

# The Creation of the World According to Zacharias of Mytilene

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Zacharias of Mytilene, also called Zacharias Rhetor or Zacharias Scholasticus (465/6–after 536), is primarily known as the author of a Church history from 450 to 491, and of three biographies of prominent monophysites (Peter the Iberian, the monk Isaiah and Severus of Antioch). These works have been preserved or partly preserved in Syriac translations or adaptations.<sup>1</sup> We still have, by contrast, the complete Greek text of Zacharias' dialogue entitled *Ammonius (or De mundi opificio)*, in which he attacks the pagan Alexandrian philosopher Ammonius son of Hermias (born between 435 and 445), and especially his doctrine of the eternity of the world.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand this dialogue is important as a source for our knowledge of both the philosophy of Ammonius itself and the way it was perceived by contemporary Christians. On the other hand it also contains the essence of Zacharias' own Christian view of the creation of the world, and it is primarily this second element of the content of the *Ammonius* I want to study here. This means that my reading of the dialogue is based on a clear distinction between Ammonius' ideas (as described by Zacharias) and Zacharias' doctrine of creation. I say this because there has been, and still is, a tendency in the research on the *Ammonius* to underestimate the difference between the two, and to misunderstand the fundamentally pagan and Neoplatonic character of Ammonius' philosophy. This tendency is part of a more general policy of regarding Ammonius as a kind of link between the pagan Neoplatonism of his master Proclus and the Christian philosophy of people like Aeneas of Gaza, Zacharias of Mytilene and, in particular, John Philoponus. Ammonius, it was and is often believed, was one of the main representatives of a pagan 'Alexandrian Neoplatonism' or rather 'Platonism' already deeply influenced by Christianity.

1. M. Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), III, 323–24.

2. Zacaria Scholastico, *Ammonio*, ed. and trans. M. Minniti Colonna (Naples: Buona Stampa, 1973).

The theory of the existence of a specifically Alexandrian form of Neoplatonism, distinct from the contemporary Athenian form of it, was first developed by K. Praechter. According to Praechter, the Alexandrian Neoplatonism of, for example, Hierocles of Alexandria and Ammonius son of Hermias differed from the Athenian Neoplatonism of Proclus and Damascius by its interest in science rather than metaphysics, and by the influence of Christian theology.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, Praechter believed, the metaphysics of Hierocles and Ammonius underwent a substantial simplification compared to the complex systems of the Athenian Neoplatonists. One of the most distinctive features of this simpler Alexandrian metaphysics was, according to Praechter, the elimination of the supreme principle (the One) beyond the demiurgic Intellect.

Praechter's assumption that Ammonius was a 'theist,' and that in this respect there was no difference between him and Christianity, was very successful. One of its adherents was L.G. Westerink, who linked it up with Ammonius' famous theory that for Aristotle, God was not only the final but also the efficient cause of the universe.<sup>4</sup> Ph. Merlan, for his part, concluded from Zacharias' *Ammonius* that on the nature of God there seems to be no difference between Ammonius and Zacharias.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, I. Hadot convincingly refuted Praechter's view with regard to Hierocles of Alexandria and Simplicius' *Commentary on Epictetus' Enchiridion*, and showed that the so-called Alexandrian Neoplatonism of Hierocles and Simplicius' Epictetus Commentary is not fundamentally different from Athenian Neoplatonism.<sup>6</sup> As to Ammonius, my own research led to the conclusion that his philosophy too is a form of pagan Neoplatonism uninfluenced by Christianity, without therefore coinciding entirely with Athenian Neoplatonism.<sup>7</sup>

The main source for our knowledge of Ammonius' metaphysics is the *Commentary on the Metaphysics* of his student Asclepius, written "from the voice of Ammonius," as its title says. From Asclepius we learn that for Ammonius

3. K. Praechter, "Richtungen und Schulen im Neuplatonismus," in *Genethliakon C. Robert* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910), 103–56; K. Praechter, "Christlich-neuplatonische Beziehungen," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 21 (1912): 1–27; K. Praechter, "Hierokles 18," in *R.E.* VIII.2 (1913), 1479–87.

4. *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, 1: Olympiodorus, ed. L.G. Westerink (Amsterdam/Oxford/New York: North-Holland, 1976), 24.

5. Ph. Merlan, "Ammonius Hermiae, Zacharias Scholasticus and Boethius," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 9 (1968): 193–203.

6. I. Hadot, *Le problème du néoplatonisme alexandrin: Hiéroclès et Simplicius* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1978).

7. K. Verrycken, "The Metaphysics of Ammonius Son of Hermeias," in *Aristotle Transformed: The Ancient Commentators and their Influence*, ed. R. Sorabji (London/Ithaca: Duckworth/Cornell U Press, 1990), 200–02.

the supreme principle of all reality was the Neoplatonic Good or One, and that, in contrast to the interpretation of Ammonius' theology by Praechter, Merlan, Westerink etc., the demiurgic Intellect was for Ammonius not the first principle, but only the second hypostasis. According to Asclepius, Ammonius considered the One as both the source of the emanation of all reality and the goal towards which everything is directed.<sup>8</sup>

Zacharias correctly ascribes to Ammonius the view that the world is eternal. Two other major elements of his picture of Ammonius' metaphysics, however, do not fit in with what we know about it from Asclepius, namely the identification of the first and second hypostasis Zacharias attributes to Ammonius, and the supposed coeternity (not only chronologically, but also ontologically speaking) of the demiurge with the world.

