

Sunt enim nonnulli qui putant esse laudabile, si
quid contra antiquos sapiant et aliquid novi,
unde periti videantur, inveniant.

*There are many who think it praiseworthy to hold
opinions contrary to those of the ancients or to
discover some new thing by which they may appear
learned.*

CASSIODORUS
— Institutes I.11

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Introduction

1- The Areopagitic Corpus and the Controversy Over Its Authorship

Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, the disciple of Saint Paul, is mentioned in the book of Acts as a Gentile convert to the faith.¹ According to tradition, after an illustrious career as the first Bishop of Athens, he left the East in his old age to go preach the Gospel in Gaul, where he was martyred.² Dionysius' writings, filled with profound apostolic wisdom, have earned him a place among the greatest doctors of the Church. The Areopagitic corpus, as it is called, comprises four books: the *Divine Names*, which explains the various designations of God; the *Celestial Hierarchy*, which illuminates the nature of the angelic orders; the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, which discusses the various sacraments and orders in the Church; and the *Mystic Theology*, a short treatise on how to unite oneself to the divine. In addition, ten letters of Saint Dionysius survive.³ These also

¹ Acts 17:34. The Areopagus—or “Hill of Ares”—after which Dionysius took his name, was a judicial court located on a stone outcropping on the northwest side of the Acropolis. It was in charge of trying serious crimes of a moral or religious nature. Its name derived from the legend that the god Ares had been tried at that location by the other gods for the murder of Poseidon's son Halirrhothius.

² Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.4) quotes Saint Dionysius of Corinth (fl. 171) as saying that Dionysius the Areopagite was the first bishop of Athens. For the Areopagite's mission to Gaul, see Chapter 5 below.

³ An eleventh letter (addressed to Apollophanes the Philosopher), is sometimes included in this collection. It is essentially a paraphrase in the first person of an existing episode recounted in *Letter 7* (to Saint Polycarp). Given that the Letter to Apollophanes exists only in Latin and is not mentioned in the commentaries of Saint Maximus (7th century), nor in Dionysius' biographical entry found in Suidas (10th century), nor in the

touch on theology, but equally deal with more day-to-day problems. They are addressed to a variety of individuals, including known figures such as Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, Bishop Titus, and Saint John the Evangelist, and unknown figures like Gaius and Demophilus.⁴ From all these works we learn that in addition to the Apostle Paul, Dionysius was instructed in the faith by a certain theologian named Hierotheos; that he personally witnessed the Crucifixion darkness, and that he was present at the burial of the Virgin Mary together with Saint Peter and Saint James of Jerusalem.

From antiquity until the sixteenth century, the works of Saint Dionysius were widely accepted as genuine and held in reverence by the entire Christian world and its most learned representatives. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find an author who has known greater or more universal acclaim. Saint Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) admired the Areopagitic works so much that he wrote commentaries on the entire corpus.⁵ The Fathers of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680-681) cite Saint Dionysius as an authority.⁶ Saint John of Damascus (d. 749), the glory of the Church, refers to him as “that most holy, and sacred, and gifted theologian,” the “divinely-inspired disciple” of Saint Paul “who had so deep a knowledge of things divine.”⁷ The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) cite Saint

paraphrase of George Pachymeres (12th century), it is safe to assume that it is not authentic.

⁴ It is possible that this Gaius is the same figure referred to in the opening of Saint John’s Third Epistle.

⁵ Text in *Patrologia graeca* 4, col. 15-576

⁶ Sixth Ecumenical Council, Sessions 4, 8, and 13. *Acta Conciliorum*, Hardouin, ed., (Paris: 1714), Volume 3, pp. 1100A, 1185C, 1342D, 1345C-D

⁷ Saint John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.3 and 3.6

Dionysius in support of the theology of icons.⁸ Hilduin of Paris (d. 855), one of the leading churchmen of the Carolingian Empire and a renowned scholar, praises him as a “river of mystic eloquence” and an “oracle of the Holy Spirit” whose writings “destroy the knots of pagan syllogisms and nullify the cult of idols” with their “magnificent perfection.”⁹ The erudite Patriarch of Constantinople Saint Photius the Great (d. 891) calls Dionysius “rich in words but even richer in wisdom, the student of Paul, martyr of Christ, and Bishop of the Athenians.”¹⁰ The Suidas lexicon (10th century) refers to him as “a man of the highest repute.”¹¹ The eleventh-century mystic Niketas Stethatos (d. 1090), the disciple of Saint Symeon the New Theologian, calls him “well-versed in the divine.”¹² Hugh of Saint Victor (d. 1141), one of the most respected ecclesiastical writers of the West, compares Dionysius’ refutation of pagan wisdom to David striking down Goliath.¹³ The Areopagite is also one of the most frequently-cited authorities in the works of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and Saint Gregory Palamas (d. 1359).

