. 121–123; “Plato’s *Timaeus*, First Principle(s), and Creation in Philo and Early Christian Thought,” in Reydam-Schils, *Plato’s Timaeus* 133–151.

give witness than the student for the teacher and especially this [student] who did not with frivolous carelessness treat *paedeia* as a minor business, but was eager to surpass the discoveries of the ancients and, breaking new ground, discovered some of the most cogent insights for each part of philosophy.

This passage has sometimes been taken as a more or less direct echo of Aristotle's lost dialogue *De philosophia*. B. Effe was optimistic to the extent that he thought to have recovered a fragment from the lost Aristotelian text.<sup>44</sup> More cautiously, Baltes argued that Philo probably relied on a Peripatetic source praising Aristotle for his character and innovations, while also reflecting the master's lost treatise on philosophy.<sup>45</sup> On this reconstruction, Philo was part of the spirit of his time in stressing Aristotle's literal reading of the *Timaeus* and praising him for his faithfulness to Plato's original message. These interpretations, however, are highly problematic and overlook Philo's significant innovation. First, the text itself has to be appreciated. It seems obvious that the enthusiastic praise for Aristotle can only have been expressed by someone looking back to the master. This passage can thus not be a fragment from Aristotle's lost work. Moreover, the nature of the praise is highly exceptional not only within the Philonic corpus. In fact, I know of no parallel in any of the extant Peripatetic writings. The far more modest designation γνησιώτατος μαθητής was common among Aristotle's followers.<sup>46</sup> It is therefore hard to see what Philo's source could have been. Instead of viewing this eulogy as a quite accidental copy of an earlier writing, we should rather recognize its active role in its present context. It is Philo who lavished extraordinary praise on Aristotle precisely because he took him to have understood Plato correctly. Aristotle emerges in Philo's narrative as a faithful student of his teacher, who preserved the true account without falsifying it. Anticipating subsequent Platonists, Philo has thus written an account

<sup>44</sup> B. Effe, *Studien zur Kosmologie und Theologie der Aristotelischen Schrift "Über die Philosophie"* (Munich 1970) 22.

<sup>45</sup> Baltes, *Weltentstehung* I 33–35.

<sup>46</sup> Demetrius Phal. fr.195 Wehrli. Virtually the same expression is also used by Diogenes Laertius in his introduction to the Peripatos (5.1).

of Greek philosophy which takes Plato as the starting point against which other views are measured.<sup>47</sup>

Philo's achievement is remarkable. He must be identified as the first Platonist, invoking Plato's texts, especially the *Timaeus*, as a source of ancient truth. Extending the notion of Scripture to Plato's writings, Philo treats them—and only them—as works of similarly sacrosanct authority. It is in treatises addressing a wider Greek audience that he explicitly speaks of Plato as “most holy” and discusses subsequent philosophy in terms of its faithfulness to the *Timaeus*. A complex picture thus emerges. While Philo's primary community consisted of Alexandrian Jews, who defined themselves by reading and observing the Torah,<sup>48</sup> he advocated Plato's texts as a source of ancient authority. Jews were encouraged to accept Plato as a writer expressing the same truth as Scripture, while pagans were invited to acknowledge the sacrosanct authority of his texts.

Was there a pagan Greek audience who accepted Philo's suggestion and began to treat Plato as sacrosanct? While Philo's popularity among Christians is well known, it is not clear whether he was read by pagans before Christianity became a significant factor.<sup>49</sup> Only two second-century writers speak, like him, of Plato as “most holy”: Lucian and Athenaeus. They do so in overtly banal contexts, the former simply as a way of distinguishing him from other philosophers when recounting his age, the latter in the context of a discussion on numbers.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> For Plutarch, Atticus, and Numenius, this position has been clearly shown by Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* 125–139.

<sup>48</sup> Law observance was an obvious marker of this community (*Migr.* 89–93). Philo moreover stresses that the Jews acknowledged God as Maker and Father through their “sacred laws and unwritten customs” (*Leg.* 116). It was thus the Torah which guided them rather than the *Timaeus*.

<sup>49</sup> See the discussions of Runia and Hilhorst concerning Heliodorus as the only relevant, yet questionable example: D. T. Runia, “How to Search Philo,” *StudPhilon* 2 (1990) 106–139, at 135–136; A. Hilhorst, “Was Philo Read by Pagans?” *StudPhilon* 4 (1992) 75–77. Celsus, on the other hand, was probably familiar with Philo, as he mentions allegorisations of Scripture by Jews (Origen *c. Cels.* 4.38).