As I have previously shown, these two elements in Zacharias' account of Ammonius' theology need not mean that Ammonius was not a Neoplatonist in the way already described. What their presence does mean is, first, that Zacharias ascribes to Ammonius the telescoping of the first two hypostases we find here and there in Asclepius as well, a pragmatic simplification that may be required by the context and is perfectly compatible with the Neoplatonic distinction of the two hypostases.<sup>9</sup> Second, it means that Zacharias deliberately deforms Ammonius' hierarchical or ontological distinction between the eternity of the demiurge and the perpetuity of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously Zacharias makes Ammonius look much closer to the Christian doctrine of creation than he was, while at the same time he emphasizes that Ammonius' doctrine of the eternity of the world remains incompatible with Christianity. In the present paper I will study Zacharias' own Christian doctrine of creation, and its resemblances and differences compared to the Neoplatonism of Ammonius. First I will summarize what still needs to be said about Zacharias' picture of Ammonius' doctrine of creation. Next, I will outline Zacharias' criticism of Ammonius and his own view of the beginning and end of the world. Finally, I will enter upon the close affinity of Zacharias' ideas with those of the later John Philoponus.

To begin with, I briefly recall the structure of Zacharias' dialogue. In his preface the author tells us how, during his stay in Beirut, he met a young law student, who had arrived from Alexandria, where he had been a student of the philosopher Ammonius. Under the influence of Ammonius this young man, Zacharias says, showed a certain inclination towards pagan philosophy (which means that he was a Christian), and started defending Ammonius' view of the

8. Verrycken, "The Metaphysics," 204–10.

9. Verrycken, "The Metaphysics," 208–12.

10. K. Verrycken, "La métaphysique d'Ammonius chez Zacharie de Mytilène," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 85 (2001): 260–64.

universe with some of his fellow students. The latter turned to Zacharias, who was himself a former student of Ammonius, to solve the problems arising for the Christian doctrine of creation from Ammonius' position, and asked him to write down the victorious discussions he claims to have had at Alexandria with Ammonius and the pagan "iatrosophist" Gesius.

The preface is followed by an introduction (Zacharias, *Amm.*, 6–91 Min-niti Colonna), in which Zacharias relates his encounter with the young man already mentioned. Particularly interesting is the description of Ammonius here. He is portrayed as a boastful pseudo-philosopher, who tries to remove young Christians from their faith. His belief in the eternity of the world, Zacharias claims, amounts to putting the world at a level with 'God,' and consequently to deny the world's creation by God.

The main, polemical part of the *Ammonius* has four subdivisions. In the first section (*Amm.*, 92–350) Zacharias reproduces a discussion he says he had with Ammonius on the world's eternity *a parte ante* and *a parte post*. The second section (351–937) relates a similar discussion with the professor of medicine Gesius, who is called Ammonius' most important student at the time of the scene. In the third section (938–1093) there is another argument between Zacharias and Ammonius, focussed on the problem of the coeternity of the demiurge and the world. In the short fourth section (1094–1136) Zacharias and Ammonius discuss the problem of the divine trinity.

Finally, after the polemical part, there is another conversation between Zacharias and the young man from the beginning of the dialogue. Its subject is the Christian view of creation, the end of the world and the immortality of the soul (1137–1524).

#### AMMONIUS' DOCTRINE OF CREATION IN ZACHARIAS' *AMMONIUS*

In this summary of Ammonius' view of creation as explicitly or implicitly contained in Zacharias' dialogue, I first discuss the relation between Ammonius' systematic philosophy and his interpretation of Aristotle and Plato. Next I will draw attention to the close link between Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle and Plato respectively. Third, I will say something about the logic of Ammonius' exegetical policy as opposed to Zacharias'. Finally, I will briefly outline Ammonius' and Gesius' main arguments for the eternity of the world.

As already said, Zacharias' *Ammonius* is not our main source of information on Ammonius' metaphysics. By contrast, Asclepius' *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, a work based on Ammonius' teaching, contains abundant evidence that the metaphysics of the Alexandrian scholar was a form of Neoplatonism. According to Ammonius (Asclepius), the supreme principle transcends the divine Intellect and its ideas, and there is an eternal eman-

