ALEXANDER OF LYCOPOLIS,
MANICHAEISM AND NEOPARAGONISM

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1. STATE OF RESEARCH ON ALEXANDER OF LYCOPOLIS

The place of Alexander in history is based on one single writing. According to this text in a late ninth to early tenth-century codex from the Biblioteca Laurenziana at Florence, the title of his work runs: Ἀλεξάνδρου Λυκοπολίτου ἐπιστρέψαντος ἐξ ἐθνῶν πρὸς τὰς Μανιχαίου δόξας. Former scholarship understood this title as referring to the treatise of a certain Alexander, bishop of Lycopolis, who once “turned from paganism to the Manichaean opinions.” Modern research, following August Brinkmann in his critical edition with a long Praefatio, did not subscribe to this opinion. Alexander was neither converted to Manichaeism, nor was he a Christian bishop. Such false views, presently still circulating by means of the preface to Jacques-Paul Migne’s often reprinted edition, seem to have been caused both by the reference of the Byzantine Patriarch Photius (ca. 810–890) in his famous Bibliotheca and by the mistaken translation of the manuscript’s title by the first editor P. Combefis as “Alexandri Lycopolitae, qui ex gentibus ad Manichaei opiniones conversus erat.” The Greek phrase πρὸς τὰς Μανιχαίου δόξας should rather have been translated as “contra Manichaei opiniones,” whereas ἐπιστρέψαντος ἐξ ἐθνῶν simply is a pious invention. Already the founding father of Manichaean studies, the famous Huguenot Isaac de Beausobre (1659–1738), opined that Alexander could only have been “un Philosophe Payen”: (1) in his dispute with the Manichaeans he never quotes from the Bible; (2) he speaks of the souls of the nymphs: “cela n’est pas du style Chrétien”; (3) he makes mention of the cataclysms in the age of Deucalion and Phoroneus, but not in Noah’s time; (4) he says that “of all the gods” the

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1 Brinkmann 1989, iv–v.
3 Migne 1857, 410–411.
4 Brinkmann 1985, 13ff.
Manichaeans only revere the sun and the moon; (5) Greek mythology is considered to be “our tradition” and the battle of the giants to belong to “our poetry.” For these and some other reasons, all leading modern researchers share this opinion and consider Alexander a pagan philosopher.

2. THE MAIN CONTENTS OF ALEXANDER’S TREATISE AND ITS IMPORTANCE

In his treatise, Alexander reports that “some of those who have pursued the study of philosophy with me” (τινας τῶν συνεσχολακότων ἡμῖν ἐν τῷ φιλοσοφεῖν, 8.14–15 Brinkmann) converted to Manichaeism. This refers either to former colleagues during his student years in Alexandria, or (most likely) to some of his own pupils in Lycopolis. The general tone of his writing, as well as Alexander’s concern for “the minds of those who uncritically accept” the Manichaean doctrines (8.12–13), reveals the attitude of the solicitous professor rather than that of the former student. The circumstances that gave rise to his tract seem to parallel those of the famous Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus (ca. 205–270) of Rome—circumstances that brought about Ennead 2.9 [33] “Against the Gnostics.” On a certain day, Manichaean missionaries entered Alexander’s school in Lycopolis and, under the guise of being his students, started their mission. Alexander mentions some of their names: “the first expounder of his (Mani’s) doctrines to visit us was a man called Papos, after whom came Thomas” (4.17–19). Both are well known from Manichaean texts and figure in the Coptic Psalmbook which, like other Manichaean texts from Egyptian Medinet Madi, was written in a Coptic dialect typical of the Lycopolis region.

Alexander speaks of Manichaeism as a “novelty” (καινοτομία) which has “but recently” (οὐ πάλαι) come to the fore (4.16–17). Other sources reveal that Manichaeism entered Egypt from 244 onwards. In 4.21–22 Alexander indicates that he had learnt of the death of Mani (277 or 276), but he does not make mention of Diocletianus’ edict against the Manichaeans of the year 297 (or 302). Most probably his treatise, in which a philosopher addresses other philosophers, was written sometime between 277 and 297.

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5 de Beausobre 1984, 236–237.
7 Villey 1985, 198.
9 Allberry 1938, e.g., p. 34 for “Pappos” and pp. 203–228 for “Psalms of Thomas.”