

*Re-Thinking Clement the Philosopher of the Corpus  
Dionysiacum*

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**Abstract**

Some modern researchers have identified the ‘Clement the philosopher’ mentioned in *On the Divine Names* V.9 of Dionysius the Areopagite with Clement of Alexandria or with a pagan philosopher who was a contemporary of Dionysius or from a more distant past. The present essay develops an interpretation of the above passage in the context of the attempt of the author to stage the structure and contents of his writings so as to persuade his readers of his apostolic identity. Thus, it argues that it would be proper to examine whether the identity of Clement the philosopher in this passage is compatible with the carefully constructed identity of Dionysius. It proposes that it is possible to understand Clement the philosopher as a reference to Clement of Rome because the information we have about him is consistent with Dionysius’ professed identity, and also because there were earlier Christian traditions that represented Clement of Rome as related to the apostle Paul, the purported teacher of Dionysius, and trained in Greek philosophy.

**Keywords:** Dionysius the Areopagite, Paul the Apostle, Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Principles of Beings, Scripture, Greek Patristics, Plato, Proclus, Platonism.

## Introduction

There is a tendency in modern scholarship to approach the author who adopted the pseudonym ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’, the Athenian disciple of Paul the apostle from *Acts* 17:34, as a person who carefully staged the structure and contents of his writings.<sup>1</sup> It is certain that his body of writings (hereafter ‘corpus Dionysiaticum’) abounds with proper names that are the same as those of specific persons mentioned in the New Testament (for a detailed account of this, with the relevant scriptural passages and bibliography, see Pallis 2018: 332-340). Some of these names of scriptural persons were prominent in the exegetical and/or theological work of influential Christian authors prior to the appearance of the corpus. The recipient of all four treatises of the corpus Dionysiaticum is called Timothy, while almost half of its ten epistles are addressed to someone called Gaius and two other epistles are addressed to Sospater or Sopater and Titus respectively. These names could be read as related to Pauline literature. The same can be argued for names found within the narrative of the corpus: Bartholomew, Justus, and Carpus. Paul himself is also presented as being connected with the author (hereafter ‘Dionysius’). Moreover, there are references by Dionysius to other scriptural figures, including the apostles Peter and John and James the brother of the Lord. It is possible that the use of some if not all of these names by Dionysius is deliberate, serving to reinforce the staging of his writings; at least, these elements are consistent with a reading of this kind on the part of his early readers.

The corpus Dionysiaticum also contains references to Ignatius, Polycarp, and Clement, names which also belong to certain fathers of the post-apostolic period. It is possible to argue that the reference by Dionysius to Ignatius was indeed a reference to Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, because it is followed by the quotation of a well-known passage from his epistles (*Rom.* 7:2, which is employed as theological evidence in *DN* IV.12). The same passage had a prehistory in the tradition of Origen and his readers (cf. e.g. Rist 1992: 149). Moreover, Dionysius implied that the Ignatius in question was a priest or bishop (i.e. *heis ton kath’hemas hierologon*) and he also described him as *ho theios*, an adjective that he used mainly for Paul and persons with a presiding role in the context of ecclesiastical office. These could point to the father of the ancient church who was a bishop. Some earlier patristic sources that would be known to Dionysius presented Ignatius of Antioch as related to Peter and even to Paul (one assessment of these sources can be found in Lightfoot 1897: 2.28-30). Turning to Polycarp, the reference could point to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna: it is perhaps significant that Poly-

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<sup>1</sup>These writings are the following: *On the Celestial Hierarchy* (*CH*); *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (*EH*); *On the Divine Names* (*DN*); *On Mystical Theology* (*MT*); and ten epistles (*Ep.*). The editions of the scriptural and the patristic texts that I have used for preparing this essay are indicated in the bibliography.

