Plato in Bad Company? Plato's *Republic* (588b–589b) in the Nag Hammadi Collection: A Re-Examination of Its Background

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Abstract

The Coptic translation of a passage from Plato's *Republic* (588b–589b) found in the sixth Codex of the Nag Hammadi collection has received very limited academic attention in comparison with other tractates from the same Codex. This paper argues that placing this passage within Clement of Alexandria's polemic with Christian Platonists Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes, may provide a fresh and insightful comment on the use of *Republic*, with its anthropology and ethics among various second-century Christian teachers. This passage allegorizes various passions within the human soul and warns against injustice. According to Clement of Alexandria the subject of justice, or righteousness, was one of the subjects which attracted the attention of Epiphanes. I propose that the origin of the Coptic passage goes back to the second-century effort to assimilate Platonic ideas about the human soul into Christian ethics. Although various apologists accused Carpocrates and Epiphanes of sexual immorality, I focus on the possibility that Christians with Platonic tendencies were exploring the nature and power of human passions and considering how they could be controlled. The place of the excerpt in the Nag Hammadi collection is not coincidental but goes along other mythological and didactic treatises within.

Keywords

Nag Hammadi – Platonism – Clement of Alexandria – Carpocrates – Epiphanes – righteousness – anthropology – ethics

1 Introduction of the Coptic Fragment: Bad Translation or Original Interpretation?

The excerpt from the *Republic* (588b–589b), belongs to the sixth Codex of the Coptic Nag Hammadi collection.¹ Among these treatises, three documents (The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth [VI, 6]; The Prayer of Thanksgiving [VI, 7] and Asclepius [VI, 8]) show Hermetic provenance and belong to a group of similar philosophical and theological interest. Remaining documents from our Codex do not indicate any common theological theme and literary ground. Unlike these documents, the remaining literature of the Codex, including the excerpt, does not permit the establishment of any common ground.² Each has to be treated separately as each contains its own individual philosophical motif and literary characteristics. Brashler's short introduction to the excerpt takes into consideration these and other observations and concludes that "to characterize this tractate as Gnostic or Hermetic is hazardous."³

Brashler also comments, "As a comparison with the Greek parallel text clearly shows this attempt on the part of the Coptic translator to deliver a summarizing excerpt from Plato's *Republic* fails disastrously."⁴ Thus, he reaffirms the earlier observation made by H.M. Schenke, that the Coptic narrative offers a very poor translation of a paragraph from Plato's work.⁵ Furthermore, although the copyist corrected some earlier mistakes, he did not correct them all and also made a number of scribal errors.⁶ It is possible to detect that the anonymous translator from Greek was certainly not a (Platonic) philosopher by profession. Moreover, his philosophical knowledge was very limited. His poor synopsis of Plato's work was a Coptic paraphrase of the original text, far from being a proper, elaborated and reliable translation. In brief, the task of translating Plato's work, or even this section of it, was beyond the intellectual skills of the scribe. So, should we assess the Coptic fragment as a bad translation?

1 The exact reference to Plato's work has been amended by Jackson 1985, 204–53. Jackson convincingly argues that the reference to the *Republic* in the Coptic excerpt does begin not at verse 588B, but 588A. I am most grateful to Prof. Mark Edwards (Oxford) for drawing my attention to Jackson's study. This essay uses the critical edition of the text from the Coptic Gnostic Library (Brill), volume XI, 328–39.

2 Cf. Parrott 1979, 5–7.

3 Cf. Brashler 1979, 326.

4 Cf. Brashler 1979, 325.

5 As stated by Brashler 1979, 325.

6 Although I use the masculine pronoun there is no evidence from the text to assume that the translator was male. Cf. Parrott 1979, 6–7.

Recently, Tito Orlandi has suggested an alternative view.⁷ According to Orlandi, the Coptic fragment reflects another version, or edition, of Plato's text. The Italian scholar, having analyzed both Coptic and Greek terminology, and similarities as well as some errors in assumed translation, concluded that the current Coptic text is an outcome of a purposeful adaptation of the original Platonic narrative by a Christian gnosticising editor (*redattore*).⁸ This proposal opens a new trajectory of interpretation of the origin of the fragment as well as its potential didactic function. Similarly, Lanzillotta points out that the Coptic version offered an intentional reinterpretation of the Plato excerpt by a redactor, which then served to a new and specific purpose.⁹

A closer look at the Coptic text highlights the crucial subject and interest of the author. The whole section from the *Republic* 588a–589b, in its central part, is concerned with animal images of the soul, expressing either progress in virtue (integrity of intellectual and sensual life) or a fall into ethical chaos (represented by many-headed mythological beasts such as Chimaera and Cerberus).

