CHAPTER FIVE

THE PHILOPONOI OF ALEXANDRIA AND HELLENIC RELIGION

The biography of Severus, the monophysite patriarch of Antioch (512–518), contains detailed reports about Hellenic religion in the milieu of the intellectual elites in the cities of the Eastern Roman Empire c. 485–500. The author, a straightforward historian called Zachariah, a scholastikos or barrister from Gaza in First Palestine, also wrote the semi-fictional dialogue of a debate between a Hellene and a Christian philoponos of Berytus on the creation of the world. He was an intellectually sober product of the Alexandrian rhetorical schools, later matriculating to the imperial law school at Berytus. Zachariah knew Severus personally, and relates his story with intense psychological insight. The author evinces a healthy contempt for miracles, citing only the fraudulent stories of that genre told by Hellenes. These he debunks with rationalistic fervor. Zachariah belonged to the zealous Christian group called the philoponoi. The association consisted of Alexandrian laymen, many of them professors and students, who undertook various church duties and even nursed the sick. Their favorite task was monitoring the activities of the pagan professors for sacrifice and other cult practices. The philoponoi also opposed the anti-Christian polemic of rhetors like the younger Horapollon. Many students, like Severus himself, had yet to receive Christian baptism, being catechumens, and often wavered between Hellenic religion and Christianity.

To judge from Zachariah’s statements, the philoponoi achieved many conversions in this milieu of Greek paideia and Hellenic faith. His narrative is restricted mainly to personal friends, but encom-
passes events at Berytus and Aphrodisias as well. One must first consider the social background of the students in Zachariah’s milieu and analyse their relations with the Hellenes on the teaching faculty. The status and characteristics of the Hellenic cults in late fifth-century Alexandria will emerge from this inquiry, as will the legal measures taken for their suppression. Events further afield at Aphrodisias and Berytus figure in this scheme as well.

I. The Social Background of Zachariah of Mytilene’s Friends

The students of rhetoric in Alexandria, like those studying philosophy at Athens, came from wealthy social backgrounds, a fact that emerges clearly from Zachariah’s biography of Severus. His account provides decisive evidence as to how the younger scions of these families accepted Christianity.

The chief protagonist of the story, Severus himself, accepted baptism well after he had completed his education in Alexandria and had gone on to the imperial law school at Berytus. Severus came from a Christian decurion family residing at Sozopolis in Pisidia. His father belonged to the city council and an uncle, his namesake, had been bishop of Sozopolis at the time of the Council of Ephesus in 431. The family estates financed his education and that of his two brothers in Alexandria. It consisted of the traditional paidia in both Greek and Latin rhetoric. Severus remained a catechumen, observing the common but now dying custom of postponing baptism except in case of life-threatening illness. Despite this, he and his brothers kept company with several philoponoi: the Christian sophist John Semeiographos, the Christian rhetorician Sopater, a certain Menas who looked after the poor, and Zachariah himself. The latter suggested to Severus, who liked to imitate the speeches of the Antiochene orator Libanius, that he compare these texts with the rhetoric, doctrine, and philosophy found in the writings of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus. Severus became the literary disciple of the Cappadocians after carefully comparing the letters exchanged between Basil and Libanius.

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4 Zachariah refers to his family as “distinguished”, the Greek word being axios or more probably lambrotos. Zachariah, V. Severi 11, n. 4.
5 Zachariah, V. Severi, 11.
6 Zachariah, V. Severi, 11.
7 The parallel case of Augustine of Hippo is instructive. Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 106f.
8 Zachariah, V. Severi, 11f.
9 Zachariah, V. Severi, 12f.