carp is the recipient of the seventh epistle of the corpus while Polycarp of Smyrna was the recipient of the seventh epistle of the collection of Ignatius (cf. Rorem 1993: 13). That may be a remarkable coincidence or evidence of use of Ignatius. A further reason to believe that the Polycarp mentioned by Dionysius is the Bishop of Smyrna is that the identity ascribed to Polycarp in the writings of Dionysius (i.e. *ho hierarches*) could denote a bishop: in the previous epistle the recipient was a priest (i.e. *ho hierews*) and therefore *ho hierarches* could suggest a higher rank for Polycarp (cf. e.g. Hathaway 1969: 62). A final argument in favour of this identification is the popularity of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* by the time the corpus was written. These may be good reasons to believe that Dionysius was referring to the two Greek fathers, Ignatius and Polycarp. Whether one or both of these references were intended to serve the staged narrative and also whether these persuaded his ancient and modern readers of the apostolic provenance of the corpus is beyond the scope of the present study.

## Clement the Philosopher

Turning to the third person noted above, there is a reference in the corpus to a Clement who is called ‘the philosopher’ in the following passage (*DN V.9*):

However, if the philosopher Clement (*ho philosophos Klemes*) considers that the principal among the beings (*ta archehikotera* – a derivative of the philosophical term *arche*) should be called exemplars in relation to something (*paradeigmata pros ti*), his claim does not advance through literal, perfect, and simple meanings (translation mine).

This excerpt outlines a teaching that was found in pagan Platonism and ascribes it to someone called Clement (for some pertinent examples from the late ancient philosophical tradition, see Chlup 2012: esp. 112-136). Some scholars have contended that this may be an indirect or codified reference to a Greek philosopher who was a contemporary of Dionysius or even from a more remote past (cf. e.g. Perczel 2012: 85 and Mainoldi 2018: 115). An estimation of this kind is interesting but cannot be demonstrated persuasively. It is true that Dionysius is opposed to polytheism elsewhere in his work (cf. esp. *DN IV.2* and *ibid. XI.6*) and he would have been familiar with this concept employed by the Platonists. However, it should be noted that this metaphysical concept was also developed by some of his Christian predecessors through the lens of monotheism (for selected patristic uses of that particular concept before and after Dionysius, see Bradshaw 2013). This fact has motivated other scholars to identify Clement of Alexandria with the Clement of the passage quoted above or even to conflate Clement of Alexandria with Clement of Rome (cf. e.g. Sheldon-Williams 1967: 457 n. 3

and Gersh 2014: 86 n. 54). The second of these proposals is in some cases an attempt to harmonize the predecessor from Alexandria with the apostolic profile constructed by Dionysius for himself. The connection of the passage with early Christian thought is possible because the employment of the concept of *paradeigmata* or *logoi* is justified in that section by the citation of a certain scriptural passage (*Hos.* 13:4) and allusions to others. It is indeed possible to find similar topics of discussion in Clement of Alexandria. Nevertheless, the content of the passage from *Stromateis* VIII.9.29, which is proposed by some of these scholars, is not identical with the text quoted above. Nor is there an identical text in the extant works of Clement of Alexandria. Therefore, while one of the editors of Clement's writings considered the Dionysian text to have derived from the latter, he placed it with the fragments of his which were 'of unknown provenance' (Stählin 1909: 225).

The above cannot wholly eliminate the possibility that this is a reference to Clement of Alexandria. However, if the author of the corpus Dionysiacum intended to construct his identity, he would have been careful enough not to refer openly to an ancient author who would undermine the staged narrative. It may be worth investigating here whether Clement the philosopher of the corpus could be the Bishop of Rome. The chronological details that we know about the life of Clement (fl. the second half of the first century AD) permit one to argue that a reference to him would be consistent with the narrative of the corpus: Dionysius mentioned that when he was young he observed the phenomenon of an eclipse of the sun at the moment of the crucifixion of Jesus (*Ep.* VII.2-3). If we assume that he was twenty years old or thereabouts at that time, it would be consistent with a possible reference by Dionysius to Clement of Rome. Another way in which we could perceive the proposed identification would be through Origen's exegesis. This influential predecessor of Dionysius had identified Clement of Rome with Clement the disciple or fellow-worker of Paul who was referred to in *Phil.* 4:3 (cf. e.g. Welborn 2017: 376-377). This identification would make things easier in the sense that it highlights the connection of Clement of Rome with Paul, who was also the purported teacher of the author of the corpus. That was not the only time Origen of Alexandria identified a man mentioned by Paul with an author from the post-biblical Christian literature who bore the same name (a further case could be Hermas from *Rom.* 16:14 as the author of the *Shepherd* – cf. e.g. Soyars 2019: 55-56). The reception of the text from the corpus Dionysiacum is worth noting here: the first scholiast and later Byzantine authors interpreted the text as a reference to the Bishop of Rome (cf. e.g. Rorem and Lamoreaux 1998: 222-223). These interpreters could have reached this conclusion as a reasonable deduction from the text or interpreted it in that manner because they aimed to invoke its apostolic authority in support of their own views.