<sup>50</sup> Lucian *Macr.* 21.2, Ath. 670F.



Philo's approach therefore does not seem to have been very successful among Greek readers.

Nevertheless, a phenomenological continuity of Philo's thought is visible in Plutarch's works.<sup>51</sup> Like Philo, he read the *Timaeus* literally, harshly dismissing metaphorical interpretations. Plutarch's polemics attribute the same truth value to Plato's works as Philo had advocated. Focusing on the *Timaeus*, Plutarch complained that Crantor and Xenocrates "entirely missed Plato's opinion" (*An.Procr.* 1013B). These and other metaphorical interpreters are even said to be "forming plots and forcing and twisting everything" (1013E). Their failure to understand renders them oblivious to "the true opinion" (τῆς ἀληθοῦς δόξης, 1013F). Plutarch positions himself in opposition to "most of the Platonists," claiming to reconstruct Plato's authentic message (1012B). The *Timaeus* in its literal sense is treated as an ancient source of truth, while any deviation from it automatically qualifies as a mistake or lie.

Moreover, the spirit of Philo's approach is reflected in Plutarch's discussion of central Platonic passages and their earlier interpretations. Commentary activity begins to emerge. While not yet systematically expounding the text, Plutarch quotes more extensively than his predecessors, providing detailed interpretations and referring to earlier exegetes. He proceeds thematically, devoting a separate "treatise" (ἀναγραφὴ) to the origin of the soul (1012B), and another, no longer extant "treatise" (λόγος) to the generation of the cosmos (1013E). Furthermore, he developed "Platonic Questions," five of them dealing with the *Timaeus*. Plutarch thus testifies that by the end of the first or the beginning of the second century Plato's works, especially the *Timaeus*, were established as authoritative texts conveying a philosophical truth, which was faithfully transmitted by part of the Greek tradition.

<sup>51</sup> See also Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* 106–113, discussing the significance of Plutarch for the emergence of Platonism in terms of his adoption of a Stoic approach to mythology. While the evidence in this respect is very impressive and helpful, an examination of Plutarch's attitude to Plato himself is still warranted.

*Stage 3: Celsus and Porphyry read the Timaeus as a marker of their pagan identity vis-à-vis Christianity*

A new development took place in the second half of the second century, when Christianity became a visible factor and saw itself as a philosophical religion based on the best of ancient traditions.<sup>52</sup> Celsus is our central witness. His interpretations of the *Timaeus* appear in the context of his famous refutation of Christianity. At stake is membership in the new religion. Aware of Christian interpretations, Celsus defended what he considered to be the original meaning of the *Timaeus*, and more generally of Plato's works, thus seeking to preserve pagan society with its particular form of worship. His reading of Platonic texts defined boundaries between "us" Greeks and the Christian Other.

Origen provides us with an important insight into Celsus' attitude:<sup>53</sup>

Celsus has quoted several passages especially from Plato, comparing them to passages from the Holy Writings which can capture even a learned person, saying that "among the Greeks these [ideas] have been better expressed and without effort and [without a claim] of a proclamation as if from god or son of god."

Celsus is presented here as favouring Plato's texts, from which he likes to quote. He juxtaposes them to the "Holy Writings" of the Christians, stressing their superiority. As Boys-Stones remarked, Celsus clearly believed in the authority and centrality of Plato's texts.<sup>54</sup> Most striking, however, and novel is the fact that Celsus for the first time connects Plato's writings to the notion of "the Greeks." He interprets the Platonic corpus as an expression of the Greek ethos in contrast to Christianity. Celsus constructed a textual community centered on a particular approach to a specific corpus of texts. He claimed superiority of

<sup>52</sup> On Christian strategies of self-definition and exegesis, see G. G. Stroumsa, "The Christian Hermeneutical Revolution and its Double Helix," in L. V. Rutgers et. al. (eds.), *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World* (Leuven 1998) 9–28.

<sup>53</sup> *C.Cels.* 6.1 (ed. Marcovic, translations Chadwick with emendations); cf. 6.8.

<sup>54</sup> Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* 105–119.