As noted by Lanzillotta, Socrates's famous metaphor of the human soul with three types of powers (passions) was well known in late antiquity.¹⁰ In the early Christian context, this image is found in the Gospel of Thomas (Logion 7).¹¹ The Coptic version of the original story shows that the author was interested in adaptation of Plato's images into a didactic framework.¹² First in the crucial metaphor the editor changes, as pointed out by Lanzillotta, the tripartition of the soul in the original text into two parts.¹³ Earlier in the Coptic text the editor amended another important Platonic metaphor of three powers of the soul that is "Chimaera," "Scylla," and "Cerberus," into two, mainly "Chimaera" and "Cerberus."¹⁴

Orlandi sees this amendment as a Valentinian edition, but I do not share his identification and I will suggest another possible affiliation. Other corrections, such as the appearance of ἀρχων/ἄρχων [49.6 and *Rep.* 588 C.1] instead of the original πολλαίαι does not determine either a gnosticising inclination on the

7 Orlandi 1977, 54. I am most grateful to my anonymous reviewer for pointing out Orlandi's valuable contribution.

8 Orlandi 1977, 49, 54.

9 Lanzillotta 2014, 131.

10 Lanzillotta 2014, 130.

11 See Lanzillotta's discussion 2014, 108–128.

12 Like Orlandi, I will leave the question of single authorship open. The Coptic text shows some inconsistencies listed by Orlandi, which may suggest more than one author. See Orlandi 1977, 54 and note 17.

13 Lanzillotta 2014, 130. *Plato, Resp.* 588a–589b (NHC VI,5) 51.11–23 with distinction between the symbol/role of "a farmer" (ἡπρωτος) and "wild beasts" (ἡτερονῆριον ἡδάριον).

14 *Plato, Resp.* 588a–589b (NHC VI,5) 49.8–9.

part of the scribe or the “Gnostic” context of this excerpt.¹⁵ These and other problems prove that the commission to produce a correct translation of Plato’s work, if there was such a commission, did not elicit sufficient academic response, or that we are dealing with the first “draft” of a new version of Plato’s text, as noted by Orlandi.

With all this summarized information we still face a question about the purpose of writing the Coptic version of the original Greek text. Those who were interested in Plato’s thought did not know the Greek language sufficiently well to read the passage, even as an edited doxographical quotation.¹⁶ If the readers were fluent in Greek, certainly they would have been satisfied with a copy of the Greek text rather than its Coptic paraphrase. In addition, another enigma is related to authorship. Was there one individual who “translated” and copied the text, or maybe even two authors—one who “translated” the excerpt from Plato and the second who (later?) copied the Coptic translation which was included in the Codex VI?¹⁷

A good question is, what kind of readers asked for the Coptic translation of a specific passage from Plato’s *Republic*? Jackson’s illuminating study on the assimilation of some Platonic motifs by Gnostic literatures, which includes the excerpt from the *Republic* in the Nag Hammadi collection, offers a new comment on the excerpt and its authorship. Jackson links the excerpt with other documents representing Hermetic philosophy in the collection, and suggests that at the time when the Coptic translation was done “the parable had by this time acquired such notoriety from its integration into heterodox anthropology that no introduction was necessary.”¹⁸ In his conclusion, Jackson points to a certain native Egyptian, named Hieracas (b. ca. 275). Hieracas, according to Epiphanius’s testimony:

had quite a bit of education, for he was proficient in the Greek and other literary studies, and well acquainted with medicine and the other subjects of Greek and Egyptian learning, and perhaps he had dabbled in astrology and magic. (3) For he was very well versed in many subjects and, as his works show, < an extremely scholarly > expositor of scripture.

