The first half of the sixth century AD witnessed a remarkable resurgence of interest in Manichaeism in the Greek-speaking world. Manichaean apologetic and polemical arguments were discussed in detail by such well-known writers as Simplicius and John Philoponus and also by less-known writers such as Zacharias Scholasticus, Severus of Antioch, John the Grammarian and Paul the Persian. This renewed interest in Manichaeism is puzzling because there is little evidence of significant Manichaean activity in Greek-speaking areas of the eastern Mediterranean during this period. The proliferation of Greek anti-Manichaean literature during the early sixth century is therefore not to be explained by factors internal to the Manichaean religion itself, but rather by some common element shared by all these anti-Manichaean writers, Christian and pagan alike.

I will argue that the common element shared by these writers is their educational background, namely that they can all be seen to have pursued the preparatory course of studies in Aristotelian logic and physics, which had come to form the initial phase of the Neoplatonic curriculum in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. The intensive study of Aristotle’s writings on physics allowed the later Neoplatonic philosophers and their students to devote more focused attention to questions concerning the nature of the physical world, debating, for example, whether light was corporeal or incorporeal and whether matter was generated. The increased emphasis upon logic and the time set aside to discuss disputed questions, using the Neoplatonic method of identifying quandaries and seeking their resolution (ἀπορία καὶ λύσις), created space in the Neoplatonic curriculum to discuss Manichaeism and other movements whose views differed markedly from orthodox Platonism. Since the goal of the preparatory course of studies was to help the student see that there is one first principle, which is the Good, it was natural for the later Neoplatonists to use...
Manichaeism as a foil, inviting students to consider its claims, showing them the quandaries raised by its dualism, and demonstrating the adequacy of orthodox Platonism to resolve these quandaries.

Sixth-century Greek anti-Manichaean writings should therefore be understood as products of later Alexandrian Neoplatonism and as reflecting the curriculum and methods of analyzing and resolving disputed questions which were important to Neoplatonic teachers and their students in the late fifth and early sixth centuries.¹ These authors’ discussions of Manichaean teaching on the two principles (Light and Darkness) and the formation of the present world should thus be seen not as mere antiquarianism, but rather as serving a broader educational purpose connected with the Neoplatonic curriculum.

To illustrate this point, this essay will examine a representative early sixth-century anti-Manichaean text, John the Grammarian’s First Homily against the Manichaeans. From its language and content, it will be seen that this text is not a homily at all, but rather a transcription of a lecture by a Christian teacher of Neoplatonic philosophy. The lecture reviews with students material which had previously been covered in the initial phase of the Neoplatonic curriculum and discusses several quandaries concerning matter and light which are raised by Manichaean beliefs and how these quandaries might be resolved within the Neoplatonic framework shared by John and his students.

Since little research has been done on John the Grammarian’s two homilies against the Manichaeans since their publication in 1977, I will begin by

¹ This approach to early sixth-century Greek anti-Manichaean literature arises naturally from a consideration of the education and professional careers of the authors of these texts. A number of these authors (including Zacharias Scholasticus, John Philoponus and Simplicius) are known to have studied philosophy in Alexandria under the Neoplatonist philosopher Ammonius (who had been a student of Proclus) and to have later functioned themselves as teachers and practitioners of advanced studies (i.e. grammar, rhetoric and philosophy). For Zacharias, Philoponus, and Simplicius as students of Ammonius, see Zacharias Ammonius, 92–93; 942–944 (M. Minniti Colonna, Zacaria Scholastico. Ammonio, Naples, 1973, 92, 125–126); Philoponus, In Meteor. 106,9; In Nicomachi introductionem (lib. 1) 7.4–5 (G.R. Giardina, Giovanni Filopono matematico, Catania: CUECM, 1999, 110); Simplicius In Phys. 59,23; 183,18: 192,14. In his Life of Severus Zacharias also describes Severus of Antioch as having studied in Alexandria at the same time he himself did. It is unclear from Zacharias’ Life whether Severus pursued a formal course of philosophical studies but a later biography of Severus by Athanasius Gamala (beginning of the seventh century) refers to Severus as “sitting one day reading the writings of Plato” (E.J. Goodspeed, Athanasius. The Conflict of Severus, PO 4.6, Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1908, 594).