⁸ Seventh Ecumenical Council, Session 6. *Acta Conciliorum* (Hardouin), Volume 4, p. 362D. The passage quoted is the following: “For there is no strict likeness between the caused and the causes. The caused indeed possess the accepted likenesses (icons) of the causes, but the causes themselves are elevated and established above the caused, according to the ratio of their proper origin.” (*Divine Names* 2.8)

⁹ Michael Lapidge, *Hilduin of Saint-Denis: The Passio S. Dionysii in Prose and Verse*, (Brill: 2017), pp. 269, 271

¹⁰ “ὁ πολὺς μὲν τὴν γλῶσσαν πλείων δὲ τὴν θεωρίαν, ὁ μαθητὴς Παύλου καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ μάρτυς καὶ τῶν Ἀθηνῶν ἐπίσκοπος.” Photius, *Bibliotheca*, no. 231

¹¹ “ἀνὴρ ἐλλογιμώτατος.” *Suidae Lexicon* (Cambridge: 1705), Volume 1, p. 596

¹² “ὁ πολὺς τὰ θεῖα Διονύσιος.” Niketas Stethatos, *Letter V*, sec. 11, in: *Opuscules et lettres* (Jean Darrouzès, ed. [Paris: 1961], p. 258)

¹³ Hugh of Saint Victor, *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy*, *Patrologia latina* 175, col. 929-931

There were a few anonymous individuals in the early centuries who challenged the ascription of the Areopagitic writings to Saint Dionysius of Athens. Saint Maximus refers to these critics in the *Prologue* to his commentary¹⁴ (from which we will quote below), and Saint Photius similarly mentions a debate over the authorship in his *Bibliotheca*.¹⁵ However, the opinion of these critics never proved anything more than a passing cloud in the clear sky of Dionysius' reputation.

The first person in modern times to challenge the corpus outright was the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (c. 1406-1457), followed by the German Erasmus (1469-1536).¹⁶ The critique of Dionysius was then taken up by Martin Luther (1483-1546), who found Dionysius' mystical style and the early references to bishops, sacraments, monks, and prayers for the dead antithetical to his own religious opinions.¹⁷ Beginning in the

¹⁴ Some believe that this Prologue was actually the work of John of Scythopolis, a sixth-century bishop of Palestine.

¹⁵ Photius, *Bibliotheca* no. 1. The critics of Maximus' time criticized the authenticity of the works on the grounds that the early Church Fathers supposedly did not quote Dionysius. Photius mentions two additional objections: that Dionysius refers to ecclesiastical rites that did not develop fully until after the first century, and that he quotes a letter by Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote after Dionysius' time. All of these points will be satisfactorily addressed in the following pages.

¹⁶ The brief critique was included as part of Valla's literary commentary on the New Testament, which was published posthumously by Erasmus. Slightly before Valla, Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) had questioned why earlier fathers like Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome do not mention the Areopagite. (Eugene F. Rice Jr., ed., *The prefatory epistles of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and related texts*, [Columbia UP: 1972], p. 68, n10).

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, sections 7.4-6, 8.3. Labelling something "apocryphal" because it disagreed with his religious convictions seems to have been a pattern with Luther. In fact, he also wished to remove the Epistle of Saint James from the biblical canon because it openly

early seventeenth century, a great scholarly debate raged in Europe, with writers of a generally more Protestant bent attacking the corpus and Roman Catholics defending it. Each new generation added its own arguments as to why it thought the works were spurious¹⁸ or genuine. Finally, by the late nineteenth century, the prevailing academic opinion was that the works had been written by an anonymous Neoplatonist sometime in the late fifth or early sixth-century, probably in Syria. In the pages that follow, we will challenge this received opinion. Having studied the entire debate, we have distilled the best arguments put forward over the course of the past four centuries in favour of the works' authenticity, mixed in with some humble observations of our own.

contradicted his novel teaching of "salvation by faith alone"! For similar reasons, Calvin and his followers attacked the authenticity of the Ignatian letters, which today are accepted as authentic by the vast majority of scholars.

¹⁸ Spurious refers to a text that is counterfeit or inauthentic.

Another interesting element of Dionysius' description of the funeral rites is his reference to the place where the bodies of the faithful are deposited. "When all have saluted," he writes, "the Hierarch pours the oil upon the fallen asleep, and when he has offered the holy prayer for all, he places the body in a worthy chamber with other holy bodies of the same rank."¹³⁰ This "worthy chamber with other holy bodies" makes us think of the catacombs which were a characteristic feature of Christian burial in the early centuries. In sum, there is not one ritual or institution found in the Dionysian corpus which does not have an ancient Christian precedent.

iii. Anachronistic Reference to the Creed

In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius provides a description of the liturgy in which he seems to mention the Creed. However, the Creed was only adopted by the Council of Nicaea in 325 and was originally used as a confession of faith made by catechumens on Holy Friday before being baptized.¹³¹ Its recitation during every liturgy was only introduced into the Church rubrics in later centuries, probably for the purpose of combatting heresy. The alleged reference to the Creed by Dionysius would therefore constitute a blatant anachronism. Since this argument is frequently cited as conclusive "proof" of

in the communion of the body and blood of Christ, whenever their names are **mentioned at the sacrifice in the usual place**, and that it should be announced that the sacrifice is offered for them." (Trans. Augustinian Heritage Institute)