tion of all reality from the One or Good, as well as an eternal return of all things to it.<sup>11</sup> Asclepius also makes use of Aristotelian concepts to articulate this fundamental tenet of Neoplatonism: the Good, he says, is both the efficient and final cause of all reality.<sup>12</sup> This means, if we rely on Asclepius, that Ammonius was prepared to stylize his Neoplatonic metaphysics in an Aristotelian manner, in order to show that it was compatible with Aristotle's metaphysics. Conversely, he was convinced that Aristotle's metaphysics was in harmony with his own, and this led him to his interpretation of Aristotle's God as not only the final, but also the efficient cause of all reality.<sup>13</sup> Obviously Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle's theology has a Neoplatonic, emanationist character, and has nothing to do with an attempt to make Aristotle "more acceptable to Christianity," as R. Sorabji and many others believe.<sup>14</sup> The goal of Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle was clearly to harmonize Aristotle not with Christian theology, but with Plato. Ammonius' tendency to make Aristotle agree with Plato as much as possible is present in Zacharias' *Ammonius* as well. Ammonius, Zacharias writes, tried to conceal the difference between Aristotle and Plato on the existence of the Ideas.<sup>15</sup> In this way pagan philosophy is made more harmonious than it was in reality, and consequently stronger in its competition with Christian thought. Ammonius' harmonization of Aristotle with Plato was based on the fundamental idea of Neoplatonism as such, namely the belief in the possibility and reality of an 'eternal creation' of the world by 'God' (to put it in Zacharias' terms), an idea the Christian Zacharias vigorously opposes.

Zacharias' *Ammonius* proves that there was a necessary link between Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle and Plato respectively. In Ammonius' mind, both Aristotle and Plato support the idea of an 'eternal creation.' For that purpose Aristotle, whose position that the world is eternal was beyond doubt, had to be converted into an emanationist and a supporter of the theory of Ideas, while Plato, who undoubtedly believed in the world's dependence on the demiurge and the existence of Ideas, had at the same time to be made a believer in the eternity of the world. In other words, the emanationist interpretation of Aristotle and the non-literal interpretation of the creation story in Plato's *Timaeus* (which for Ammonius amounts to an emanationist reading as well) are closely linked together. An eternalist interpretation of Plato need not necessarily involve an emanationist interpretation of Aristotle (as is proved

11. Verrycken, "The Metaphysics," 204–10.

12. Asclepius, *In Metaph.*, 108.23–25, 151.24–27.

13. Verrycken, "The Metaphysics," 218–20.

14. On this 'Christian' reading of Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle's theology see Verrycken, "The Metaphysics," 223.

15. Zacharias, *Amm.*, 952.

e.g., by the case of Proclus), but Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle would make no sense without a corresponding interpretation of Plato.

In the *Ammonius* we can see the logic of Ammonius' and Zacharias' opposed exegetical policies at work. Ammonius, to put it this way, wants to 'neoplatonize' both Aristotle and Plato. Zacharias tells us that Ammonius made Aristotle an adherent of Plato's doctrine of Ideas. This is indeed involved in Zacharias' remark that Ammonius tried to conceal the difference between the two philosophers on this point. "Trying to conceal the disagreement" between Aristotle and Plato on the Ideas is nothing else but making Aristotle a defender of the Ideas. And this means that, according to Ammonius, Aristotle put the Ideas as *universalia ante res* in the divine Intellect. As a consequence, Ammonius considers Aristotle's divine Intellect (which is not the same thing as the Good, the supreme principle Aristotle, Ammonius claims, accepts as well) not as pure self-thinking thought, but as a creative Intellect, in other words as being not only the final, but also the efficient cause of the universe. In this way Zacharias confirms an essential element of what we know about Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle's theology from Asclepius, Simplicius and Philoponus.<sup>16</sup>

Just as Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle is tailored to harmonize Aristotle with Plato, so also his interpretation of Plato is aimed at harmonizing Plato with Aristotle. As a result, Ammonius argued that Plato's creation story should not be taken literally, and that in reality Plato considered the world to be eternal. I need not enter here upon the history of the interpretation of the *Timaeus* before Ammonius. Suffice it to say that his eternalist reading of Plato's creation story is in line with a long Neoplatonic tradition.<sup>17</sup> In Zacharias' *Ammonius* it is Gesius who defends an eternalist interpretation of the *Timaeus*.<sup>18</sup> As to Ammonius himself, we know from Asclepius that his reading of the *Timaeus* was eternalist.<sup>19</sup> In this way Ammonius' emanationist interpretation of Aristotle is met by a corresponding interpretation of Plato. Just as the eternity of Aristotle's world, Ammonius argues, is a *created* eternity, Plato's created world is an *eternally* created world. Both Aristotle and Plato are mobilized as authorities for Ammonius' own Neoplatonic view of the world, and this is made possible by a non-literal reading of both Plato and Aristotle's criticism of Plato.

16. Verrycken, "The Metaphysics," 215–26.

17. See M. Baltes, *Die Weltentstehung des platonischen Timaios nach den antiken Interpreten* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976–78).

18. *Amm.*, 880–82.

19. Asclepius, *Commentary to Nicomachus' Introduction to Arithmetic*, ed. L. Tarán (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1969), I.γ.74–77.