One of the main problems for modern scholars may be the title, *ho philosophos*, that is

ascribed to him. It can be argued that the textual coherence of the corpus of Dionysius could permit a reading of the term as an epithet and not exclusively as a technical concept. The Greek words for philosophy or love of wisdom and philosopher are used in almost every instance by Dionysius with regard to the theological beliefs and the ritual practice of those who follow the Christian religion and their Jewish ancestors (*DN* II.2 and III.3; cf. also *EH* III.III.4 and VI.III.2; a similar argument is made in Siassos 1984: 59-60). Alternative terms or periphrastic formulations are also employed by Dionysius to refer to the erotic desire of the Christians for the true and higher philosophy of their religion (e.g. in *DN* I.5 and *ibid.* IV.13). One of the two aspects of the Christian tradition is the philosophical way of the theologians or those who speak of God (*he philo-sophos paradosis ton theo-logon* in *Ep.* IX.1). It should also be noted that Dionysius tended to attach various adjectives and nouns to proper names and therefore the philosophical title for Clement could not exclusively denote a pagan or Christian philosopher in a literal sense (it could be synonymous with phrases such as *ho philosophos* [i.e. wise or prudent] *aner* or *didaskalos*). A further argument could be that there are specific teachings or views ascribed by Dionysius to figures from the early church or even reconstructed known views of theirs (this practice can be found, among others, in the following passages: *MT* I.3; *Ep.* VII.2; *Ep.* VIII.6). It is possible to argue that there are traditions which could be known to ancient readers but are now lost or have not been considered by modern scholars in this regard yet. For example, in the so-called Clementine *Homilies* and *Recognitions* it was stated (*Hom.* and *Rec.* 1.3; cf. also *Rec.* 8.7) that Clement of Rome attended philosophical lectures in his youth and had been connected with certain Greek philosophers. Many modern scholars estimate that the works in question are based on a common source, which they connect with the geographical region of Syria. That region is also often considered to have been the theological milieu of Dionysius (for a description of these works with critical discussion, see Trevijano 2014).

## Conclusion

It can be said by way of conclusion that the theories that understand the reference to Clement in the corpus Dionysiaca as an indirect or codified allusion to a known pagan philosopher –be it Porphyry, Proclus the successor or even a different representative of late ancient Greek philosophy– are intriguing but require more evidence. The possible allusion to Clement of Alexandria is a reasonable hypothesis because he belonged to the authors of the early church who were characterized by a remarkable Greek education and showed an interest in certain philosophical questions. In this paper I have proposed that we examine the possibility that Clement the philosopher of the corpus is Clement of Rome. This identification would be

consistent with the narrative constructed by Dionysius and with the traditions that represented the Bishop of Rome as related to philosophy. Dionysius could have been familiar with one or more traditions of this kind. The content of the text ascribed to Clement remains a question but it is, of course, possible that an author as creative as Dionysius may have reshaped an earlier tradition or even fabricated one himself. The philosophical title for Clement would also be in line with examples of treatment of monotheist faith as a philosophical path if not the only true philosophy in the Hellenized Jewish and early Christian literature. Therefore, Clement of Rome as a philosopher could have been part of the apologetics of Dionysius or, at least, could be read as such.

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