¹³⁰ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 7.2

¹³¹ See Theodorus Lector, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book II.32 (Patrologia graeca 86, col. 201A) and Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, With a History and Critical Notes*, Vol. 2 (New York: 1896), p. 29

the spuriousness of the Areopagitic corpus,¹³² we shall reproduce the entire relevant passage in order to examine it more closely:

The Hierarch, having completed a reverent prayer near the Divine Altar, starts with the incensing, and proceeds to every part of the enclosure of the sacred place; he then returns to the Divine Altar, and begins the sacred chanting of the Psalms, the whole ecclesiastical assembly chanting, with him, the sacred language of the Psalter. Next follows the reading of the Holy Scriptures by the Attendants. After these readings the Catechumens quit the sacred enclosure, as well as the Possessed, and the Penitents. But those who are deemed worthy of the sight and participation of the Divine Mysteries remain.

Of the Attendants, some stand near the closed gates of the sanctuary, whilst others perform some other duty of their own rank. But chosen members of the ministering Order with the Priests lay the holy Bread and the Cup of Blessing upon the Divine Altar **after the universal Hymn of Praise (ὕμνολογία) has been professed beforehand by the whole body of the Church.** Added to these, the Divine Hierarch makes a sacred prayer, and proclaims the holy Peace to all. When all have kissed each other, the mystical proclamation of the holy tablets is performed.

¹³² Paul Rorem and John C. Lamoreaux, op. cit., p. 9

When the Hierarch and the Priests have washed their hands in water, the Hierarch stands in the midst of the Divine Altar, and the chosen Attendants alone, with the Priests, stand around. The Hierarch, when he has sung the sacred works of God, ministers things most divine, and brings to view the things sung, through the symbols reverently exposed, and when he has shewn the gifts of the works of God, he first proceeds to the sacred participation of the same, and turns and exhorts the others. When he has received and distributed the supremely Divine Communion, he terminates with a holy thanksgiving.¹³³

Dionysius then adds some additional details:

When [the Catechumens] have been excluded from the divine temple and the service which is too high for them, the all-holy ministers and loving contemplators of things all-holy, gazing reverently upon the most pure rite, sing in a universal Hymn of Praise the Author and Giver of all good, from Whom the saving mystic Rites were exhibited to us, which divinely work the sacred deification of those being initiated. Now this **Hymn** (ὕμνον) some indeed call a confession, others, the symbol of worship, but others, as I think, more divinely, a **Hierarchical Thanksgiving**, as giving a summary of the holy gifts which come to us from God.

¹³³ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3.2

For it seems to me the record of all the works of God related to have been done for us in song, which, after it had benevolently fixed our being and life, and moulded the Divine likeness in ourselves to beautiful archetypes, and placed us in participation of a more Divine condition and elevation; but when it beheld the lack of Divine gifts, which came upon us by our heedlessness, is declared to have called us back to our first condition, by goods restored, and by the complete assumption of what was ours, to have made good the most perfect impartation of His own, and thus to have given to us a participation in God and Divine things.¹³⁴

As anyone can see, nowhere does Dionysius ever mention the Creed. He refers only to a hymn which he calls the “hymn of praise” (ὕμνολογία) and the “hierarchical thanksgiving” (ἱεραρχικὴ εὐχαριστία).¹³⁵ Moreover, although in the first passage Dionysius says that this hymn is professed by the “whole body (πλήρωμα) of the Church,” in the second passage he specifies that it is sung only by “the all-holy ministers (ἱερουργοί).” As a matter of fact, the word πλήρωμα in ecclesiastical Greek, although it usually means “congregation,” can also be used to refer exclusively to the clergy.¹³⁶ This is

¹³⁴ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3.3.7

¹³⁵ In Greek, the Creed is referred to as “the symbol of the faith,” a term absent from Dionysius’ text.

¹³⁶ See, e.g. Saint Basil, *Letter 69* (Patrologia graeca 32, col. 429B): “Now, from the sacred ranks of your clergy (τοῦ ἱεροῦ πληρώματος), you have sent forth the venerable brother Peter, whom I have welcomed with great joy.” *Ibid.*, *Letter 240* (Patrologia graeca 32, col. 897B): “I have written thus...to prevent anyone from being prematurely received into communion, or after receiving the laying on of hands of our enemies, when peace is made, later on, trying to force me to enroll them in the ranks of the sacred ministry (τῶ

consistent with Dionysius' description of it as "hierarchical," a word he reserves for bishops.

Far from referring to the Creed, Dionysius' description of this hymn closely corresponds to the "prayer of thanksgiving" found in the various eastern liturgies. In the liturgy included in the eighth book of the *Apostolic Constitutions*,¹³⁷ which is the earliest complete liturgy we have in existence, this prayer occurs after the dismissal of the catechumens and immediately precedes the holy oblation. It recounts in detail how God created the universe and praises Him for all the blessings He has visited upon His chosen people:

It is very meet and right before all things **to hymn You**, who art the true God, who art before all beings, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named...And when You made [man], You gave him a law implanted within him; and when You had brought him into the paradise of pleasure, You allowed him the privilege of enjoying all things, only forbidding the tasting of one tree, in hopes of greater

ἱερατικῶ πληρώματι)." Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily 3 on Philipians* (Patrologia graeca 62, col. 204, section 217F): "For when the whole people stands with uplifted hands, a priestly assembly (πλήρωμα ἱερατικόν), and that awful Sacrifice lies displayed, how shall we not prevail with God by our entreaties for them?" Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book X.1 (Leipzig: 1913, p. 126): The presbyters, however, of the same city, Asterius and Crispinus, and the rest of the clergy (τὸ ἄλλο πλήρωμα), convened a council, at which some of the neighbouring bishops were present, and sent to Eunomius and his party, demanding to be admitted into communion by them."