15 This opinion is expressed by Brashler 1979, 331 note on 49.6. I am fully aware of the highly problematic semantic of the term “Gnostic.” Therefore, in the present paper I try to avoid this controversial notion. See Williams 1996.

16 An example of that quotation can be found, for example, in Eus., *Praep.Ev.* XII.46.2–6, again emphasizing the role of animal symbolism, but this time in a new context and with a new rhetorical purpose.

17 Cf. Parrott 1979, 6–7.

18 Jackson 1985, 205.

He knew Coptic very well—he was Egyptian—but there were few deficiencies in his Greek, for he was quick in every way.¹⁹

Hieracas was able to produce a Coptic version of Plato's excerpt and as suggested by Jackson, he might have used it for ascetic purposes.²⁰ In addition, as we know from Athanasius of Alexandria's attack on Hierakas, the ascetic formed a community of men and women who lived together in complete separation from married people.²¹ Jackson's valuable theory shows that among Christian ascetics of the period when the Nag Hammadi documents were collected and hidden, there were leaders and groups who assimilated Christian faith into an amalgam of Platonic and other dualistic anthropologies. I wish, however, to suggest yet another author and community which may have been connected with the excerpt from the *Republic*.

2 The Platonic Excerpt and Clement of Alexandria's Testimony

One of Clement of Alexandria's (ca. 150–215) merits was his outstanding education in Greek philosophy, which he incorporated into his Christian outlook and faith. Unlike Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–200), Clement of Alexandria was able to see a particular theological rival and his school in a larger philosophical framework. Clement's third book of the *Stromateis* lists a number of adversaries, providing the reader with the basic characteristics of their erroneous teaching. Clement's catalogue of adversaries, divides them generally into two groups (φέρει εἰς δύο διελόντες τάγματα ἀπάσας τὰς αἱρέσεις): the extreme ascetics and the libertines (*Strom.*, 3.40.2).²² Clement states:

Either they teach a way of life which makes no distinction between right and wrong or their hymn is to highly strung and they acclaim asceticism out of a spirit of irreligious quarrelsomeness. (ἢ γὰρ τοὶ ἀδιαφόρως ζῆν διδάσκουσιν, ἢ τὸ ὑπέρτονον ἄδουσαι ἐγκράτειαν διὰ δυσσεβείας καὶ φιλαπεχθιμοσύνης καταγγέλλουσι).²³

19 Epiph., *Pan.* 47 (67).1.1–2 (Williams 1994, 308).

20 Jackson 1985, 206.

21 Cf. Athan., *First Letter to Virgins* 22–30 in Brakke 1995, 281–84 and earlier, 4, 20, 48.

22 The Greek citations of Clement follow Stählin 1960.

23 The English translation, Ferguson 1991, 280. This construction of two clearly distinguished, opposite groups serves, in my view, Clement's rhetoric as it provides readers with the starting point for further critique.

Among the latter groups a further sub-distinction notes the existence of certain Christians called “the Carpocratians” (οἱ Καρποκρατιανοί), and we can rightly assume that the group was named after the founder of the school: Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes.²⁴ While introducing Carpocrates’s son, Epiphanes, Clement states that his writings “are still preserved” (τὰ συγγράμματα κομίζεται), which suggests existence of an active community in Alexandria that produced the copies and used them.²⁵ Unfortunately, we have very limited knowledge about both Christian teachers, however modern scholars unveil a number of characteristics of their theologies reassessing various ancient polemical testimonies.

Mylykoski, reading Pseudo-Tertullian’s report, highlights that Carpocrates saw Jesus as a mere man, a son of Joseph without any references to divinity.²⁶ In Mylykoski’s view, this report is based on the earlier Irenaeus accusation (*Adv. Haer.* 1.25.1).²⁷ Ehrman adds that Irenaeus also accused the followers of Carpocrates of “practice of indiscriminate sex” and that their theology justified breaking of all moral laws and norms in order to avoid reincarnation (*Adv. Haer.* 1.25.4).²⁸ There is no doubt that this school really existed, for it is “named and shamed” by many heresiologists.²⁹ Clement dedicated a special section of his work to the discussion of some of the controversial ethical and social ideas of Epiphanes (*Strom.*, 3.5.1–11.1), who was educated by his father in the general curriculum and in Platonism:

He was educated by his father in the general curriculum and in Platonic philosophy ‘ἐπαιδεύθη μὲν οὖν παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ τὴν τε ἐγκύκλιον παιδείαν καὶ τὰ Πλάτωνος’.³⁰

At the center of controversy is their theory of marriage. In this section of his apology Clement refers to the treatise *On Righteousness* (Περὶ δικαιοσύνης), written by Epiphanes, providing us with some quotes from that lost work, which he

24 *Strom.* 3.10.1. This tag is an outcome of polemic and tries to distinguish one group of adversaries from other. We don’t have evidence that the followers of Carpocrates and Epiphanes saw themselves as a “separate” Christian community. See valuable discussion of the label “Valentinian” by Marksches 1997, 412–21.

25 33 Cf. *Strom.* 3.5.2.

26 *Adv. omn. haer.* 3.2. (Mylykoski 2005, 215–16).

27 Mylykoski 2005, 216 and 228.

28 Ehrman 2011, 18. On Irenaeus’s treatment of the Carpocratians, see Löhr 1995, 23–48.

29 In addition to two sources already mentioned, see also Hegesippus in Eus., *H.E.* IV.22.5; Hipp., *Ref.* VII.32; Tertullian, *Anima* 23 and 35; Origen, *Contra Celsum* V.62.

30 *Strom.*, 3.5.3. The English translation follows Ferguson 1991, 259.

claims to have read.³¹ If we can believe Clement on this occasion, Epiphanes's social theory promoted the ideal of righteousness, which was based on social equality, fellowship (κοινωνία), total sharing of goods among all members of the community, and liberation from any divisions or segregation imposed by current laws, customs, and cultural traditions.³² In brief, Epiphanes's theory, (if not originally that of Carpocrates's theory of Christian community), might have been modelled upon Plato's ideal communist state from the *Republic*. If this conclusion seems to reach too far, we can find Clement's own criticism of Epiphanes's erroneous interpretation of Plato's oeuvre directly named:

It seems to me that he [i.e. Epiphanes] misunderstood the statements of Plato in the *Republic* [457 d] that all the women are to be used in common 'δοκεῖ δέ μοι καὶ τοῦ Πλάτωνος παρακηκοέναι ἐν τῇ Πολιτείᾳ φαμένου κοινὰς εἶναι τὰς γυναῖκας πάντων'.³³

Then, immediately, Clement offers his own interpretation of Plato's *lectio* from the *Republic*.³⁴ It is evident that this hint at competition between Clement's and Epiphanes's alternative commentaries on Plato's *Republic* has as one of its central concerns a desire to show that among Christian intellectuals in Alexandria there was a common effort to reconcile some Platonic motifs with Christian revelation, an inclination that should not surprise us. Christian theologians, particularly in Alexandria, were aware of Philo's legacy for he, just a century before, had adapted many Hellenistic philosophical ideas into his exposition of Hebrew theology. The debate between Clement and Epiphanes was not only concerned with a correct rather than incorrect, or a beneficial rather than treacherous, interpretation of Platonic theory. They sought rather to consolidate their authority to promote their own unique way of assimilating Plato's ideas into a new Christian framework.

We have to remember that Clement's critique of those of his adversaries who used Plato's teaching was crucially involved in promoting his own theological and philosophical agenda.³⁵ Clement wished to convince his listeners,

31 *Strom.* 3.5.1–10.1.

32 *Strom.* 3.6.1–4. It is rather remarkable that Clement's synopsis (*Strom.* 3.5.1–3.10.2) of the Carpocratians' theory contains twenty-eight references to the term κοινωνία, κοινός, κοινωνεῖν which highlights one of the central themes of their ethics.

33 *Strom.* 3.10.2. Translation is mine.

34 Clement's interpretation and apology of Plato can also be questioned, but this is not the aim of this investigation.

35 Clearly visible in *Strom.* 7.16.1–17.5 with the central theme of self-control, a proper understanding and harmony between rational life and righteousness in *Strom.* 7.17.4.

or readers, that his interpretation of Plato's legacy within Christian intellectual context was the most appropriate.