In contrast to Ammonius, the Christian Zacharias is interested in showing that an 'eternal creation' is impossible. According to him the world is either created by God (as it is) or eternal: an 'eternal creation' is inconceivable. As a consequence, Zacharias rejects Ammonius' interpretation of Aristotle's theology. He is convinced that Aristotle does oppose the existence of the Ideas, as well as many other doctrines of Plato.<sup>20</sup> This means that, according to Zacharias, Aristotle's divine intellect does not contain any Ideas within itself, or, in Ammonius' terminology, that it is not the *efficient* cause of the world. According to Aristotle, Zacharias claims, the world was not created, not even from eternity. In contrast to Ammonius, Zacharias does not try to harmonize Aristotle with Plato. On the contrary, he emphasizes the incompatibility of their positions with regard to the eternity of the world. Plato, Zacharias says, considers the world to have been created by the demiurge, and therefore rejects its eternity. In other words, Zacharias gives a literal, anti-eternalist interpretation of the *Timaeus*, which was of course the standard Christian approach.<sup>21</sup> On this reading, Plato becomes a pagan authority (at least in part) for the Christian view of the creation of the world. The literal understanding of the *Timaeus* also involves a literal understanding of Aristotle's criticism of Plato. In Ammonius' view, there is one pagan philosophy (Plato and Aristotle, in harmony with one another), opposed to Christianity. In Zacharias' view, Plato and Christian thought form a united front against Aristotle's and the Neoplatonists' eternalism.

So far for the exegetical side of Ammonius' position in the *Ammonius*. As regards Ammonius' own idea of 'creation,' it can be described as an emanationist eternalism. In Zacharias' terms, Ammonius is convinced that the world is eternally 'created' by 'God.' Several arguments for this Neoplatonic type of eternalism are put forward by Ammonius (*Amm.*, 92–350) and Gesius (351–937).

Ammonius' most important argument for the eternity of the world is that the 'demiurge' (a concept in which, as we saw, the Neoplatonic Good and the divine Intellect are telescoped) is good, and that this necessarily involves the eternal emanation of the world, both *a parte ante* and *a parte post*.<sup>22</sup>

Gesius, for his part, emphasizes that the divine Intellect can only be called the demiurge of the world if it actualizes the potentiality of the creative reasons contained in it, i.e., if it actually creates.<sup>23</sup> And for the demiurge to be eternally the actual creator of the world, that world must be eternally created by him,

20. *Amm.*, 946–52.

21. Philoponus expounds this Christian interpretation at length in Book VI of his *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*.

22. *Amm.*, 102–43.

23. *Amm.*, 369–85.

including at the present moment. For even now the demiurge is holding the universe together and is exercising providence towards it.<sup>24</sup> However, Gesius argues, the coeternity of the world with its creator does not involve its being equal in value with him. Even though the world is not posterior to its creator in time, it is hierarchically (*tèi axiai*) or ontologically posterior or inferior to him, just as a shadow is simultaneous (*homochronos*) but not equal in value (*homotimos*) with the corresponding body.<sup>25</sup> A further argument of Gesius is that the eternity of the world is required by the necessary eternity of time: since time is the measure of the world's movement, the latter must be coextensive with infinite time.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Gesius deduces the world's eternity from its spherical shape: just as the sphere of the universe is without beginning or end, so also its existence is without beginning or end.<sup>27</sup>

#### ZACHARIAS' CRITICISM OF AMMONIUS' AND GESIUS' ETERNALISM

Zacharias' reply (*Amm.*, 144–350) to Ammonius' first set of arguments (102–43) begins with a verbose introduction, in which the author opposes the Christian view of creation to Ammonius' emanationism (144–73), and emphasizes that Christianity is not only a religious faith, but is based on solid logical arguments and matters of fact. Christian theologians, Zacharias continues, endeavour to reveal the naked truth, in contrast to Plato and other pagan writers, who instead, like the Sirens, try to enchant their public with their style, for lack of real arguments.

Zacharias first objects to Ammonius that the goodness of the demiurge does not involve the eternity (*a parte ante* or *a parte post*) of the world as a whole, no more than it involves the eternity of individual creatures like Socrates or Plato. Consequently, the non-eternity of the world need not mean that, 'before' or 'after' the existence of this world, God is ignorant of the good or too jealous to let creatures share in it.<sup>28</sup>

To this Ammonius replies that "the demiurge of Socrates and Plato and [the other] individual men is not God, but their individual father and the sun."<sup>29</sup> The fact, Zacharias' Ammonius argues, that Socrates and Plato are not eternal beings only means that their immediate creators, i.e., their fathers, are not eternal themselves, with the result that they cannot be eternally creative either. In the view Zacharias ascribes to Ammonius here, there are three levels of creation. The highest level is the eternal creation of the world

24. *Amm.*, 435, 491.

25. *Amm.*, 521–26.

26. *Amm.*, 553–61.

27. *Amm.*, 892–902.

28. *Amm.*, 173–207.

29. *Amm.*, 208–11.



as a whole by the eternal goodness of the demiurge. The lowest level is the creation of temporal beings by their immediate 'creators.' The sun is apparently intermediate between these two levels: it is, as all celestial bodies, both corporeal and eternal, and therefore able to pass on the demiurge's eternal creativity to the level of temporal corporeal beings.