“our” textual tradition over its Christian equivalent. The atmosphere is clearly one of competition, each community defending the value of its textual heritage and status within society at large.

It is significant that Celsus dismisses Christian interpretations as “corrupting” and “misunderstanding Plato.”<sup>55</sup> Similar formulations appeared already in Philo’s and Plutarch’s writings, yet in Celsus’ mouth they acquire a new social meaning. It is obvious that Celsus denies the legitimacy of Christian readings, which are anchored in a specific group. In his view, they simply misconstrue Plato’s original intent. It is implied that the truth conveyed by Plato’s texts has been preserved only by the community of pagan Greeks. Proper interpretation emerges as a marker of “the Greeks,” while the Christian Other is characterized by false readings and manipulations of the texts.

The social significance of Celsus’ position becomes clear when we consider the strikingly similar perspective of an anonymous Hellenistic Jew.<sup>56</sup> That Jew, quoted by Celsus, confronted the Christians with the following charges (2.4):

Why do you on the one hand trace your origins to our holy things, and then in the course of time dishonour them, while on the other hand you cannot claim any other origin for your teaching than our law?<sup>57</sup>

Celsus’ Jew moreover dismissed a particular Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible: “Thousands will refute Jesus by asserting that the prophecies which were applied to him were actually spoken of themselves” (1.57).<sup>58</sup> These statements construct

<sup>55</sup> παραφθείρουσιν (7.61) and παρακούσαντες τοῦ Πλάτωνος (6.7).

<sup>56</sup> On Celsus’ Jewish sources, see H. Bietenhard, *Caesarea, Origenes und die Juden* (Stuttgart 1974) 42–47; R. L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven 1984) 112–117. Cf. *c.Cels.* 1.45 where Celsus recalls a “discussion with some Jews, who were alleged to be wise, when many people were present to judge what was said.”

<sup>57</sup> ἢ πῶς ἄρχεσθε μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν ἡμετέρων ἱερῶν, προϊόντες δὲ αὐτὰ ἀτιμάζετε, οὐκ ἔχοντες ἄλλην ἀρχὴν εἰπεῖν τοῦ δόγματος ἢ τὸν ἡμέτερον νόμον.

<sup>58</sup> τινὲς δὲ καὶ ἐλέγξουσιν ... μυριοὶ τὸν Ἰησοῦν φάσκοντες περὶ ἑαυτῶν ταῦτα εἰρησθαι ἅπερ περὶ ἐκείνου ἐπροφητεύετο. See also the rhetorical question that begins this passage.

clear boundaries between two communities. As far as Celsus' Jew is concerned, anyone who accepts the holy things and Mosaic Law belongs to "us," while those who trace their origin to Jewish traditions but in reality misread them follow Jesus. The anonymous Jewish author and Celsus express the same sense of frustration with the appropriation of their tradition by Christian readers.<sup>59</sup> Both complain that their texts have been recruited for objectives alien to their original intent. Both wish to recover the texts' authentic meaning, insisting on their own community's separate and superior status.

While the Torah had defined Jewish identity for many Jews already before this time,<sup>60</sup> Celsus was constructing a new textual community. Greek identity had thus far focused rather on Homer's epics and the tradition of their interpretation. Many scholiasts attributed to Homer a distinct philhellenism, thus supporting their own sense of national pride.<sup>61</sup> Celsus, setting out on a new task, defined the community of "the Greeks" by reference to the Platonic corpus.

There may be a distinctly Alexandrian background to this new connection between Greek identity and Plato's authority which had been recognized before. In a way, Celsus seems to have read Philo and accepted his suggestion to the pagans. While he does not call Plato "most holy," as Philo had advocated, he presents certain interpretations of Plato's texts as authoritative for "the Greeks," thus grounding their identity in this particular textual tradition. Furthermore, Celsus' position may have to do with the fact that another Alexandrian, known for his love of Philo, had claimed Plato for the new religion. Clement of Alexandria thus praised Plato as a "fellow worker"

<sup>59</sup> Celsus agreed with the Jewish critique, as we can gather from his paraphrase of it at 5.33; see also his rejection of the allegorisation of the Hebrew Bible at 4.49–50.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, the role of the Torah in Philo's construction of Jewish identity: Niehoff, *Philo* 187–209.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. schol. *Il.* 1.1, 2 (I 3, 7 Erbse); cf. M. Schmidt, *Die Erklärungen zum Weltbild Homers und zur Kultur der Heroenzeit in den bT-Scholien zur Ilias* (Munich 1976) 56–57, and "The Homer of the 'Scholia': What is Explained to the Reader?" in F. Montanari (ed.), *Omero tremila anni dopo* (Rome 2002) 159–183, at 172–173.

