GOD AND METHODIUS: USE OF, AND BACKGROUND TO, THE TERM ΑΠΡΟΣΔΕΗΣ AS A DESCRIPTION OF GOD IN THE WORKS OF METHODIUS OF OLYMPUS

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In his definitive monograph Methodius of Olympus: Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom, and Life in Christ, Lloyd George Patterson crowned an interest that had continued from his dissertation onwards and in many subsequent published essays. That book devoted two chapters to the topic of God and Methodius in which he first describes Methodius’ remarks on the divine nature, and then considers the question of possible sources. Nonetheless he planned to pursue the topic beyond this study in order to investigate whether it holds a particular explanation for Methodius’ use of the term ἀπροσδεής (self-sufficient) as a description of God. In one of his last letters to me he wrote, “I do wish you would send me any uses of ἀπροσδεής you run across among Christian or philosophical sources likely known to Methodius.” I would like to propose an answer here that is based upon all references in the works of those ancients, both Christian and pagan, either proven to have been known to Methodius or possibly known to him.

The term ἀπροσδεής appears in Methodius’ work De Creatis with marked frequency; there are seven occurrences, of which five are in

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3 Patterson, Methodius, 220–222.
4 Patterson, Methodius, 223–227.
6 An answer, then, dealing specifically with the use of the term ἀπροσδεής, and not with the full range of associated ideas, which were also indicated in ancient literature by the use of other terms. The wider semantic field to which the term ἀπροσδεής belongs when referring to God in the context of a certain author’s works should nonetheless be named where possible.
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Creat. 3 alone. It is always employed as a description of the self-sufficiency of God. From here it is only a small step to joining Patterson in asking the reason for these findings and their significance. Is the term simply part of the common usage of the day, or is Methodius adopting the usage of a particular group with which he felt affiliated?

I shall first take stock of the occurrences of ἀπροσδεής in the works of Methodius and formulate the problem at hand (I). Then I shall deal with the background to Methodius’ use of the term ἀπροσδεής, investigating first its appearances in connection with God in the works of those ancients known or possibly known to Methodius (II), then its application with regard to that which God created or that which issued from him (III). The results will be evaluated in the fourth section (IV).

1. The Texts and the Problem

Fragments II–VII of the work De Creatis, which has been handed down to us only in excerpts contained within Photius’ Bibliotheca, reveal an argument followed by Methodius against Origen and his followers. Methodius ascribes to Origen the assertion, “that the universe is coeternal with the only wise and self-sufficient God (συναίδιον εἶναι τῷ μόνῳ σοφῷ καὶ ἀπροσδεήθει θεῷ)” (Creat. 2.1). This assertion is substantiated by the opposing side on the grounds that God the creator can no more exist without the universe that he created than a master craftsman can without his artifacts. For it is implicit that at a point in time when God has not yet been active as creator, that is, before the universe was created, God is not to be seen as creator.

In his refutation, Methodius demonstrates that God (even as God the creator) is already perfect before the creation of the world, because he is self-sufficient and needs nothing more to be perfect, not even the act of creation. He begins with a comprehensive definition of the term τέλειος, which he expounds for the moment in general terms without giving any specific reference. The term ἀπροσδεής plays a key role here, as it is applied almost synonymously with τέλειος, “Does perfect

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7 Creat. 2.1; 3.1.2–5; 7.5; G. Nathanael Bonwetsch, Methodius (GCS 27; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1917). Patterson inexplicably counts sixteen occurrences; Methodius, 223.
8 Namely Plato, Plutarch, the First Epistle of Clement, Alcinous, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, the Kerygma Petrou, Origen, Plotinus and Porphyry.
9 References made by Plutarch, Clement of Alexandria and Plotinus are investigated here.
10 Photius, Bibliothecae codices 235, 301b–304b; PG 39.