¹³⁷ The *Apostolic Constitutions* were compiled by an anonymous redactor in the second half of the fourth century on the basis of earlier materials, some of which go back to the first century.

blessings; that in case he would keep that command, he might receive the reward of it, which was immortality. But when he neglected that command, and tasted of the forbidden fruit, by the seduction of the serpent and the counsel of his wife, You justly cast him out of paradise. Yet of Your goodness You did not overlook him, nor allow him to perish utterly, for he was Your creature; but You subjected the whole creation to him, and granted him liberty to procure himself food by his own sweat and labours, while You caused all the fruits of the earth to spring up, to grow, and to ripen. But when You had laid him asleep for a while, You with an oath called him to a restoration again, loosed the bond of death, and promise him life after the resurrection....

But after the law of nature, after the exhortations in the positive law, after the prophetic reproofs and the government of the angels, [Christ] was pleased by Your good will to become man, who was man's Creator; to be under the laws, who was the Legislator; to be a sacrifice, who was a High Priest; to be a sheep, who was the Shepherd. And He appeased You, His God and Father, and reconciled You to the world, and freed all men from the wrath to come...Being mindful, therefore, of His passion, and death, and resurrection from the dead, and return into the heavens, and His future second appearing, wherein He is to come with glory and power to judge the quick and the dead, and to recompense to every one according to his works, we offer to You, our King and our God, according to His constitution, this bread and this cup, **giving You**

thanks, through Him, that You have thought us worthy to stand before You, and to sacrifice to You.

And we beseech You that You will mercifully look down upon these gifts which are here set before You...and accept them, to the honour of Your Christ, and send down upon this sacrifice Your Holy Spirit, the Witness of the Lord Jesus' sufferings, that He may show this bread to be the body of Your Christ, and the cup to be the blood of Your Christ, that those who are partakers thereof may be strengthened for piety, may obtain the remission of their sins, may be delivered from the devil and his deceit, may be filled with the Holy Ghost, may be made worthy of Your Christ, and may obtain eternal life upon Your reconciliation to them, O Lord Almighty.¹³⁸

A similar prayer occurs in the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, a version of the ancient rite followed in Syria. The prayer occurs in the following context: when the liturgy of the catechumens has ended, the choir chants, "the mercy of peace, the sacrifice of praise." Next, the priest exclaims, "let us give thanks to the Lord," after which he says the following:

It is meet and just **to hymn Thee**, to bless Thee, to praise Thee, to give thanks to Thee, to worship Thee in every place of Thy dominion. For Thou art God ineffable, and passing all knowledge, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-living, self-existing; Thou, and Thine Only-begotten Son, and Thy Holy Spirit.

¹³⁸ *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.12. The prayer is very similar to the Anaphora of Saint Basil.

Thou, from nothing, hast brought us forth into being, and when fallen, Thou hast raised us up again, and hast not ceased from doing all that could lead us to heaven, and hast bestowed on us Thy kingdom which is to come. For all these things **we give thanks** unto Thee, and to Thine Only-begotten Son, and Thy Holy Ghost...

Yet offer we unto Thee this reasonable and unbloody worship, and call upon Thee, and beseech, and supplicate Thee; send down Thy Holy Ghost upon us, and upon these gifts lying before Thee...And make this bread the precious Body of Thy Christ, and that which is in this cup, the precious Blood of Thy Christ, changing them by Thy Holy Spirit, so that they may be, to those who receive them, for the cleansing of their soul, for remission of sins, for communion of Thy Holy Spirit, for the fulness of the kingdom of heaven, for confidence in Thee, not for judgment or for condemnation.

The “prayer of thanksgiving” in both liturgies perfectly matches what Dionysius says of his “hierarchical thanksgiving”: it speaks of the creation of man, the Fall, the Redemption, and ends with a reference to the Holy Gifts.

iv. Monasticism

Dionysius refers to the order of monks. However, organized monasticism only appeared in the fourth century after the time of Saint Anthony the Great. Therefore, the argument goes, the Areopagitic works must be spurious. Now, if by “organized

substance.¹⁵³ But what need is there to quote Origen, Clement, and Philo when Saint Paul himself uses the word in exactly the same way as Dionysius to refer to the divine person of the Father: “Who [Christ] being the brightness of [the Father’s] glory, and the express image of His person (hypostasis), and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.”¹⁵⁴

vi. Borrowings from Proclus

This is by far the most popular objection to the authenticity of the works of Saint Dionysius. This particular argument dates back to 1895. In that year, the German Jesuit Joseph Stiglmayr and the classicist Hugo Koch published two articles pointing out similarities between certain passages of Saint Dionysius’ *Divine Names* and the treatise entitled *On the Existence of Evils* written by the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus (412-485).¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ “[Light] has no character (hypostasis) of its own, but is generated from flame, and when this is wholly and completely extinguished in all its parts, it follows of necessity that the light also must be extinguished.” *On the Eternity of the World*, sec. 92

