AN ECHO OF MIDDLE PLATONIST THEOLOGY
IN ALEXANDER DE FATO CH. 34

BY
JAAP MANSFELD

Part of Alexander of Aphrodisias' dialectical argument against his determinist opponents in his De fato ("On Fate or What Is Up To Us") is that some things are up to us because we are not born virtuous, or acquire virtues naturally the way we grow teeth, but have to acquire virtue through our own efforts. This is why praise and rewards are attached to good actions, and blame and punishment to evil actions (see esp. Fat. ch. 27). The gods are different from men in that they are as they are by nature, viz. good. The gods do not develop toward virtue or remain stagnant in evil ways the way most humans do. The good things the gods possess are always at their disposal and so are not up to them, viz. beyond praise, because praise can only be given to what has been acquired through efforts based on a choice between what is, and what is not, good. Accordingly, the qualities the gods possess are to be honoured and blessed, not praised: τιμιά τε καί μακαριστά, μετάφρασε τι τῶν ἑπανετῶν ἀγαθῶν ἔχοντα (Fat. ch. 32, p. 204.16 Bruns = 63.9-10 Thillet). In Fat. ch. 35, Alexander drives this point home in another way which goes beyond what Aristotle had said, p. 206.31-207.4 Br. = 67.9-14 Th.: τὸ δὲ κατορθοῦν ἐπὶ τῶν θεῶν οὐ κυρίως ἃν λέγοιτο, ἀλλ' ὡς ἢσον τῶ τὰ ἀγαθὰ ποιεῖν, εἶ γε ἐν αἷς μὲν τὸ κατορθοῦν, ἐν τούτων καί τὸ ἀμαρτάνειν, ἀνεπίδεκτον δὲ ἀμαρτήματων τὸ θεῖον. διὰ τούτο γὰρ οὐδὲ ἐπαινοῦμεν τοὺς θεοὺς, ὅτι κρείττους εἰσίν ἢ κατ' ἐπαίνους καί τὰ ἐρ' ἀἷς οἱ ἔπαινοι κατορθώματα. Sharples translates: "Acting rightly would not be applied to the gods in the strict sense, but as equivalent to 'doing what is good'..." Thillet translates: "Quant au bien agir, au sujet des dieux, on ne le saurait dire au sens propre, mais bien en lui donnant le sens qu'ils sont les auteurs des biens..." Neither Sharples nor Thillet adequately translates the word ὡς before ἢσον, or explains what is meant by the "strict sense" or "sens propre". Alexander's main point is of course clear. Morally right...
actions (note that he uses the Stoic technical vocabulary and recall that in this treatise the Stoics are his main opponents: a neat turning of the tables) cannot really be attributed to the gods, because they have no choice — there is nothing that is up to them — but simply cannot not be good, and so cannot make moral mistakes (ἀμαρτήματα: again the Stoic technical term). Furthermore, Alexander does not say or imply that the “doing” or rather “making” of good things could be attributed to the gods in the “strict sense”; all he says is that “in a way” the improper attribution to the gods of actions that are morally right is somehow equivalent to affirming that their works are good. This of course recalls the ancient argument, first found at Xenophon, Mem. IV 3, concerned with the understanding of God, or of the gods, that may be derived from the observation of his (or their) operations in the universe: the knowledge of the divine, or of the gods, through their works.6

In his commentary, Sharples remains silent on the expression οὗ κυρίως. According to Thillet’s index verborum, this is the only place in Fat. where κυρίως is connected with the verb λέγεσθαι. This terminology, as we shall see, is technical. Alexander exploits it to further his polemical purpose. Throughout the treatise, existing modes of argument of whatever provenance are cleverly exploited and adapted the better to underpin the Aristotelian libertarian point of view concerned with human responsibility, or liability, and to undermine that of the determinist opponents.

The earliest authority for the expression in a theological context is Philo, De mutatione nominum 27: ἀλλὰ γὰρ οὐδ’ ἔχειν προσήκειν ἄγνοιαν, ὅτι τὸ "ἠγώ εἰμι θεός σῶς" [cf. Gen. 17:1] λέγεται καταχρηστικῶς οὗ κυρίως. Earlier in the same treatise (Mut. 11-12), Philo has pointed out that no ὄνομα κύριον’ can be predicated of What Truly Is, but that God allows mankind to use certain appellations, however improper these may be sub specie aeternitatis (dictavit καταχρησθαι). The next parallel is to be found in Clement of Alexandria, again in a context which deals with the proper and less proper though still permitted ways of speaking about God, Strom. V xii 82.1: καὶ ὄνομα ζωμεν αὐτῷ [scil., the ineffable God] ποτε, οὐ κυρίως καλοῦντες αὐτῷ ἦτοι ἣν ἡ τάγαθαν κτλ.9 Yet, in the less proper way, we may according to Clement still call God good, or Creator. The philosophical epistemic theology at issue is beyond any doubt of Middle Platonist provenance; it survives in its most complete form in Alkinoos, Didaskalikos ch. 10. Here, three ways of knowing the First God are