

This is a post-print version of ‘Berg R.M. van den (2019), An ancient commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* Bespreking van: Tarrant (H.) (2017) Proclus: Commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. Book 5: Proclus on the Gods of Generation and the Creation of Humans., *The Classical Review* 69(1): 94-96,’ available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X18003062>

AN ANCIENT COMMENTARY ON PLATO'S *TIMAEUS*

TARRANT (H.) (ed., trans.) *Proclus: Commentary on Plato's Timaeus, Volume VI. Book 5: Proclus on the Gods of Generation and the Creation of Humans*. Pp. xiv + 282. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Cased, £69.99, US\$125. ISBN: 978-1-107-03264-4.

This volume marks the completion of an Australian project to produce a most welcome modern English translation of Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. It covers Book 5, which deals with *Timaeus* 40e5–44d2 and comments on the speech of the Demiurge to the so-called young gods, whom he orders to bring into existence the human race, and on how the latter subsequently perform that task. (One wonders whether the pagan Proclus would have been entirely happy with the phrase ‘Creation of Humans’ in the book's title, which carries Christian associations that he would be anxious to avoid.) Book 5 is the final one of the *Commentary* in the manuscripts. Whether or not the original commentary continued beyond this point is a matter of debate. That it did has sometimes been deduced from the fact that later sources – both Greek (Philoponus) and Arabic ones – report comments by Proclus on later parts of the *Timaeus*. In his introduction, T., by contrast, argues that the point where the commentary ends in the manuscripts is not arbitrary. He thinks it likely that Book 5 is the final book of Proclus' detailed, running commentary on Plato's text and that the fragments that deal with later sections from the *Timaeus* stem from essays, comparable to those that make up Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, which Proclus later

added to the commentary as we have it. In support of this hypothesis, T. points to the fact that Proclus, when he refers to the part of *Timaeus* that is not covered by the *Commentary* as we have it, tends to restrict himself to a select number of passages, in particular *Ti.* 47e–55d, which coincided with the passage from Philoponus, and the closing pages, which coincides with the Arabic fragment. I find this an attractive hypothesis, even though, as T. frankly admits, this sort of statistical evidence is not conclusive. T. makes the further useful observation, once again backed up by statistics, that Book 5 is somewhat different in nature from the other four books. Whereas up to Book 5, Proclus could develop his exegesis of the text by engaging with the commentaries by predecessors, notably the one by Porphyrius, for the section discussed in Book 5, Proclus apparently only had Iamblichus as a sparring-partner, which, in the words of T., leaves him looking ‘a little bit like a lonely navigator in poorly charted waters’ (p. 10).

The lukewarm enthusiasm of the ancient commentators for Book 5 is matched by the limited interest of modern scholarship for Proclus’ commentary on this book. T. deplores in particular the tendency among modern students of Proclus to privilege Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* over his commentaries. While the systematic exposition that characterises the *Elements* may probably be more congenial to modern intellectual tastes, T. rightly insists that the *Elements* are rooted in Proclus’ activities as a commentator and that these offer a fuller and more instructive treatment of many of the issues raised in the *Elements*. Even so, the scholarship on Book 5 is somewhat less meagre than T. suggests, especially if one looks beyond the narrow confines of publications in English. The Belgian scholar J. Opsomer, for example, has published on almost all aspects imaginable of the commentary, including a lengthy article on Proclus’ discussion of the demiurgic activities of the young gods, ‘La démiurgie des

jeunes dieux selon Proclus’, *Les Etudes Classiques* 71 (2003), 5–49, which does much to elucidate Proclus’ often bewildering theological musings in Book 5.