According to Zacharias, the father is only instrumental in the creation of the child: it is God who creates the formal structure of the child's body and brings about the unity of body and soul.<sup>30</sup> The author particularly expands on the creative role of the sun. In Ammonius' view, he says, the sun is illegitimately deified. It is only a corporeal, composite and perishable creature, in contrast to God, who is intelligible, simple and beyond change, generation and destruction. It therefore lacks the independence and perfection of the demiurge. Even if we were to admit, Zacharias argues, that the sun is the demiurge of bodies, that does not solve the problem how it could unite the souls to the bodies. In reality, the sun is no more than an inanimate object, destined by the demiurge to light the world.<sup>31</sup>

Zacharias' criticism of the role of the sun in Ammonius' doctrine of creation is largely irrelevant, since it is obvious that Ammonius did not consider the sun to be the demiurge in the way Zacharias describes. Actually, Zacharias himself recognizes this by referring to "series of demiurges" the Neoplatonists accept. The polytheistic multitude of demiurges, Zacharias says, is nothing but a chaotic democracy, and is the very opposite of the well-ordered monarchy of the one and only demiurge of the Christians.<sup>32</sup> As if Ammonius would have denied the hierarchical subordination of the lower creation levels, including the sun, to the divine demiurgic Intellect. Zacharias apparently gives a distorted picture of Ammonius' metaphysics here, just as he does elsewhere in his dialogue.

Although the emphasis in the discussion between Gesius and Zacharias is more on Zacharias' own views and less on his objections to Gesius' arguments properly speaking, yet it makes sense to consider some of the latter separately. First, Zacharias rejects Gesius' argument for the eternity of the world on the basis of the necessary actualization of the demiurgic *logoi*. It is true, he says, that God must always be the creator, but he need not therefore actualize the creative reasons in his mind, no more than e.g., a doctor has to do in order to be a doctor.<sup>33</sup>

30. *Amm.*, 217–27.

31. *Amm.*, 227–350.

32. *Amm.*, 313–27.

33. *Amm.*, 369–428.

Consequently, it is not necessary for God to create at the present moment either. As a matter of fact, Gesius' position, Zacharias argues, involves a contradiction. On the one hand, the Neoplatonists claim that the demiurge is continually creating the world at any moment of time. On the other hand, however, they believe in the "myth of metensomatosis" (which means that souls are not being created at this moment) and consider "the fathers and the sun," instead of God, as the creators of individual bodies.<sup>34</sup>

Another inconsistency, according to Zacharias, of Gesius and his philosophical friends is that for them the demiurge's creative activity at the present, and indeed any moment consists in his holding together the world and exercising providence towards it. This would mean that the demiurge only creates the formal structure of the universe. However, according to both the pagan and Christian doctrine of creation, Zacharias says, the demiurge creates the very substance of the world *ex nihilo*, i.e. not only form, but matter as well.<sup>35</sup> It goes without saying that this is another example of Zacharias deforming Gesius' and Ammonius' Neoplatonic emanationism in a rather crude way.

According to Gesius the world is coeternal with the demiurge, just as the shadow is simultaneous with the corresponding body. To this Zacharias, among other things, objects that the analogy is inadequate. In the physical world both a body and a second cause, namely light, are required for a shadow to be cast. But these two causes, Zacharias says, are lacking in God's creation of the world. In the case of creation, there is no (intermediate) body, nor light as a joint cause of the 'shadow,' since God is "intelligent light" himself.<sup>36</sup>

Apparently, Gesius' example of the shadow (which may very well have been used by the historical Ammonius)<sup>37</sup> serves only as an instance of an effect simultaneous with its cause. Zacharias, however, emphasizes that the image of the shadow does not apply literally to the creation of the world, as if this were the contention of his opponent. The inferiority of the shadow compared to the body is due, Zacharias claims, to its two-dimensional nature, in contrast with the body's three-dimensional nature. There is, the author continues, no inferiority whatever of the shadow to the body as far as its chronological status is concerned.<sup>38</sup> According to Zacharias, coeternity excludes a relation of cause to effect, and vice versa. But his objections against the image of the shadow in its material meaning are, of course, no valid arguments against Gesius' concept of coeternity.

34. *Amm.*, 428–60.

35. *Amm.*, 490–503.

36. *Amm.*, 536–45.

37. See *Amm.*, 1040–41.

38. *Amm.*, 545–52.

A beginning of time, Gesius argues, is impossible. For whatever comes into existence, does so at a certain moment of time. Therefore, time is eternal, and so is the world. Zacharias' reply is that time did not begin in time (which would be absurd), but "in eternity" (*en aiōni*).<sup>39</sup> We will have to return to this view of eternity later on.

Finally, Zacharias rejects Gesius' inference from the spherical shape of the universe to its eternity. Any circle you draw, he says, necessarily has both a beginning and end.<sup>40</sup>

#### ZACHARIAS' DOCTRINE OF CREATION

We have seen that Ammonius' view of creation is both exegetical and systematic, and that his interpretation of Plato and Aristotle is based on his own Neoplatonic emanationism. In Zacharias' position we find a similar parallelism between his interpretation of Plato and Aristotle on the one hand and his own Christian doctrine of creation on the other. I have already dealt with Zacharias' general approach of Plato's and Aristotle's position with regard to the creation of the world. It is based on his own axiom that any efficient cause must precede its effect in time.<sup>41</sup> According to Ammonius, by contrast, the demiurge (or efficient cause of the world) need not precede the world in time. On the contrary, Ammonius says, the demiurge has only a hierarchical superiority to the world, and the world is coeternal with the demiurge. Like Ammonius, Zacharias applies his axiom to Plato and Aristotle. To put it more precisely, he ascribes to both the belief in the correctness of his axiom. As a result, Aristotle, for whom the world is eternal, cannot, according to Zacharias, consider it to be created by God, while the opposite holds true for Plato.