in the search for God (*Protr.* 6.68, συνεργόν). Homer, on the other hand, was rejected as walking on “slippery and harmful deviations from the truth” (2.27, ὀλισθηραί τε καὶ ἐπιβλαβεῖς παρεκβάσεις τῆς ἀληθείας). Homer could only with difficulty be integrated into Christian dogma even though his epics remained a major textbook for every Christian child. Plato, by contrast, was chosen as spiritually congenial. His philosophy was considered as a *preparatio evangelica* leading to Christian monotheism. Seen against this background, Celsus’ position acquires new significance. He countered Christian claims, such as those voiced by Clement, when stressing that Plato belonged to pagan Greek readers. Dismissing Christian appropriations of Platonic texts as falsifications, Celsus undermines their claims to the Classical heritage.

In this conflict of identities the *Timaeus* played a special role. Celsus several times quotes passages from this text, expounding their authentic meaning in contrast to Christian claims. *Ti.* 28C is discussed at particular length (7.42):

Then after these things he [Celsus] refers us to Plato as the most effective teacher of problems of theology, quoting his words from the *Timaeus* as follows: “Now to find the Maker and Father of this universe is difficult and having found him it is impossible to declare him to everybody” [*Ti.* 28C]. Then he [Celsus] adds to these words, saying: See how the path of truth is sought by seers and philosophers and how Plato knew that it is “impossible” for all men to travel it. And because of this it has been discovered by wise men, so that we may receive some notion of the nameless and first [being]—a notion which manifests him either by synthesis with other things or by analytical distinction from them or by analogy. I would like to teach that which is otherwise indescribable, but I would be amazed if you were able to follow, as you are completely bound to the flesh and see nothing pure.

Celsus here addresses Christians incapable of properly understanding the *Timaeus*, because they are too much “bound to the flesh and see nothing pure.” One of the Christians Celsus may have had in mind is Clement, who quoted precisely the same passage from the *Timaeus* in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*. Clement used *Ti.* 28C to show that among all the Greek writers Plato was most congenial to the Christian message (*Protr.* 6.68). In his

view, Plato realized the difficulty of knowing God and declared “the only true God to be God.” Clement implies that Plato already anticipated Christian monotheism, referring to the true God rather than to an idol. In his hands Plato thus became a proto-Christian, who left polytheism behind. This appropriation of the *Timaeus* by a Christian reader is remarkably similar to certain Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. Identifying particular verses as hints at their dogma, Christian interpreters claimed these texts for themselves, rejecting the original form of worship that had been intimately associated with them. Pagan and Jewish texts were thus domesticated within the Christian community, while pagan and Jewish readers were confronted with the alternative of either joining the new group or else being dismissed as anachronistic.

Celsus counters the Christian strategy by presenting a distinctly Greek reading of the *Timaeus*. His rather cynical remark about Christian readers being too bound up in the flesh and seeing nothing pure may be an inversion of their own claims to spirituality and purity.<sup>62</sup> He may also have hinted at the fact that everywhere Christians see Jesus, the god having become flesh, thus closing their eyes to the original meaning of the texts.<sup>63</sup> Opposing such interpretations, Celsus reads the passage from the *Timaeus* with an emphasis on values which he considers to be specifically Greek. First, he stresses the elitist character of philosophical learning. Plato knew that only seers and philosophers are capable of apprehending god, while “it is ‘impossible’ for everybody to travel” this path. Throughout his refutation of Christianity Celsus contrasts “our” elitism to the approach of the new religion, which appeals to the uneducated masses and relies on silly books.<sup>64</sup> *Ti.* 28C is thus used as a proof-text for the characteristic structure of pagan society and learning, which are now challenged by Christianity.

<sup>62</sup> This is the way Origen understood Celsus: 7.45.

<sup>63</sup> See Celsus’ critical remarks on the Christian doctrine of Jesus as a god who descended to the world and became flesh: 4.14–18.