The avowed aim of this project is to translate the *Commentary* as clearly and as smoothly as possible, a formidable task, given Proclus’ reliance on technical terms and his fondness for etymologies. T., being a veteran student and translator of late Neoplatonic texts, delivers on his promise, thus providing an easy access to an, at times, complicated text. Any new translation of the *Commentary* invites comparison with the masterful French translation by A.J. Festugière, whose important work is generously acknowledged by T. We will do so here by looking briefly at two passages. One typical aspect of Proclus’ philosophy that is less evident from the *Elements* are his attempts to harmonise the various pagan theological traditions. Thus, at the beginning of Book 5 (3.169.10–171.18), we find Proclus worrying about the fact that, whereas the *Theogony* that he ascribes to Orpheus lists a succession of divine kings who precede Ouranos (Heaven), the *Theogony* by Hesiod makes Ouranos the first king. At this place, the text is unfortunately corrupt. Here, T. does a better job than Festugière. The latter assumes that Proclus intended to say that the doctrine of Orpheus was ‘plus familière aux Grecs’ (συνηθεστέρα). T. on the other hand, assumes, correctly, that it is precisely the other way around: Hesiod ‘proclaims the kingdom of Heaven and Earth the first, teaching more familiar (συνηθεστέρα) to the Greeks, as Plato himself says in the *Cratylus*’ (p.49). T., as does Festugière, infers that the reference is to Plato, *Cratylus* 396c, complaining (n. 27) that Socrates’ point in the *Cratylus* ‘cannot be that Hesiod’s teaching is more familiar to the Greeks’. The reference, however, is probably to Plato, *Cratylus* 397c–d, where Socrates derives the Greek word θεός from the fact that the first Greeks recognised only the earth and the heavenly bodies, which run around (θέω), as gods and only later applied the word θεός (‘runner’) to other divine beings. From

this, Proclus apparently deduces that Hesiod, in an Aristotelian fashion, took as his starting point that what is better known to us (ὥς γνωριμωτέρας ὁρμηθείς), i.e. because the heavenly bodies are visible gods, as opposed to the superior gods of Orpheus' theogony.

Another fine illustration of T.'s point that, if we were to restrict ourselves to the more systematic works like the *Elements*, we risk ending up with a *Proclus dimidiatus* is provided by Proclus' commentary on the speech by the Demiurge to the young gods. It contains, among other things, a discussion of the style of the address, an interesting passage for those who are interested in the rhetorical interests of the late Neoplatonists, and a lengthy exposition of the vocative expression 'Gods of gods'. T. somewhat apologetically informs his readers 'who consider excessive the time Proclus spends on these two words of Greek' (p. 81 n. 156) that this was common practice in the Athenian Neoplatonic school. By way of introduction to his commentary on the speech, Proclus discusses the nature of the words (*logoi*) that are spoken by the Demiurge to the young gods. They are not, he tells his readers, προφορικοί (*In Ti.* 3.197.28–30: εἰσὶ μὲν οὖν οἱ λόγοι πάντως οὔτε προφορικοί [τοῦτο γὰρ ἀλλότριον τῆς ἀύλου καὶ χωριστῆς οὐσίας]). T. translates: 'The *logoi* are not totally projected outwards (for that would be alien to immaterial and separable substance)' (p. 77). This is a less fortunate rendering. The Greek προφορικός is a technical term that refers to ordinary spoken language as an outward expression of the internal dialogue that constitutes our thinking; 'totally' (πάντως) does not qualify προφορικός, but εἰσὶ; χωριστῆς οὐσίας, finally, here means 'separate' rather than 'separable substance' (cf. Proclus, *In Ti.* 3.180. 12: 'the substance separate from bodies' tr. T., p. 59). Hence, in this case Festugière's translation is preferable: 'De toute façon, ces paroles ne sont ni une énonciation proférée au dehors – car ceci est étranger à la substance immatérielle et séparée'.

The notes that accompany the translation are for the most part helpful clarifications of the text. The lengthy untranslated Greek quotation in n. 571 is, one assumes, an infelicitous oversight. In the light of T.'s observation that Proclus is in Book 5 pretty much on his own, it deserves to be noted that Proclus borrows powerful images from Plotinus in order to clarify the problematic relationship between body and soul. Proclus, *In Ti.* 3.330.9–331.2, for example, a beautiful passage of how the unaffected soul identifies itself with the affections of the body ('just as if somebody standing upon the bank' might mistakenly 'think that he was himself suffering ... as he gazed upon his own image upon the water') recalls Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.8, whereas the comparison of the body to 'a nonsensical and petty neighbour' (Proclus, *In Ti.* 3.349–50; tr. T., p. 222) derives from Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.2.5.

All in all, this fine translation is a useful tool, alongside that of Festugière, for the further exploration that this many-faceted text merits.

Universiteit Leiden

ROBBERT M. VAN DEN BERG

r.m.van.den.berg@hum.leidenuniv.nl