But even if we see Clement of Alexandria as a Christian apologist, still his concern and criticism show that there were other Christian exegetes who in a similar way to Clement were keen to assimilate some elements of the Platonic system into a Christian frame. Clement of Alexandria, Epiphane, and many more theologians of this period were very keen on supporting their exploration of Christian doctrine by reference to philosophical authorities, with special reference to Plato's intellectual legacy.

The passage from the third book of the *Stromateis* shows how carefully and with what keen interest the early Christians studied Plato's ideas in the *Republic* and reveals their zealous promotion of a particular interpretation of them. Thus, they understood that the Greek author and his ideas could be incorporated into a new philosophical, theological and social outlook. This common reasoning lay behind the acceptance among philosophically inclined Christians, such as Clement and Epiphane, of the need to preserve Plato's original discourse. They also wished to secure its correct explanation in order to strengthen their Christian ethos with the backing of the authority of the ancient Greek Master.

Clement's critique of the Carpocratians, which has different aims from Irenaeus even though both shared a similar ardent disapproval, reveals a number of characteristics. Cumulatively, they suggest a flawed application to Christian life of Plato's social and political theory.³⁶ The reading of Clement's account of Plato's ideal state presents a caricature that is far from entertaining, but rather pitiful and dangerous. Of course, this apologetic with its highly critical and deformed picture of the Carpocratians' hermeneutic must be taken as a further example of the large part which denigrating one's rivals played in Clement's rhetoric. Clement finds enough "evidence" to charge them with sexual immorality, which they justified with the backing of Plato's discourse.³⁷

Here, Clement accuses the Carpocratians of an interpretative abuse of Plato. The Christian apologist suggests that his adversaries alienated Plato's

36 Here we find two crucial instances, the claim of the Carpocratians that "wives should be shared" (*Strom.* 3.5.1; cf. Plato, *Republic* 457d–458d) and that "God's righteousness is a kind of social equality" (*Strom.* 3.6.1; cf. Plato, *Def.* 441 E).

37 *Strom.* 3.10.1. The accusation of sexual immorality or licentiousness must be treated within the context of inner-Christian rhetorical polemic with adversaries. In that polemic erroneous teaching (theology) was expressed by sexual immorality of the individual or the community. The heretic was linked with a prostitute, for instance, the story of Simon Magus (cf. Acts 8:9–25) and a certain Helena in Justin, *Apol.* 1. 26.3; Iren., *Adv. Haer.* 1.23.2–24.4; Tert., *De Anima* 34; Hipp., *Ref.* 6.19; Epiph., *Pan.* 21.1–2 and Phil., *Haer.* 29.

philosophy from the proper context of God's revelation, which also referred to Moses's Law, and from the clear instructions concerning the social order and sexual behavior prescribed by the Decalogue.³⁸ Clement saw Moses and "his disciple" Plato teaching in their writings and passing on to their schools a set of regulations laying down what was morally acceptable and what was not.³⁹ He claimed the Carpocratians' forged hermeneutic deceived Christians and even pagan critic about the true Christian ethos. In addition, it led to "libertinism" and immorality.⁴⁰ Clement tries to counter-balance this "extremism" through his own interpretation of Plato's difficult passages from the *Republic* as well as by stressing the value of the Mosaic Law in reaffirming the authority of the Hebrew scriptures and the subsequent Apostolic teaching.

3 Clement's Critique of the Carpocratians in Question

As in many other cases, when dealing with the accounts of the apologists, we do not have any independent means of verifying their charges. Still, the picture found in Clement's account, although it contains a rather pejorative and simplistic record of their doctrines, may be used in order to establish at least some points of their assimilation of the *Republic*. Carpocrates and Epiphanes, like other Christian Platonists, aimed to accommodate some Greek notions in their theory of Christian ethics. The strong accent on Plato's authority provided them with an insightful exemplification of the new stage of Christian life, while new faith liberated the followers of the savior from any attachment to individual worldly advantage which included the ownership of property and even adhering to their previous way of life with its long-established family connections.⁴¹

The established models of "fathers," "sons," "wives," and "daughters" might have been reinterpreted, since the new way of life of the Christian community was to hold everything in common. It followed that the distinctions "of this world," such as those between "the rich" and the "poor," "the ruler" and "the ruled," must be challenged and changed, as these were against nature and the Christian faith.

³⁸ *Strom.* 3.9.1–3.