<sup>64</sup> Esp. 1.27, 3.44, 3.55, 3.69, 3.75, 4.73, 6.15, 7.61; regarding the N.T., see esp. 6.1–2. Celsus equally exposes the weakness of the Hebrew Bible as a text acknowledged by Christians (esp. 4.30–47).

Celsus also applies to *Ti.* 28C notions derived from pagan Middle Platonism. He translates Plato's concrete reference to "the Maker and Father of this universe" into the distinctly more transcendental notion of "the nameless and first [being]." This rendition removes the text from Christian identifications of the Maker and Father as Jesus' father. Furthermore, Celsus' insistence on an entirely abstract notion of the Divine parallels formulations in Albinus' *Epitome*. This Platonist, who flourished around 150 in Smyrna, is known for his tendency to introduce Aristotelian principles into Platonism. Adopting Aristotle's description of god as the unmoved mover, Albinus paid particular attention to the transcendental nature of the first god. He also outlined various epistemological methods that may assist man to overcome the resulting gap.<sup>65</sup> Celsus follows the same line of interpretation. He, too, removed the demiurge from the realm of simple human perception and referred to analogy as one of the methods by which wise men may transmit the idea of the nameless, first being. Celsus' interpretation of the *Timaeus* is thus rooted in pagan tradition, which is now used to challenge current Christian interpretations.

Origen's reaction to Celsus confirms our impression that group identity is at stake. While Origen admits that Celsus has quoted a "noble and not despicable" Platonic passage, he urges his readers to recognize the superiority of its Christian interpretation (7.42):

See whether the divine Logos introduces the God-Logos, "who was in the beginning with God" and who became flesh, as more benevolent to humanity, so that the word, about which Plato said that "having found him, it is impossible to declare to all men," might be able to reach all men.

Origen denies that a wise man may, without divine assistance, acquire insight into the true nature of God. Rejecting Celsus' approach, he insists that only the Christian relying on Jesus may know Him. John 14:9 is adduced as a proof that one may perceive the Maker and Father by looking at His image (7.43).

<sup>65</sup> Albinus *Epit.* 10, especially 5–6 (ed. P. Louis); see also R. E. Witt, *Albinus and the History of Middle Platonism* (Cambridge 1937) 115–126.

This image, of course, is the figure of Jesus. It is only through him, Origen continues, that true knowledge about God can be transmitted to the benefit of humanity. Christian knowledge and love of mankind are contrasted to the pagans' limited insight and snobbish elitism. Origen triumphantly concludes that pagans "pride themselves on having known God and learnt the divine truths from philosophy," while in reality they, "like the most vulgar, keep on with the images and their temples and the mysteries which are a matter of common gossip" (7.44). Celsus' interpretation of the *Timaeus* is thus dismissed as an example of the general failure of paganism. Their interpretations are not only informed by the wrong spirit, but also lead to the wrong form of worship. Insisting that polytheism has become "a matter of common gossip," Origen insinuates that pagans, such as Celsus, belong to a miserable group that is generally rejected. Their way is no longer attractive, but repelling. This rhetoric reflects Origen's confidence in the ultimate victory of Christianity over the Classical pagan world. Writing in the third century, the Church seemed to him already on an invincible path of ascendancy.

Celsus' interpretation of creation is important in our context, because it indicates his position in the ancient debate whether Plato had meant the *Timaeus* literally. Celsus emerges as a metaphorical interpreter, holding the view that the cosmos is "uncreated and indestructible."<sup>66</sup> He insists in the spirit of Aristotle that "nothing produced by matter is immortal" (4.61). Celsus apparently adopted the syncretistic interpretation of the *Timaeus*, which had been rejected by Philo and Plutarch. Like Eudorus, Albinus, and Taurus, he was convinced that the cosmos, being indestructible, cannot have been literally created, since creation inherently also implies disintegration. At the same time, however, Celsus moved beyond earlier pagan Platonists by addressing also the biblical account of creation. He dismissed it in no uncertain terms as "most foolish."<sup>67</sup> The Philonic and Christian synthesis between Scripture and the *Timaeus* was rejected. A deep dichotomy instead emerged be-

<sup>66</sup> ἀγενήτου ὄντος τοῦ κόσμου καὶ ἀφθάρτου (4.79).

<sup>67</sup> ἔτι γε μὴν καὶ ἡ κοσμογένεια μάλα εὐηθική (6.49).



tween pagan and Christian Platonism.