As already said, Zacharias' interpretation of Plato involves a literal reading of the cosmogony of the *Timaeus*. The author quotes some crucial passages which he believes testify to Plato's conviction that the sensible world is not eternal *a parte ante*.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand he acknowledges that Plato considered the world to be eternal *a parte post*, not on the basis of its own nature, but by the will of the demiurge.<sup>43</sup> However, Zacharias says, the emphasis in Plato's idea of an imperishable world is on the fact that by its own nature the world is perishable and subject to dissolution, rather than on its supernatural conservation by the demiurge.<sup>44</sup>

39. *Amm.*, 553–75.

40. *Amm.*, 893–914.

41. *Amm.*, 754–58, 1028–55.

42. *Amm.*, 668–80; *Tim.*, 27D–28A, 28C, 28B, 38B.

43. *Amm.*, 680–94; quotations from *Tim.*, 38B, 41A–B.

44. *Amm.*, 694–701.

Zacharias' own doctrine of creation, both in his criticism of his pagan opponents and in the exposition of his own views in *Amm.*, 1137–1524, can be outlined in three steps: his conception of God as the creator of the world, his view of the act of creation itself, and finally his ideas on the nature of the sensible world.<sup>45</sup>

According to Zacharias the goodness of the demiurge need not mean that he creates the world from eternity. God is always the demiurge, by the fact that he contemplates the creative reasons (*dèmiourgikoi logoi*) of things in his mind, without therefore necessarily creating them.<sup>46</sup> His goodness is not subject to any necessity.<sup>47</sup> Whether or not anything is actually created solely depends on God's free will.<sup>48</sup> God's will to create and his goodwill towards his creatures are eternal,<sup>49</sup> but it does not follow that he must actually create. Neither does the transition to the actual creation of the world or to the destruction of the present world constitute a change in God.<sup>50</sup>

But why, one might ask, does God move on from potential to actual creation? In Ammonius' first intervention two possible explanations are mentioned. If God, Ammonius says, did not create the world from all eternity, what made him proceed to do so at a certain moment (and not 'earlier')? According to Ammonius, it was either ignorance of the beautiful or envy, both of which are impossible.<sup>51</sup> As we saw, Zacharias refutes this objection to the Christian idea of creation in his reply to Ammonius. In the final conversation between Zacharias and the young man from the beginning of the dialogue, the same objection recurs in another and more expanded form. This time it is applied to the transition of the sensible world to a future state of immortality. Why, the young man asks Zacharias, didn't God create such a better world right from the beginning? And what will make him eventually do so? Four possible explanations are now adduced. 1) Either God, at the time he created the present world, was ignorant of a better one. 2) Or he knew a better world was possible, but was unable to create it at once. 3) Or he was jealous of the new, immortal world. 4) Or he will regret one day that he created our imperfect world.<sup>52</sup>

45. I cannot enter here upon the many parallels between the *Ammonius* and Aeneas of Gaza's *Theophrastus* (Enea di Gaza, *Teofrasto*, ed. and trans. M.E. Colonna [Naples: S. Iodice, 1958], esp. 43.22–51.23).

46. *Amm.*, 371–72, 387–89, 510–12, 764–67, 871–72.

47. *Amm.*, 393, 410–24, 448, 737–40, 808–09, 1148–49, 1324–25.

48. *Amm.*, 387–402, 408–20, 527–34, 735–61, 1292–97, 1445–50.

49. *Amm.*, 771–73, 820–24.

50. *Amm.*, 576–90.

51. *Amm.*, 121–26.

52. *Amm.*, 1176–82. The element of regret is already mentioned at *Amm.*, 123.

Zacharias first gives a rather simple solution to the problem: 1) God cannot be ignorant of anything, because he is wisdom itself. 2) He cannot initially have been unable to create the immortal world, because of his power (*dunamis*). 3) God cannot be jealous, because he is mere goodness. 4) Neither can he repent of anything, because he is not subject to change.<sup>53</sup>

Next, Zacharias gives a philosophically more interesting argument. God, he argues, first created the present world, which corresponds to our human condition in this life. A world corresponding to our future immortal condition can only become reality in the future.<sup>54</sup> The argument is interesting, because it draws a theological conclusion on an anthropological and cosmological basis. The problem is whether or not the Christian idea of a creation and eventual transformation of the world by God is theologically possible. A purely theological solution of this problem (e.g., God cannot repent of anything since there can be no change in God) is, after all, no more than a tautology. It is the destiny of mankind which in this case, according to Zacharias, allows of a theological inference. We will come across the same type of argument later on.