¹⁵⁴ Hebrews 1:3. Ilaria Ramelli has argued that Origen’s terminology was influenced by the Pauline use of the word in this passage. See “Origen, Greek Philosophy, and the Birth of the Trinitarian Meaning of ‘Hypostasis,’” *The Harvard Theological Review* 105.3 (2012), pp. 302-350.

¹⁵⁵ Josef Stiglmayr, “Der Neuplatoniker Proklus als Vorlage des sogenannten Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Übel,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895), pp. 253–273 and 721–748; Hugo Koch, “Proklus als Quelle des Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen,” *Philologus* 54 (1895), pp. 438–454. Koch later devoted a full monograph to proving the alleged relationship between Dionysius and Neoplatonism: *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in seinen Beziehungen zum Neuplatonismus und Mysterienwesen*

They concluded that the author of the *Divine Names* must have drawn from Proclus and, therefore, could not have lived in the first century. The table below displays the main similarities between the two works (additional parallels between Dionysius and Proclus can be found in Appendix I). The two numbers listed after the passages in Proclus' column refer respectively to the pagination of the 1864 *editio princeps*¹⁵⁶ of Proclus' treatise¹⁵⁷ and to the page numbers of its 2003 English translation.¹⁵⁸

Dionysius	Proclus
<p>Long before the difference between the just man and his opposite is made manifest externally, in the very soul itself the vices stand altogether apart from the virtues, and the passions rebel against the reason; and from this we must grant some evil contrary to the Good. For the Good is not contrary to Itself, but as the product from one Source and one Cause, It rejoices in fellowship and</p>	<p>In general, the manifest oppositions between good and evil men exist long before in a hidden way within the souls themselves...Now, if vices are contrary to virtues, as we have said, and evil is in every respect contrary to good—for the nature of the good itself is not so constituted as to be in discord with itself, but being an offspring of one cause and one henad,¹⁵⁹</p>

(Mainz: 1900). For a summary of the main arguments in English, see the 1909 article written by Stiglmayr for the *Catholic Encyclopedia* entitled “Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite,” available on newadvent.org.

¹⁵⁶ An *editio princeps* refers to the first published edition of a work.

¹⁵⁷ *Procli philosophi Platonici opera inedita*, Victor Cousin, ed., (Paris: 1864), col. 196-267

¹⁵⁸ *On the Existence of Evils*. Trans. Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel (New York: 2003), pp. 57-104

¹⁵⁹ Henad is a philosophical term meaning “monad” or “unit.”

<p>unity and friendship. Nor yet is the lesser good opposed to the greater, for neither is the less heat or cold opposed to the greater. (<i>Divine Names</i> 4.19)</p>	<p>it maintains a relation of likeness, unity, and friendship with itself...it is absolutely necessary that the vices be...really evil and not just something less good. For the lesser good is not contrary to the greater good, just as the less hot is not contrary to the more hot nor the less cold to the more cold. (201/60)</p>
<p>For we also say, that the air around us becomes dark by failure and absence of light, and yet the light itself is always light, that which enlightens even the darkness. (4.24)</p>	<p>For the sun nothing is dark, for even to darkness it imparts a weak clarity; for the air, however, darkness is a privation of the light that exists in it. (208/65)</p>
<p>Whilst privation of good is partial, it is not, as yet, an evil; and when it has become an accomplished fact, the nature of the evil has departed also. (4.29)</p>	<p>For the presence of privation does not yet entail that there is evil, whereas total privation implies that the evil nature has disappeared. (239/86)</p>
<p>The Good will be beginning and end of all, even things evil, for, for the sake of the Good are all things, both those that are good, and those</p>	<p>Evils, then, do not have a principal cause for their generation, a so-called efficient cause...nor do evils attain the final goal, for the</p>

<p>that are contrary...Wherefore the Evil has not a subsistence, but a parasitical subsistence (<i>parhypostasis</i>), coming into being for the sake of the Good, and not of itself. (4.31)</p>	<p>sake of which everything that comes about exists. Therefore it is appropriate to call such generation a <i>parhypostasis</i>. (254/95)</p>
<p>Not all things are evil to all, nor the same things evil in every respect. To a demon, evil is to be contrary to the good-like mind; to a soul, to be contrary to reason; to a body, to be contrary to nature. (4.32)</p>	<p>There are three things in which evil exists, namely the particular soul, the image of the soul, and the body of individual beings...Evil for the first is being contrary to intellect; for the second it is being contrary to reason...and for the third it is being contrary to nature. (259/99)</p>

Clearly, one text drew from the other. The question is, which one? Stiglmayr and Koch contended that Proclus had to be the original for three reasons:¹⁶⁰ (1) the discussion of evil in Dionysius reflects the doctrinal controversies on the nature of evil within the Platonic tradition, in particular the teaching of Proclus' master Syrianus; (2) the use of the term *parhypostasis* to describe evil's dependence on the Good is specific to Proclus; (3) Dionysius' text looks like a summary of Proclus' arguments: where Proclus offers elaborate reasoning and discussion,

¹⁶⁰ Arguments summarized in: Christian Schäfer, "Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr on Dionysius and Proclus," *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* (2022), pp. 571-572

Dionysius merely states conclusions. We will address each of these arguments in detail.

