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**Accueil** > A pagan philosopher writes against Manichaeism: Alexander of Lycopolis and his "Against the Manichaeans"

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## A PAGAN PHILOSOPHER WRITES AGAINST MANICHAISM: ALEXANDER OF LYCOPOLIS AND HIS "AGAINST THE MANICHAEANS"

While re-reading Anthony Kaldellis' *A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities* I came across the following entry (p.129):

Around A.D. 300, one Alexander of Lycopolis wrote a treatise *Against the Manichaeans*, which begins with a lucid account of the transformation of Christian thought in his time.

"The philosophy of the Christians is fairly simple. It is mostly concerned with ethical teaching and gives only hints when it comes to the more esoteric questions about the nature of God... . Its precepts are rather crude, but they do help the common people improve their lives. However, later generations subdivided this philosophy by engaging in contentious disputations to which there can really be no solution, and the people have been led into fractious quarrels too. As each of these teachers strives to impress others by the novelty of his doctrines, they have turned this formerly simple philosophy into an unspeakable mess."

It is unknown whether Alexander was a pagan or a Christian himself.

This, I think, is really rather interesting! It certainly sounds like a pagan, rather than a Christian.

I'd never heard of Alexander of Lycopolis, so I found myself scurrying around to find information about his book.

The title of the work in the manuscript is Ἀλεξάνδρου Λυκοπολίτου, ἐπιστρέψαντος ἐξ ἔθνων, πρὸς τὰς Μανιχαίου δόξας. A misunderstanding of this title by the first editor, Combefis, led earlier scholars to suppose that it was a work by a pagan convert to *Manichaeism*, who then became Bishop of Lycopolis. It should be understood as "Alexander of Lycopolis, converted from the pagans, against the teaching of the Manichaeans".

But there is nothing in the text that suggests a Christian writer. Rather this is the work of a pagan philosopher, a Platonist, responding to the infiltration of Manichaeans into his own lectures, who started carrying off his students. They are named as Papos and Thomas, and both appear in Manichaean literature in Egypt.

The discovery of physical books at Medinet Madu and Kellis makes plain that Manichaeism was very successful in Egypt, just as gnosticism had been. It quickly became illegal because Mani was seen as a Persian, and so a threat to state security.

Alexander talks about Christianity, because he sees Manichaeism as a Christian heresy. In this he is correct. In fact I am told that it is explicitly stated in the Cologne Mani codex that Mani was educated in an Elchesaite environment.<sup>[1]</sup>

The standard edition of the text is A. Brinkmann, *Alexander Lycopolitanus: Contra Manichaei Opiniones Disputatio*, B.G.Teubner (1895), [online at Archive.org](https://www.archive.org/details/alexanderlycopolitanus01brinkmann). From this I learn that the oldest manuscript is in Florence, Mediceo-Laurentianus plutei IX codex 23, of the 9th-10th century, in which the text appears between Didymus the Blind, *Contra Manichaeos*, and a fragment of Methodius. This does not appear to be online. The other mss are merely derived from it:

- Ottobonianus gr. 194, paper, 15-16th c.
- Vindobonensis theol. gr. 52 (or possibly 193), paper, 16th c.
- Barberini III 81, paper, '16-17th c.'

and a number of 17th century copies. The text seems to have no conclusion, so I would suspect that it has not reached us in a complete form.

It was first edited by Franciscus Combefis in *Bibliothecae graecorum patrum auctarii nobissimi*, part 2, Paris, 1672, with a Latin translation. A reprint of this by Galland in 1768 was reprinted by Migne in the *Patrologia Graeca* 18, col. 411, in 1857. Brinkmann' edition begins thus:

Ι Ἡ Χριστιανῶν φιλοσοφία ἀπλῇ καλεῖται. αὕτη <sup>f.179</sup>  
δὲ ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ ἡθους κατασκευὴν τὴν πλείστην ἐπι- <sup>p.3C</sup>  
μέλειαν ποιεῖται ἀνιττομένη περὶ τῶν ἀκριβεστέρων  
λόγων περὶ θεοῦ· ὧν τὸ κεφάλαιον τῆς περὶ ταῦτα  
σπουδῆς εἰκότως ἂν ἅπαντες ἀποδέξαιντο, ἔνθα τὸ 5  
ποιητικὸν αἷτιον τιμιώτατον τίθενται καὶ πρεσβύτατον  
καὶ πάντων αἷτιον τῶν ὄντων. ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῖς ἡθικοῖς  
τὰ ἐργωδέστερα παραλείποντες, οἷον τίς τε ἡ ἡθικὴ  
ἀρετὴ καὶ λογικὴ, καὶ ὅσα λέγεται περὶ ἡθῶν καὶ  
παθῶν, περὶ τὸν ὑποθετικὸν διατρίβουσι τρόπον, στοι- 10  
χεῖα μὲν πρὸς ἐκάστης ἀρετῆς ἀνάληψιν οὐκ ἀποδι-  
δόντες, παραγγέλματα δὲ παχύτερα ὥς ἐτύγγανεν ἐπι-  
σωρεύοντες, ὧν ὁ πολὺς δῆμος ἀκούων — ὥς ἐκ τῆς  
πείρας ἔστι μαθεῖν — σφόδρα ἐπιδίδωσιν εἰς ἐπιεί-  
κειαν, καὶ τῆς εὐσεβείας χαρακτὴρ ἐνιζάνει αὐτῶν τοῖς 15  
ἡθεσιν ἀναζωπυρῶν τὸ ἐκ τῆς τοιαύτης συνηθείας  
συνειλημμένον ἡθος καὶ κατ' ὀλίγον εἰς τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ  
αὐτοῦς ὁρεξίν ὁδηγῶν.