Zacharias' ideas about the act of creation itself can be outlined as follows. First of all, the author emphasizes that God's creation of the world is a *creatio ex nihilo*. The demiurge, Zacharias says, produces the very substance of all things, i.e., both their form and matter at the same time, in contrast to the demiurge of Plato and the (Neo)platonists, who, according to Zacharias, only gives a formal structure to a formless matter.<sup>55</sup>

God is the efficient cause of the world in its entirety. I have already mentioned Zacharias' basic axiom about efficient causality: any efficient cause, Zacharias says, must precede its effect in time. Accordingly, it is impossible both for God to create the world from all eternity, and for the world to exist from all eternity. If the world were eternal, Zacharias argues, God would only be its involuntary and unreasoning cause. And the world itself would only be like the shadow of a body or the radiance of a brilliant object.<sup>56</sup> The effect would be constitutive of the cause or consubstantial with it, as the Son with the Father.<sup>57</sup>

Zacharias distinguishes the intelligible from the sensible world. However, it is not always entirely clear what he means with the term 'intelligible' world. Sometimes it seems to refer to the ideas or *logoi* in God's intellect, sometimes it refers to the world of spiritual beings which is said to be older than the

53. *Amm.*, 1183–87.

54. *Amm.*, 1187–1220.

55. *Amm.*, 492–500.

56. *Amm.*, 754–58.

57. *Amm.*, 1028–74.

visible world. At *Amm.*, 647–53 Zacharias replies to Gesius that the fact that God did not create the sensible world from all eternity does not detract from his being a creator or from his goodness, since he “was (already) making the intelligible world.” In this way, Zacharias says, God did not remain inactive before the “orderly arrangement (*diakosmèsis*) of the sensible things.” He creates “in orderly fashion” (*meta taxeōs*), i.e., the creation of the sensible world is posterior to the creation of the intelligible world.<sup>58</sup>

At first sight, Zacharias refers in this passage to the eternal *logoi* in the divine intellect, which are no creation of God properly speaking. A reference to a created (and therefore non-eternal) intelligible world properly speaking, one might conclude, would make no sense here, for such a creation would still leave God inactive ‘before’ the corresponding act of creation. Only the divine ideas are co-eternal with God: they are the eternal objects of his eternal activity of thinking.

Other passages, however, clearly show that terms like “the intelligible world” do not or not only refer to the demiurgic *logoi*, but (also) to a world of intellectual entities (*noèta*, *noeraí phuseis*) preceding the creation of the sensible world.<sup>59</sup> Obviously, Zacharias faces a dilemma here. Either these entities have been created, and cannot therefore be eternal, or they are eternal (as they should be in order to exclude God’s inactivity before the creation of the sensible world), and cannot have been created.<sup>60</sup>

According to Zacharias the creation of the intelligible world, eternal or not, took place ‘before’ the creation of the sensible world. Apart from the insoluble problem just mentioned, another equally insoluble problem comes to the fore at this point: how can there be a ‘before’ prior to the beginning of time?

Zacharias’ answer to this last question is to be found in his discussion with Gesius. The beginning of time, he says, does not mean that time begins in time itself, which would suppose a “timeless time” (*chronos achronos*) before time. Time originates in eternity (*en aiōni*), of which, as Plato said, it is an image.<sup>61</sup> Needless to say that this view of the origin of time is in fact an inversion of Plato’s definition of time: an eternity that allows of succession in any form is itself an image of time, rather than its model.

No creation in the Christian sense is possible without eternity ‘before’ time being some kind of successive or linear eternity. Such a view of eternity,

58. *Amm.*, 647–53.

59. *Amm.*, 1147–55, 1163–64, 1317–29. See Aeneas, *Theophr.*, 44.21–45.2, 49.7–11, 51.21–23.

60. *Amm.*, 1318–20: “ton de kosmon touton ton aisthèton kai horōmenon gegenèsthai meta tèn tōn ontōn demiourgian.” One should rather read *noētōn* for *ontōn* Minitti Colonna.

61. *Amm.*, 571–75.

however, poses the problem of why God created the world at the ‘moment’ he did, and not ‘earlier’ (or ‘later’).<sup>62</sup> Zacharias’ solution of this problem reminds us to a certain extent of a similar argument about the future transformation of the world. God, we are told, chooses to create the world ‘when’ that was the most useful for it, or when it was necessary for it to come into being.<sup>63</sup> This is another attempt to solve a theological problem starting from a consideration of the created world rather than from the idea of God itself.

Anyway, Zacharias only recognizes one form of eternity instead of the two forms Ammonius distinguishes. According to Ammonius the static eternity of ‘God’ is hierarchically superior to the perpetuity of the world.<sup>64</sup> Zacharias, by contrast, rejects the perpetuity of the world, and accordingly reduces eternity to one form, viz. divine eternity.<sup>65</sup> Obviously, this only remaining form of eternity is perpetuity at the level of God, which is some kind of “timeless” succession, in order to allow of a beginning of time.