Origen's reaction to Celsus once more confirms our impression of a "parting of the ways." He identifies Celsus' position not only as inconsistent, but as typically pagan and opposed to the spirit of Christianity (4.61). Origen insists that the idea of a literal creation intrinsically resonates with the Christian world-view (4.79). The metaphorical reading of the *Timaeus* has thus been relegated to the pagan Other, while its literal reading, which had also originated in paganism, is now claimed exclusively for the Christian religion. Following Celsus, pagan writers seem to have accepted the idea of a fundamental dichotomy on the issue of creation. No pagan after him is known to have advocated the literal meaning of the *Timaeus*.<sup>68</sup> The tradition of Philo, Plutarch, and Atticus was discontinued, while a distinctly Greek community was constructed around the metaphorical reading of the *Timaeus*. It is thus not surprising that Sallustius, close friend of Julian and master-mind of the emperor's effort to restore the old cults, raised the notion of an eternal cosmos to the level of a pagan dogma.<sup>69</sup>

Porphyry in the late third century marks another milestone. His person is of particular interest, because he combines several important activities: exegesis of the *Timaeus*, anti-Christian writings, and Homeric criticism. A student of Longinus, Porphyry was well versed in text-critical approaches to Homer's epics, which had been so influential in shaping earlier Greek identity.<sup>70</sup> He also became a particularly outspoken opponent of Christianity, composing fifteen books against the new religion

<sup>68</sup> See J. F. Phillips' analysis of interpretations from Taurus to Proclus, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997) 173–197.

<sup>69</sup> G. Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*<sup>2</sup> (New York 1955) 171; Sallustius *About the Gods and the World* 7 (transl. Murray 197–198). Sallustius, however, does not refer to the *Timaeus*, instead speaking in generally Aristotelian terms. The only allusion to the Platonic text may be found in his insistence that the "cosmos exists by the goodness of God." Note that the rabbis took the opposite route, accepting the Christian notion of *creatio ex nihilo*; for details see M. R. Niehoff, "Creatio ex Nihilo Theology in *Genesis Rabbah* in Light of Christian Exegesis," *HThR* 99 (2006) 37–64.

<sup>70</sup> Fragments collected by H. Schrader, *Porphyrii Quaestionum Homericarum* (Leipzig 1880).

exposing the tendentious nature of Christian exegesis.<sup>71</sup> A near contemporary of Origen, he subjected this leading Christian scholar to particularly sharp criticism, suggesting that his reliance on Greek culture, especially on Platonic texts, was nothing but a camouflage for his essentially barbarian ways:<sup>72</sup>

Origen, a Greek educated in Greek learning, drove headlong towards barbarian recklessness. And making straight for this, he marketed himself and his literary skill; and while his manner of life was Christian and contrary to the law, he played the Greek (ἐλληνίζων) with regard to his opinions about worldly affairs and god, subjecting the [traditions] of the Greeks to foreign tales (τὰ Ἑλλήνων τοῖς ὀθνείοις ὑποβαλλόμενος μύθοις). For he always consorted with Plato and was conversant with the writings of Numenius and Cronius, Apollophanes and Longinus and Moderatus, Nicomachus and the distinguished men among the Pythagoreans; he also used the books of Chaeremon the Stoic and Cornutus and having learnt from them the allegorical interpretation of the mysteries [practiced] among the Greeks, he applied this method to the Jewish Scriptures.

Porphyry rejected Origen's literary work, because it was in his view a severe abuse of Classical Greek traditions. Platonic philosophy and Stoic allegory were manipulated to express Christian doctrines, which are fundamentally alien to the original writings. Porphyry significantly stresses the contrast between "a Christian way of life" (κατὰ τὸν βίον Χριστιανῶς ζῶν) and "playing a Greek with regard to worldly affairs and god." It is implied that a proper Greek, by contrast, understands Plato and other Greek texts correctly, while also continuing the pagan way of life. Membership in a particular community and proper interpretation of Classical texts were thus closely linked.

<sup>71</sup> For a critical overview, see A. Meredith, "Porphyry and Julian against the Christians," *ANRW* II.23.2 (1980) 1119–1149. The authenticity of the fragments collected by von Harnack continues to be debated, see recently J. M. Schott's acceptance of von Harnack's controversial fragments, "Porphyry on Christians and Others: 'Barbarian Wisdom', Identity Politics, and Anti-Christian Polemics on the Eve of the Great Persecution," *J ECS* 13 (2005) 277–314, at 282–283. In the present analysis I have only considered fragments explicitly mentioning Porphyry.

