

**Sebastian Gertz, John Dillon, Donald Russell (trans.)**

*Aeneas of Gaza, Theophrastus, with Zacharias of Mytilene, Ammonius. Ancient Commentators on Aristotle.* Pp. xxx, 181. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012. £70. ISBN:978-1-78093-209-5. €82.50.

The conflict between paganism and Christianity as it played out on the stage of the shared schoolrooms of Alexandria in the late fifth century, especially in the affair of Paralius as recounted by Zacharias of Mytilene in his *Life of Severus*, has received increasing scholarly scrutiny for over twenty-five years, as evidenced in the work of, among others, Frank Trombly (*Hellenic Religion and Christianization*), Pierre Chuvin (*Chronique des derniers païens*) and, more recently, Edward Watts (*City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* et al.) and Michael Champion (*Explaining the Cosmos: Creation and Cultural Interaction in Late-Antique Gaza*). The more philosophical texts, Zacharias' dialogue *Ammonius*, along with that of his elder compatriot Aeneas, the *Theophrastus*, both of which are prime witnesses of the engagement of Christians with chief issues of contention with the Platonic tradition as taught in Alexandria, have until now been available in English only by grace of translation of selected passages made by scholars in the course of those studies. Fortunately that gap has now been ably filled by the publication of these two dialogues, based upon the editions of the original Greek of each by Colonna. These works have been given more than adequate treatment in this full presentation of the texts, accompanied by generous notes aimed at clarifying their philosophical content. The volume furthermore benefits from a very engaging introductory essay by Richard Sorabji, as well as by the translators' valuable introductions to each author and dialogue.

Both works, although written by the successful rhetor Aeneas and the advocate Zacharias, advance philosophical arguments of distinct contemporary concern on two fronts: the nature of the soul and the manner of its resurrection, and how the world cannot be eternal, but must have been created by God. Many may read these two dialogues less for their philosophical content than as primary documentation of the Christian intellectual milieu of Gaza in the fifth and sixth century, but Sorabji in his introduction, aptly titled "Waiting for Philoponus", explains how their arguments not only anticipate those of that later opponent of the eternity of the world, but also how their method differs essentially from his. Aeneas and Zacharias often choose to echo the earlier Christian strategies of Origen and Basil of Caesarea and do not display the same philosophical rigor as Philoponus, who would engage with Neoplatonists much more on their own territory. Yet it becomes clear from Sorabji's introduction how appropriate in the context of the eternalist controversy between

Philoponus and Simplicius in response to Proclus that these works do in fact fit into the *Ancient Commentators* series.

The dialogues share points of argument, with the slightly later *Ammonius* implicitly referring to positions advanced in Aeneas' *Theophrastus* on several occasions. But, as Sorabji and the translators make clear in their respective introductions, the authors show marked differences. While *Theophrastus* is mostly concerned with the nature of the soul, *Ammonius* focuses on the question of the eternity of the world. Aeneas, although being critical of the character of the pagan Theophrastus, is never harsh, and rarely refers to Scripture, choosing instead to make literary allusions to cherished Hellenic authors across the spectrum of pagan history, while showing his close acquaintance with Plato's dialogues. His strategy is rather to overthrow the positions of Theophrastus with non-Christian proofs, although the principles that he advocates regarding God and the nature of the soul are thoroughly orthodox Christian. Zacharias, on the other hand, is thoroughly polemical, deploying Scripture as a main weapon, while also displaying his own familiarity with Plato here and there. He is, however, contentious and, on occasion, personally vituperative of his targets, the physician Gessius, and chiefly the Neoplatonist teacher Ammonius, with whom he appeared to have studied in Alexandria. Sorabji's characterization of Zacharias' approach is apt when he writes that "despite some good arguments" Zacharias reads more like a cabaret act designed to impress his Christian fellow-students (p.xxiii).

The translations of these unfamiliar texts are skillful and fluent, with attention being given to difficult or ambiguous terms, and the notes deserve special praise for the care shown in delineating the authors' arguments. Aeneas' numerous and far from pellucid allusions are clarified throughout, and attention is given to the citations and echoes of Plato made in both dialogues. The earlier Christian arguments he deploys, as discussed by Sorabji, are meticulously articulated in the notes. An example is in the annotation of *Theophrastus* 44, 1, where Aeneas is addressing the question of God's activity before Creation and how he brought into existence the intelligible world (p.39) in the *ad. loc.* note (n.155, pp.63-64), in which Gertz explicates this notion by going back to Philo and Origen. In the *Ammonius*, the note on the first use of *dēmiourgos* (n.18, p.150 to text p.104) highlights the difficulties involved in translating the term in the context of Zacharias' argument against the eternity of the world. Such detailed scholarly notes on out-of-the-way texts make this publication particularly useful to those interested in the philosophy of late antiquity in general and the history of Christian reactions to pagan Neoplatonism in particular. In a few instances both Aeneas and Zacharias do also engage directly with earlier Platonist texts, one chief example of which is Aeneas' use at *Theophrastus*, 46,