Plotinus, Origenes, and Ammonius on the ‘King’

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1 Introduction

In the early Roman Empire the theology of Platonist philosophers became increasingly concerned with a number of Platonic texts that appeared to offer some hope of settling debate over the kind of god(s) that Plato had postulated. Most of these seemingly authoritative texts were drawn from what we refer to as the ‘middle’ and ‘late’ dialogues, sometimes but not always considered in context. Small snippets of relevant texts could be quoted for a variety of purposes, not least in order to underline the erudition, authority, and perhaps orthodoxy of the teacher himself. In this regard it had much in common with emerging early Christian theology, with which it shared some interesting traits. These traits enabled some of the early Christian writers to find a surprising pre-Christian ally in Plato, while the similarities sharpened the need felt by others, both Christians and Platonists alike, to distance themselves from their rivals.

The particular problem of Plato’s dialogues was that that they did not, in any straightforward manner, declare Plato’s beliefs; sometimes these seemed to emerge in question-and-answer materials, while at other times they appeared in myth, or when ‘Socrates’ adopted some unusual voice in response to a given source of inspiration. In all of these cases, hermeneutic disputes could easily arise. Since some seemed to have felt a deep need to penetrate to the true depths of Plato’s system and to require some lead from him concerning what was really important in the debated passages, material from the Seventh, Second, and Sixth Epistles seemed to offer the direct insights into Plato’s mind and into the reasons why the dialogues did not disclose the theological heart of his system more openly.

In this paper I shall concentrate on Platonist authors of the third century CE and try to respond to a number of ongoing problems:

1. How is it that Plotinus, regarding the interpretation of the hypotheses of the Parmenides and the esoteric passage of the spurious Epistle II, can represent himself as a simple follower of Plato, when he would today normally be regarded as highly innovative?
2. How is it that Origenes the Platonist (as opposed to the prolific Christian author of that name)\(^1\) seems to have become a regular part of the exegetic tradition of the *Parmenides* when he normally did not write, and when the titles of the two known exceptions do not suggest any relation to that dialogue?

3. Why did Proclus expect Origenes to have learned enough to avoid his ‘errors’ of interpretation from Ammonius Saccas, with whom he studied alongside Plotinus? Did Proclus think that Plotinus’ interpretation of Plato also went back to studies in Alexandria with Ammonius?

In trying to answer these problems, I hope to be able to offer some insight into the authorship of the anonymous commentary on Plato’s *Parmenides*, once preserved in a Turin palimpsest, though of course without settling this question.

2 The Works of Origenes

It is probable that most of our information about Origenes derives from Porphyry and that his contributions to Platonic exegesis came to us through Porphyry’s lost commentaries on Plato’s dialogues. He had studied under Ammonius with Plotinus and was known to Porphyry’s original teacher Longinus as the author of a treatise on *daimones*; it is from this treatise that his interpretation of the Atlantis story as a war between *daimones* (= fragment 12) is likely to have been derived. Of the thirteen named references to Origenes in Proclus, twelve occur in the first book of the *In Timaeum*, and they all concern what precedes Timaeus’ monologue. The details of material unrelated to the Atlantis story relate to matters of documented controversy between Longinus and Origenes (1.31.18–27; 1.59.31–60.4; 1.63.24–64.7; 1.68.3–15), which is shown by the third of these passages to have been at least partly oral. Porphyry hin-

\(^1\) The fragments of Origenes were collected in a monograph by Karl-Otto Weber, *Origenes der Neuplatoniker: Versuch einer Interpretation* (München: Beck, 1962 = *Zetemata* 27). The fragment numbers below refer to this edition. Also of importance is the treatment of Origenes’ first principle and the commentary tradition in H.-D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink, eds., *Proclus: Théologie Platonicienne*, tome ii (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1974), x–xx. While it is methodologically correct to separate this Origenes from the Christian, it is not certain that they are distinct.