First of all, the alleged “Platonism” of Dionysius has been greatly overstated. In fact, *all* of the central philosophical claims that Dionysius makes about evil in the *Divine Names* can be found, without exception, in Christian writings of the first four centuries.

Claim 1: Evil cannot come from the Good

Dionysius believes that Good is metaphysically incapable of producing evil: “The Evil is not from the Good, and if it is from the Good, it is not the Evil. For it is not the nature of fire to make cold, **nor of Good to bring into being things not good.**”¹⁶¹ This principle is stated quite plainly in the Gospel: “Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. **A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit,** neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.”¹⁶² Athenagoras of Athens writes that “**virtue is opposed by its very nature to vice** and...contraries war against one another by a divine law,”¹⁶³ while Clement of Alexandria even employs the same metaphor involving heat that Dionysius does: “As the nature of the beneficent is to do good, as it is of the fire to warm, and the light to give light, and a good man will not do evil, or light produce darkness, or fire cold; so, again, **vice cannot do anything virtuous.**”¹⁶⁴ Finally, Origen states: “If a bad nature cannot do good, **neither can a good nature do evil.**”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ *Divine Names* 4.19

¹⁶² Matthew 7:17-18. Dionysius actually cites this verse at *Divine Names* 4.21.

¹⁶³ *Apology*, section 3

¹⁶⁴ *Stromata*, Book VI.17

¹⁶⁵ *On First Principles* 2.5.2

Claim 2: Evil is not an end in itself

One of the arguments that Dionysius uses to prove that evil cannot have an independent existence is the fact that no one does evil for evil's sake. As he says, "if the things existing desire the Beautiful and Good, and whatever they do, they do for the sake of that which seems good...how shall the Evil be in things existing?"¹⁶⁶ Although the idea that evil is involuntary was expressed in Plato's *Meno*, one finds it in ancient Christian literature as well. For example, Clement of Alexandria writes that "**no one prefers evil as evil**, but induced by the pleasure that is in it, and imagining it good, considers it desirable."¹⁶⁷ Origen claimed that "**whoever sins entertains wrong beliefs**,"¹⁶⁸ and Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395) writes: "Since all humans have a natural inclination towards the Good and every choice is directed towards It as the aim of all of life's endeavours, the inability to evaluate what is truly good is usually the cause of most errors; for **if what is truly good was manifest to all, we would not fail to attain it** on account of its nature being Goodness; and we would not voluntarily experience evil unless things were not coloured with a false appearance of the Good."¹⁶⁹

Claim 3: Evil is a privation of the Good

Dionysius claims that evil things are simply a privation or perversion of what is good: "The Evil, insofar as it is evil, makes no single essence or birth, but only, as far as it can, pollutes and

¹⁶⁶ *Divine Names* 4.19

¹⁶⁷ *Stromata*, Book I.17

¹⁶⁸ *Homily on Ezekiel* 9.1

¹⁶⁹ *On the Dead*, *Patrologia graeca* 46, col. 497B-500A

destroys the subsistence of things existing.”¹⁷⁰ This idea was also expressed by Christian authors many centuries before Proclus:

Origen (c. 185-253): To depart from good is nothing else than to be made bad. For it is certain that **to lack goodness is to be evil**...Now some have held that since evil is not based in the constitution of things (for it did not exist at the beginning and at the end it will have ceased), **the evils of which we spoke are the Nothing**...All, then, who have part in Him who is (and the saints have part in Him), may properly be called beings; but those who have given up their part in the Being, **by depriving themselves of Being, have become not-beings**.¹⁷¹

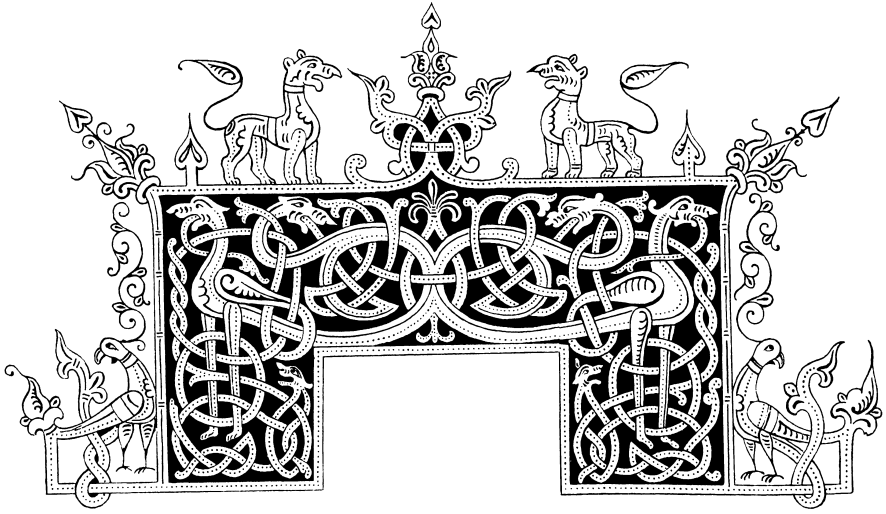
Novatian (c. 200-258): If “everything was very good” [Genesis 1:31], consequently, and reasonably, both those things which were ordained have proved that He that ordained them is good, and those things which are the work of a good Ordainer cannot be other than good; wherefore **every evil is a departure from God**.¹⁷²