<sup>72</sup> Eus. *HE* 6.19.7–8 (transl. Oulton, modified).

Only pagan Greeks were trusted to represent Greek culture. Porphyry's rhetoric is a remarkable inversion of Christian identity. While Origen thought of himself as raising the Hebrew Bible to a more elevated spiritual level by interpreting it in terms of Greek, and especially Platonic philosophy, Porphyry relegates him to the side of the barbarian Other.

Porphyry, moreover, wrote the first running commentary on the *Timaeus*, which Baltes characterized as "undoubtedly the most comprehensive and thorough of its kind at the time." Baltes praised its philological precision and stressed that Porphyry systematically reviewed his predecessors' opinions before providing his own interpretation.<sup>73</sup> Porphyry's treatment of the *Timaeus* is indeed of a new kind. He applies methods of Homeric scholarship more consistently than his predecessors and stresses pagan identity more forcefully. His work can in some respects be compared to that of Didymus, who wrote an extensive commentary on the *Iliad* in Augustan Alexandria. Both scholars critically reviewed earlier interpretations. While Didymus focused on the controversies between Aristarchus and Zenodotus, Porphyry paid particular attention to the differences between Plutarch, Atticus, and Taurus.

Unfortunately, however, Porphyry's commentary is extant only in a highly fragmentary condition. This must be largely due to his vehemently anti-Christian position; his opponents were obviously not inclined to preserve his work. Proclus and Philoponos nevertheless provide some crucial glimpses into Porphyry's epoch-making commentary. Their witness, however, must be approached critically, because one of them is himself Christian, while the other was accepted and transmitted by the Church. It is thus difficult to know, for example, whether Porphyry mentioned divergent Christian interpretations of the *Timaeus*. In the extant fragments he does not, but that may well be the result of selection by later writers.

The fragments, as known from Proclus, indicate that Porphyry saw his commentary activity on the *Timaeus* in the context of a shift from Homer to Plato. He compared the *Timaeus* to the Homeric epics, asserting Plato's philosophical superiority. First,

<sup>73</sup> Baltes, *Weltentstehung* I 161–163.

it is obvious that Porphyry submits the *Timaeus* to a consistent textual analysis in the spirit of Homeric scholarship, often raising an ἀπορία and then providing a λύσις.<sup>74</sup> He moreover argues about minutiae of breathings and explains “Plato out of Plato” (Procl. *In Ti.* I 219 and 94). Following Longinus and the best of the Alexandrian tradition, Porphyry also addresses text-critical issues, asking, for example, whether the preface of the *Timaeus* was an integral part of the original dialogue (I 204, cf. II 300–301). He furthermore formulated a clear view of the relationship between Plato and Homer, suggesting that they complement each other (I 64):

Homer is indeed sufficient to bestow magnitude and elevation to the passions and to stir up actions in an imaginative bulk, but ... he is not capable of delivering an impassivity that is intellectual and activates a philosophical life.

Porphyry defines here a particular role for each author: while Homer is the poet, appealing to human emotions, Plato conveys philosophical truth and trains his readers towards a philosophical life style. Porphyry moreover stresses that “the life of the best state cannot [be imitated] by poets because it transcends their power” (I 66). Plato emerges as philosophically more valuable, but Homer’s epics are not altogether dismissed. This position is highly significant. Porphyry in a way exchanges Homer for Plato, applying to the latter’s texts the same scholarly attention as had hitherto been given to Homer’s epics. A pagan philosopher thus wrote a running commentary on the Platonic account of creation, applying traditional tools of Homeric scholarship, while Christians commented on the Book of Genesis. Each community focused on a particular creation myth, stressing its own ethnic and religious identity.