³⁹ Clement expresses his theory of Plato's dependence on the Hebrew Scriptures and directly on Moses in many places, for instance, *Strom.* 1.165.1–2; 166.1; 2.133.2; 5.29.3; 73.3; 92.1–2; 99.3.

⁴⁰ *Strom.* 3.5.1 and Origen, c. *Celsus* 5.62–64. On these terms and their use by the apologists, see Goehring 2000, 330n4.

⁴¹ Cf. Acts 2:44–45.

This radicalism embodied the ideal of the perfection of the “first creation,” but it also aimed to realize the dream of social and political equity, which took as its socio-economic expression the repudiation of property ownership. The same radicalism also highlighted the ideas of Christian revelation about ultimately overcoming the traditional distinction between male and female roles in the Christian community. Thus, they claimed their kind of monastic, “Scriptural-based,” or “charismatic” community of men and women combined Plato’s theory and Christian revelation.

Within this new amalgam, Plato’s concepts rather than those of the Old Testament provided a useful and inspiring, if not pragmatic, validation. Was this syncretism, both on the level of theory and praxis, dissolving the “core” ethos of Christian identity? It certainly challenged the understanding of that “Christian identity” as represented by Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria. Interestingly, the latter apologist rebuked this “syncretism” while promoting his own construction of Christian eclecticism.

4 A Tentative Solution to the Enigma

So far, from the present examination it is possible to see that the Carpocratians went even further than their counterparts such as Clement of Alexandria in the assimilation of some of the Platonic ideas. Now, in direct reference to the excerpt from the Codex VI, I would like to present the following hypothesis.⁴²

When Clement composed his polemic, Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes were both already dead.⁴³ Although, as he notes, Epiphanes lived only seventeen years, he quickly gained a great reputation both in his native island of Cephalonia (off the west of Greece) and beyond, in Alexandria, the city of his father. At Sami in Cephalonia, if we accept Clement’s note, the local people “honored him as a god” (καὶ θεὸς ἐν ... τετίμηται), and celebrated his birthday (κατὰ νομηνίαν γενέθλιον ἀποθέωσιν θύουσιν).⁴⁴ This local apotheosis

42 I wish to note that my conclusion goes against, for example, the suggestion made by the editors of the excerpt of the *Republic* who claim that it was rather the Valentinian milieu which produced the Coptic synopsis, more in Painchaud 1983.

43 *Strom.* 3.5.1–2.

44 *Strom.* 3.5.2. I am inclined to believe Clement of Alexandria on this point, but we don’t know any archaeological (including inscriptions) evidence which would support his claim. *Nota bene*, Porphyry informs us that also the philosophical community around Plotinus in Rome celebrated Plato and Socrates’s birthday in *Vita Plotini* 2, Edwards 2000, 5. Commemoration of Epiphanes’s birthday (γενέθλια) by his local community can be seen as a continuation of that tradition.

of Epiphanes was known in Alexandria, as we can see from Clement's record. It even found some form of assimilation in the Hellenistic milieu. Certainly, the use of the present tense of the participle (ἀναγόμενοι ...) in the opening sentence of Clement's account on the followers of Carpocrates and Epiphanes shows that when Clement was writing his *Stromateis*, this school was dynamic at least in Alexandria.⁴⁵

It is thus possible, that the members of this school copied the original work of their leader, Epiphanes, *On Righteousness*, in Greek in order to preserve his teaching.⁴⁶ Like every other group of Christians, they engaged in missionary tasks in order to gain new converts.⁴⁷ To further this endeavor they had to produce some synopsis of the doctrine of their leading figure.

The details of how far they spread outside Alexandria remain unknown. However, Epiphanius's *Panarion* presents an account of yet another heretical and enigmatic sect originating "in the region of Rome and Africa" (τινὲς δὲ ἔφασαν αὐτὴν περὶ Ῥώμην καὶ Ἀφρικὴν γεγενῆσθαι) who masked themselves as "monastic men and women" (οἱ μὲν γὰρ εἰσι προσχήματι μοναζόντων, αἱ δὲ σὺν αὐτοῖς οὖσαι προσχήματι μοναζουσῶν), and committed sexual acts with the members of the same group or by masturbation.⁴⁸ Their heresy, in Epiphanius's view, was a replica of an earlier disorder created by Epiphanes: "Their heresy might have been modeled on the heresy of Epiphanes" (Ἡ αἵρεσις δέ, <ἡ> παρ' αὐτοῖς νομι[ς]τεύεται, ὥσπερ ἀπεικαζομένη τῇ τοῦ Ἐπιφάνους).⁴⁹