Saint Methodius of Olympus (died c. 311): Murder is not a substance, nor is any other evil; but the substance receives a cognate name from putting it into practice. For a man is not murder, but by committing it he receives the derived name of

¹⁷⁰ *Divine Names* 4.20

¹⁷¹ *On First Principles* 2.9.2; *Commentary on John* 2.7

¹⁷² *On the Trinity*, ch. 4



Encomium of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite
By Michael Syncellus

Truly, one would need a heavenly and divine tongue, similar to those God-sent and fiery tongues⁵⁸⁴ which were apportioned to the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,⁵⁸⁵ and an angelic voice, if one wished to laud Dionysius the revealer of God, the extoller of the all-beholding Deity which encircles and contains all things in perfect goodness and is worshipped and adored in the supersubstantial and superdivine and exceedingly good Trinity—Dionysius, the most superb theological interpreter of the appellations of God and inexpressible divine mysteries; the expounder of the heavenly hierarchy and praiser and adorer of the heavenly intelligible hosts; the initiate and initiator and exhibitor of the hierarchical office and holy rites and ceremonies and of the entire sacred wisdom and splendour of the Christians, who because of the purity of his life and perfection

⁵⁸⁴ Acts 2:3

⁵⁸⁵ Luke 1:2

in all the virtues was entrusted by holy Paul with the revelation of the visions and sounds he saw and heard when he was caught up to the third heaven⁵⁸⁶—Dionysius, the comrade and associate of the Apostolic choir and their equal in holy struggles, the most holy among hierarchs, the brightest among martyrs, the most divinely-wise among theologians, and the most illuminating among teachers.

On which account, O divine priesthood,⁵⁸⁷ and holy people, and God-chosen assembly, I feared that in attempting to sing the praises of such a great luminary, I would incur the crime of arrogance. For even if the eloquence of all the orators who have ever lived was gathered together—much less my own feeble powers of speech—one would still fall short of the sublimity of praise that the celebrated theologian deserves. Nevertheless, yielding to your insistent love and faith, I will offer what I am able to God, and to the Saint, and to you. Even if I fail in the task of composing praises suitable to the virtues, excellencies, and feats of the one being praised, I rejoice greatly in my failure, since it is no loss to the one receiving acclaim if the one acclaiming him prove incapable of finding sufficient expressions to praise him.

Where, then, shall I begin my tribute? Shall I employ the usual laws of rhetoric in my encomium, taking as my subject what is earthly, perishable, ever-changing, and destructible, that is, the family and country, the wealth and worldly glory, not to mention the reputation of one who is so much more elevated than all these things and superior to the mutable glory and vaunt of man? Or rather, shall I speak of those incorruptible and

⁵⁸⁶ 2 Corinthians 12:2-4

⁵⁸⁷ Cf. 1 Peter 2:9

truly blessed and eternal trophies which he acquired through his most excellent conversion from the religion of the idols to Christ the True God, and by his angelic instruction and strenuous labours? For how will recounting the genealogy of his earth-bound parents who wallowed in the mire and, what's more, were captives to superstition, redound to the true honour of him who was deemed worthy of the adoption of God, the King of All; who was numbered among the heavenly orders of the angels and vested with the same hierarchical and apostolic radiance as Peter and Paul the preachers of God; who became a member of that blessed generation, and was likewise crowned with the crown of martyrdom?

Or what distinction will a homeland fit for horses and rich in flocks, surrounded by fields and mountains and glens and gullies, thickly covered by meadows and groves and all manner of trees and plants, encompassed by sea-harbours, flowing abundantly with rivers and fountains and lakes, graced with spaciousness, and displaying the tombs of its builders as a marvel to the passerby⁵⁸⁸—what will all this add to one who possessed the heavenly city of Jerusalem, whose walls are painted by God and where one finds the habitation of the joyful,⁵⁸⁹ the song of those who feast,⁵⁹⁰ and the voice of rejoicing?⁵⁹¹

Though we have spoken of all these things by way of introduction, judging the most blessed one to be above the

⁵⁸⁸ The Athenian quarter of Ceramicus, northwest of the Acropolis, was the site of a large cemetery with numerous funerary sculptures. It formed part of the Sacred Way leading from Athens to Eleusis.