Because the work was printed among the fathers, it was generally assumed to be by Alexander, bishop of Lycopolis, although no evidence of this was forthcoming. For the same reason it was translated in the 19th century and appears in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, in a

truly wretched English translation from the Galland edition in 1869 by a certain James B. H. Hawkins, Curate of Ilminster. This may be read [here](#), if you try hard enough. As a sample, here is the beginning of chapter 1:

The philosophy of the Christians is termed simple. But it bestows very great attention to the formation of manners, enigmatically insinuating words of more certain truth respecting God; the principal of which, so far as any earnest serious purpose in those matters is concerned, all will have received when they assume an efficient cause, very noble and very ancient, as the originator of all things that have existence. For Christians leaving to ethical students matters more toilsome and difficult, as, for instance, what is virtue, moral and intellectual; and to those who employ their time in forming hypotheses respecting morals, and the passions and affections, without marking out any element by which each virtue is to be attained, and heaping up, as it were, at random precepts less subtle-the common people, hearing these, even as we learn by experience, make great progress in modesty, and a character of piety is imprinted on their manners, quickening the moral disposition which from such usages is formed, and leading them by degrees to the desire of what is honourable and good.

But this being divided into many questions by the number of those who come after, there arise many, just as is the case with those who are devoted to dialectics, some more skilful than others, and, so to speak, more sagacious in handling nice and subtle questions; so that now they come forward as parents and originators of sects and heresies. And by these the formation of morals is hindered and rendered obscure; for those do not attain unto certain verity of discourse who wish to become the heads of the sects, and the common people is to a greater degree excited to strife and contention. And there being no rule nor law by which a solution may be obtained of the things which are called in question, but, as in other matters, this ambitious rivalry running out into excess, there is nothing to which it does not cause damage and injury.

Ugh! It appears to be in English, but not a single idea is conveyed to the mind.

Fortunately a more modern translation exists, P.W. van der Horst & J. Mansfeld, *An Alexandrian Platonist against Dualism: Alexander of Lycopolis' Treatise 'Critique of the Doctrines of Manichaeus'*, Leiden, 1974.

The philosophy of the Christians is a simple philosophy. It is chiefly devoted to ethical instruction, while in so far as relatively precise statements of the Christians about God are concerned it remains ambiguous. The endeavours in this direction amount to the assumption that the productive cause is the most honourable, the most important and the cause of all beings, an idea to which, in all fairness, no one will take exception. In ethics too they avoid the more difficult problems such as what is ethical and what is intellectual virtue and the whole subject of dispositions and affections. Hence they merely devote themselves to ethical exhortation, without laying down the principles according to which each individual virtue should be acquired, but indiscriminately heaping up precepts of a rather ponderous nature. Ordinary people listen to

these precepts and, as you can see with your own eyes, make great progress in virtue, and a stamp of piety is imprinted on their characters, stimulating the moral disposition which grows from this sort of habituation and leading them by degrees towards the desire of the good.

Since this simple philosophy has been split up into numerous factions by its later adherents, the number of issues has increased just as in sophistry, with the result that some of these men became even more skilful and, so to speak, more prone to creating issues than others. Indeed some of them, in the long run, became leaders of sects. Consequently, ethical instruction declined and grew dim, since none of those who wanted to be leaders of sects was able to attain theoretical precision and since the common people became more inclined to internal strife. For there was no norm or laws on the basis of which issues could be decided.

Which at least means something.

There is a commentary by André Villey, Alexandre de Lycopolis, Contre la doctrine de Mani, Paris: Cerf 1985. This I have not seen.

There is also a useful article by Johannes van Oort on the present state of research.<sup>[2]</sup> An earlier draft is accessible on Academia [here](#).

An obscure and interesting work.

1. <sup>[1]</sup>This from Pieter W. van der Horst, "Alexander of Lycopolis on Christianity", in: *Polyhistor: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ancient Philosophy. Presented to Jaap Mansfeld on his Sixtieth Birthday*, 1996, p.314, with reference "S. Lieu, Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire 1-85". There is a Google books preview of van Horst which infuriatingly makes pages visible at random. I have found paging down past invisible pages to a visible page, then paging back up again sometimes makes the upper pages visible again! Link [here](#).↩

2. <sup>[2]</sup>J. Van Oort, "The Platonist Philosopher Alexander of Lycopolis on Manichaeism", *Journal of Early Christian History* 2 (2012), p.86-94.↩

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