For Porphyry the *Timaeus* in its metaphorical sense was of sacrosanct authority. Defending the pagan dogma against its contenders from within, he criticizes literal readings as “impious” (I 382):

The followers of Porphyry and Iamblichus rebuke (ἐπιρροαπί-ζουσι) this opinion [of Plutarch and Atticus concerning the

<sup>74</sup> See e.g. Procl. *In Ti.* I 63, 202, 216, 439–440.

literal creation of the cosmos out of preexisting chaos] as placing in wholes the disorderly before the orderly and the unaccomplished before the accomplished, the unintelligent before the intelligent. And [they add that Plutarch and Atticus] were impious (ἀσεβοῦσαν) not only concerning the cosmos, but also concerning the demiurge himself and verily altogether did away with his beneficent will or his productive power.

Porphyry, Iamblichus, and their students obviously assume the ultimate truth value of Plato's *Timaeus*. This text is taken to teach the right attitude towards the gods as well as the correct understanding of the nature of the cosmos. By their own account a literal interpretation was ruled out, because a chronological sequence of creation would imply the temporal priority of chaos and imperfection. Yet the particularly sharp "impious" suggests that more was at stake than just theoretical hermeneutics. It would in fact seem that Plutarch's and Atticus' view was attacked so vehemently precisely because their approach had been adopted by the Church. Eusebius significantly stressed that Atticus' interpretation of the *Timaeus* was correct as it coincides with Scripture (*Praep. Evang.* 15.6.1). Atticus was praised as an example of the congeniality between Christian faith and Platonic philosophy. Aristotle, by contrast, was condemned as always expounding the opposite, and by implication false, view of the world. Against the background of this Christian polemic, Porphyry's and Iamblichus' position acquires new significance. Rejecting earlier pagan views which were now quoted in support of Christianity, they constructed firm boundaries for their pagan community.

Our impression of a textual community being constructed in pagan circles around the *Timaeus* is further confirmed by Porphyry's discussion of pagan religious life. In the fragments of his commentary on the *Timaeus* Porphyry twice comments at length on references to prayer in Plato's text. One example can illustrate the spirit of his explanations (I 208):

Prayer especially pertains to worthy men, because it is union with the divine, and the similar loves to be joined to the similar, the worthy man is most similar to the gods ... and besides as we are like children torn off from our fathers it is fit to pray for our return to our true parents, the gods.

Porphyrus here grounds the Platonic text in contemporary pagan religiosity. In a way he parallels earlier Alexandrian scholiasts, who discussed Homer's description of Athena in the context of rituals known in their own time.<sup>75</sup> Yet Porphyry's explanations acquire new social significance, when we consider their contemporary context. While Christians had claimed the literal interpretation of the *Timaeus* for their community, thus severing the text from its original pagan *Sitz-im-Leben*, Porphyry counters their approach by stressing precisely the religious practices of the pagan community to which the text, in his view, truly belonged.

This outline of the emergence of a textual community around the *Timaeus*, and more generally around Plato's works, is confirmed by two witnesses from the post-Constantinian period. Julian and Proclus made heroic efforts to counter the increasing power of the Church and to preserve authentic pagan traditions. As is well known, in 362 Julian issued a law preventing Christians from instructing school children in the pagan texts.<sup>76</sup> He obviously suspected that they would misrepresent the Classical heritage. Julian moreover assigned a special role to the *Timaeus*, describing it as "our account" of the creation of the world (*c. Gal.* 96c). More explicitly than anyone before him he thus paralleled it to the biblical account embraced by the Christians (49a–b). The *Timaeus* had become the pagan counterpart to the Book of Genesis.

Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*, which obviously cannot be fully investigated in the present article, provides a further piece of evidence in support of our argument. Proclus assembled a vast tradition of pagan exegesis on the *Timaeus* without mentioning even one Christian reader of this text. This is a truly remarkable silence. It can be explained, I think, in light of a parallel phenomenon in rabbinic literature, where Constantine's conversion to Christianity goes unmentioned. This lacuna could suggest a genuine lack of interest in "outside" events. Given the enormous political implications of Constan-

<sup>75</sup> Schol. *Il.* 6.92–93 (II 147 Erbse).

<sup>76</sup> *Cod. Theod.* 13.3.5; cf. G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (London 1978) 83–84.

tine's conversion, however, it is more likely, as some scholars have argued, that rabbinic silence on the topic was a rather conscious posture with respect to the rival religion that had assumed sovereign power. In the same way, it seems, Proclus and other pagan readers of the *Timaeus* turned inwards after the Church established itself. Available pagan traditions were collected and a sense of solidarity reinforced via their own commentary project on the Platonic works.<sup>77</sup>

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