⁵⁸⁹ Psalm 86:7, Vulgate numbering

⁵⁹⁰ Psalm 41:5

⁵⁹¹ Psalm 46:2

mundane and far-removed from the earthly, the truth is that he did not hail from an obscure lineage, nor was his homeland an insignificant one, nor indeed was he the citizen of some common town. For what part of the world has not heard of the glory of Greece? Or who is ignorant of Athens, the jewel of Greece, the famed and all-celebrated city, the dwelling place of the philosophers and the training ground and school of the most eminent orators? This is where the famous Dionysius originated and where he was a renowned magistrate, serving as one of the chief and preeminent judges of the Areopagus, whose illustrious and most glorious ancestry is treated at length by the writers of the *Atthides*, Androtion and Philochorus.⁵⁹² Hence, one is able to infer that his ancestors were men of authority, rank and fame, for the high-minded Athenians would never have promoted a man to such an elevated estate were he not distinguished by his wisdom, good sense, temperance, justice, courage, and the great reputation of his family.

The surpassing nobility, and virtue, and knowledge, and wisdom, and breadth of eloquence of that intellectual beacon is also clearly demonstrated by the sacred and all-wise narrative of the Apostolic Acts composed by the most truth-loving and wise Luke, when he describes those in Athens who believed on account of the teaching and speech that the God-inspired and

⁵⁹² Ancient historians of Athenian history who lived in the fourth and third centuries B.C., respectively. In a fragment of their works preserved by Saint Maximus, they state that the Areopagus was a high tribunal that originally consisted of nine men, but was later expanded to include fifty-one of the most illustrious citizens of the city who were distinguished by their noble birth, wealth, and good character (Patrologia graeca 4, col. 16-17). The adjective "Atthid" was commonly used by learned writers as a synonym for "Attic" or "Athenian" (Atthis being the name of the legendary princess of Athens from whom the land of Attica took its name).

blessed Paul delivered upon the Areopagus: for he singles him out with a particular expression, saying, *Among whom was Dionysius the Areopagite.*⁵⁹³ He did not say, “Among whom was a man by the name of Dionysius,” but *Among whom was Dionysius the Areopagite*, hinting thereby that his name was on every man’s lips and that he was well-known to all. And may no one doubt that these few words enclose such a lofty meaning, for even though the words are few, their power in showcasing the renown of the admirable man is great. Indeed, Moses the God-seer employed a similarly short expression in his account of the Creation when he made mention of Melchizedek, who was the foreshadowing of our spiritual priesthood, naming neither the parents who bore him nor whence he came;⁵⁹⁴ yet he left his memory as an immortal monument to be forever celebrated by future generations. Come then, most blessed Luke, O evangelist of universal salvation and joy, mighty herald of the ineffable incarnation of God the Word and most accurate orator of His divine signs and wonders, come and tell us who and what sort of man this Dionysius is, and expand upon those exceedingly brief and holy words by which you introduced the sacred doctor!

Here, he says, is the most glorious of the leading men and nobles of Greece, the crown of the Areopagus, whose fame rests less on his rank than his rank is ennobled by his virtue. Here is one who excelled in all manner of dialectical learning, the most learned among Stoics and Epicureans and other philosophers, the most Attic and articulate among Atticists and grammarians, the most rhetorical among rhetoricians, the most perceptive

⁵⁹³ Acts 17:34

⁵⁹⁴ Genesis 14:18-20. For Melchizedek’s symbolism of the Christian priesthood, see Hebrews 7.

among those who busy themselves with astronomy, the most precise in the other liberal disciplines, but also the most perfect in the tetrad of the virtues. He is the one who held the unwavering scales of justice, who was the most equitable of the magistrates of Athens; and he was all these things while still being bound to the Gentile religion, while still steeped in the abominations of Zeus and given to the idolatrous rites of Pallas Athena; while he still embraced the fanciful theology of Orpheus (who attracts all things with his musical melodies),⁵⁹⁵ and happily accepted Hesiod's *Theogony*, which is truly fit for old wives.⁵⁹⁶

But when the salvific grace which shone upon all men had dispersed the mist of Greek folly and drunkenness and had chased away every idolatrous delusion, and the disciples of our God and Saviour Christ, flying and running through the entire world like eagles with spread wings, had illumined the world with the light of divine knowledge, Paul, the mightiest theologian and most divine Apostle to the Gentiles, the trumpet that echoed unto the heavens and the chosen vessel,⁵⁹⁷ visited Athens, trumpeting the world-saving and life-bearing proclamation and announcing the divine name of the Lord. Having seen that the city surpassed all the other cities of Greece in its devotion to the idols, he was enflamed by a divine zeal

⁵⁹⁵ Orpheus was a mythical Thracian enchanter who was said to have the power to entrance animals with his tunes. In the sixth century B.C. a mystical cult known as Orphism appeared in Greece. It was dualistic in nature, involved secret rituals, and founded its theology on an apocryphal corpus of poems attributed to Orpheus.

⁵⁹⁶ The *Theogony* was a fantastical poem written by the poet Hesiod (c. 8th century B.C.) relating the genealogies of the various gods and monsters.

⁵⁹⁷ Acts 9:15