To Epiphanius, their libertine ethos, the rejection of marriage, hypocrisy and "infamous practices" represented the greatest abomination.⁵⁰ Although Epiphanius's account does not mention any reference to Plato's social ethics, including the *Republic*, he does mention that those heretics used "various Scriptures of the Old and New Testament" as well as apocrypha, especially "the Acts of Andrew" (διαφόροις γραφαῖς παλαιᾶς καὶ καινῆς διαθήκης καὶ ἀποκρύφους

45 *Strom.* 3.5.1.

46 Irenaeus's account of Carpocratians mentions production of some writings ("In conscriptionibus autem illorum"). See *Adv. Haer.* 1.25.5.

47 As for example, a certain woman Marcellina, who ca. 150 CE propagated the teaching of Carpocrates in Rome. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.25.6; Origen, c. *Celsus* 5.62; cf. Lampe 2003, 319–320 and 352.

48 See translation in Williams 1994, 129. Epiph., *Pan.* 63.1.3–4; here the author named the heretics as "Origenists": Κατὰ Ὀριγενιανῶν τῶν πρώτων τῶν καὶ αἰσχυρῶν <μγ>, τῆς δὲ ἀκολουθίας <ξγ>. I would like to remind that sexual relation (μίξις) between the teachers and disciples within a philosophical or rhetorical school was not unknown in Late Antiquity. For instance, see Plato, *Symposium* 218c–d; *Vita Plotini* 15; Philos., *Vita Soph.* 490; Lib., *Or.* 64, 44. This subject is well-discussed in Janiszewski 2009, 57–87.

49 *Pan.* 63.1.3. See translation in Williams 1994, 128.

50 *Pan.* 63.4.6. See translation in Williams 1994, 131.

τισί, μάλιστα ταῖς λεγομέναις Πράξεσιν Ἀνδρέου).⁵¹ The Acts of Andrew, a document with Encratite tendency and strong dualism, advocates the renunciation of all possessions and withdrawal. It encourages celibacy and rejection of procreation. It also promotes life together in one community of men and women, abandoning social distinctions and separation from those who are hostile to this Christian community.⁵²

In the context of Epiphanius's notes, it is possible to conclude that the moral and sexual ethos of the group continued the original teaching of Epiphanes, the Platonist known to Clement of Alexandria. However, both Clement and Epiphanius misunderstood the behaviors of the members of the community. It was not sexual promiscuity and uncontrolled carnal desires which characterized the common life of those men and women, but rather their radical type of partnership ("brotherhood and sisterhood of all members") which renounced distinction of the "classical" household and community. I agree with April DeConick's observation: "We also know that the ideal Epiphanes mobilized in his community was communal equality with no distinction between female and male, declaring 'righteousness to be fellowship with equality' between males and females. In his community, women could not be given away in marriages as the private property of certain males."⁵³ For those Christians in upper Egypt the direct reference to Plato's notions had lost its intellectual significance. Still, they may have wished to preserve, this time in a new Coptic context and language, what they understood as a part of their valuable Platonic-Christian legacy.

It is impossible to state whether or not these various Christian communities found themselves expelled from the Great Church, when the ecclesiastical structure became clearly defined and enshrined in ecclesiastical authority.⁵⁴ But if later generations of these heterodox Christians inspired by the amalgam of Platonic type of *koinonia* and Christian community (Acts 2:44–45) settled down in other regions of Egypt and still practiced the ideas of their leaders, they gradually absorbed more characteristics of the local Coptic culture and language. The term *κοινωνία* refers here to a community of men and women who shared intellectual values as well as material goods. Among later Platonists, Plotinus expressed the desire of establishing "a city of philosophers" where its citizens "should live by the laws of Plato."⁵⁵ It is also likely that they

51 *Pan.* 63.2.1. See translation in Williams 1994, 129.

52 For more information, see Prieur 2003, 101–15, esp. 112.

53 DeConick 2013, 106. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out DeConick's note.

54 See the historical context in Brakke 1994, 394–419 and Wipszycka 2007, 331–49.

55 Cf. Porphy., *Vita Plot.* 12 in Edwards 2000, 23.

were in competition with increasingly prestigious movements,, for example, the Pachomian type of monasticism and orthodoxy.

The excerpt is a poor translation of a section from the *Republic* but its origin could be located in a passage from Epiphanes's work *On Righteousness*. The excerpt is problematic as a translation because it does not refer directly to Plato's work, but to an interpretation of some sections from the *Republic*, which still had some value to those Christians on the margins of the Church in Egypt. For them, unsophisticated and poorly acquainted with Platonic *apparatus*, the ideal of life within the Christian *κοινωνία* was still based on equal access to goods held in common, where men and women lived together in a similar way to the Pachomian *modus*.⁵⁶ Although those idealists disappeared from the scene, their ideal might have been an inspiration to other Christians who, in a similar way to the Pachomian type of community, valued the teaching of their founder.⁵⁷

5 The Justified Place of the Coptic Version in the Nag Hammadi Collection

The title of this paper rhetorically accuses the Coptic version of Plato's *Republic* of keeping "bad company." However, careful contextualized examination of the fragment and its possible origin suggests that this was not a coincidence, human error, or an unsolvable enigma. First, I am inclined to conclude with scholars such as Tito Orlandi, that our document is not an outcome of a poor translation, but rather a product of deliberate reinterpretation of the section of Socrates's teaching about the human soul and passions. Secondly, the studied fragment matched other documents from the Nag Hammadi dedicated to encouragement of spiritual growth through ethical disciple and new self-understanding. As I am critical of scholarly tags such as "Gnostic" or "gnosticising," I do not see the Coptic version of the passage from Plato's *Republic* as evidence of such a tendency in the Coptic editor. Rather, together with scholars such as Lanzillotta, I am inclined to assess our passage as a deliberate transformation of the original text into another narrative (hypertextuality).

It is possible to place the origin of our fragment much earlier than its Coptic rescued version. As has been pointed out, during the second-century various Christians who valued Platonic ethics (the role of passions) and anthropology

56 For more information, see Wipszycka 2009, 568–88.

57 Further information can be found in Veilleux 1986, 271–306, especially 275–76.

(nature of the human soul) were keen on merging Plato's notions with a Christian outlook. Carpocrates and Epiphanes are examples of that experiment. Although they were accused by their critics of misunderstanding Plato and using him to endorse licentiousness, we cannot verify that accusation.

The Coptic excerpt from the *Republic* bears, together with other documents from the Nag Hammadi collection, an important testimony to the pluralism of theological interests among various individuals and communities in upper Egypt, at least in the time when the whole collection was hidden in the clay jars. If the assumption of a relationship between the identity of the group and text is correct, then this excerpt too must have had its specific authorship, purpose and audience. The Coptic authorship remains anonymous, but its purpose, as this essay has argued, was concerned with the promotion of a Platonic Christian way of life and the construction of a genuine Christian identity. These who were interested in copying and preserving this Coptic excerpt, either as individuals or as a community, aspired to live their lives dedicated to spiritual progress towards excellence.

This suggests that the community which used the excerpt, and possibly other documents too, might have lived on the margin of the emerging Coptic monastic network. I am inclined to see the Coptic excerpt as evidence of an ongoing Christian effort to combine some Platonic ethical values, which by the time of translation into Coptic lost their direct reference to the whole Platonic philosophical system, with the spirit of the radical Christianity aiming to conquer the evil in the human nature and surrounding world.

This effort was not new, as much earlier various Christian groups, including the followers of Carpocrates, were fascinated by both sources of inspiration: Jesus' and Plato's teaching. The excerpt does not need to be treated as a papyrological coincidence, or sensation related to a "mystery scenario" which led to its burial. Rather it bears witness to ongoing interest in exploration of the human soul as the center of spiritual life with its positive potential, but also beast-like attitudes which need to be recognized, faced and tamed. Rather, as a literary survival, it hints at a lost religious context and ideal, which the orthodox Christians saw as "diabolically inspired" and therefore condemned to be destroyed.

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