As for Zacharias’ views about the sensible world, I must limit myself here to the main point, viz. the idea that this world is necessarily subject to generation and destruction. All the parts of the world, Zacharias argues, have both a beginning and end, and therefore the world as a whole must have had a beginning and will have an end.<sup>66</sup> By its nature the sensible world is limited,<sup>67</sup> and this holds true for its very existence as well: it is finite both *a parte ante* and *a parte post*. However, there is one important qualification to be added. The destruction of the present world, Zacharias says, is not its entire annihilation, but only its transformation (*metaschèmatismos*) into a better world.<sup>68</sup> The present sensible world is adapted to our mortal and continuously changing bodies. Everything in this world, including heaven and the celestial bodies, is subject to generation and destruction, and in this way constitutes an appropriate object for our perishable senses.<sup>69</sup> By contrast, when we will come to life again after death, our bodies will be immortal and unchangeable. And since the world we will then live in must be homogeneous with our future bodies, that world too and all things in it will be immortal and beyond change.<sup>70</sup> As a consequence, the future destruction of the present world and its transformation into a better one does not take

62. For this objection see e.g., Simplicius, *In De Caelo*, 138.2–15; *In Phys.*, 162.14–22.

63. *Amm.*, 1087–88, 1147–48.

64. *Amm.*, 121–23.

65. *Amm.*, 1005–24.

66. *Amm.*, 914–37.

67. *Amm.*, 933–34.

68. *Amm.*, 647–67, 1168–72.

69. *Amm.*, 1187–1211 (at 1211 read *energeia* for *energeia* Minniti Colonna).

70. *Amm.*, 1211–18. See Aeneas, *Theophr.*, 43.11–20.

away anything from the creator's goodness. According to Zacharias, only a complete annihilation of the world would do so.<sup>71</sup>

This view of the end of our world reminds us of what Zacharias says about the intelligible world preceding the creation of the sensible world. In both cases we can affirm that the creator is good only if there is always a world, either intelligible or sensible, of which he is the creator. And in both cases a fundamental problem arises. With regard to the intelligible world, the problem was whether anything can be created and eternal at the same time. With regard to the immortal sensible world into which the present world will be transformed, the problem is whether anything sensible, including our own future bodies, can be eternal *a parte post*. Zacharias is convinced it can, and in this way he sides to a certain extent with Plato, according to whom the demiurge will make this world to last forever.<sup>72</sup>

#### ZACHARIAS AND PHILOPONUS

As a Christian, Zacharias is anxious, throughout his dialogue, to dissociate himself from the pagan Neoplatonism of his master Ammonius. There is an interesting parallel here with another student of Ammonius, viz. John Philoponus. When I speak of the philosophy of Philoponus here, I mean the Christian philosophy he developed primarily in his *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* (529 A.D.), after he had been a follower of Ammonius. The latter is proven e.g., by his *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*.<sup>73</sup> On the one hand, we can find in Philoponus' works elaborate philosophical arguments about several issues Zacharias treats more superficially. On the other hand, Zacharias' opposition to Ammonius bears additional evidence that any attempt to unite Philoponus' two different philosophical systems (the one Neoplatonic, the other Christian) into one 'Neoplatonic-Christian philosophy' must remain futile. For Zacharias the incompatibility of his own Christian doctrine of creation with Ammonius' Neoplatonic eternalism is obvious. And we can safely infer from this that this was the position of someone like Philoponus as well. The reconciliation of Neoplatonism and Christian philosophy in this period of the history of philosophy seems to be a preoccupation of present day historians of philosophy, rather than to have been a concern of people like Zacharias and Philoponus, or, for that matter, Ammonius themselves. In order to illustrate the proximity between Zacharias

71. *Amm.*, 647–56.

72. Plato, *Tim.*, 41A–B.

73. For a general survey of Philoponus' philosophy cf. e.g., K. Verrycken, "Johannes Philoponos," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* XVIII (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1997), 534–53; K. Verrycken, "John Philoponus," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. L.P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, in press).



and the later Philoponus, I will briefly discuss some of the main points that are common to the *Ammonius* and Philoponus' philosophical works.

To begin with, there is Zacharias' principle of the necessary anteriority of the efficient cause to its effect. On two occasions the author puts forward this principle as an axiom, without further proof. Each time, however, he adds an argument by which he tries to demonstrate that it applies to God's creation of the world. If the world, Zacharias says, were coeternal with the creator, that would mean that God is only its involuntary and unreasoning cause, as the body is of its shadow.<sup>74</sup> Another possibility would be that the effect (the world) is constitutive of the essence of the cause, or is consubstantial with it. Either, Zacharias argues, the world is not coeternal with God, and then it has a cause which is intelligent, acts deliberately and creates a substance different from itself, or the world is coeternal with God, and then it has no efficient cause at all.<sup>75</sup>

In his *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* Philoponus bases the principle of the anteriority of the efficient cause to its effect on observation. With regard to God as the efficient cause of the world, Philoponus repeats Zacharias' proposition that eternity is the privilege of God:<sup>76</sup> "That which always is," Philoponus argues, "how could it be brought into existence? If that which is created is in all respects inferior to the creator, both with regard to its essence, its potency and its actuality, it is, as a consequence, absolutely necessary that it is inferior to him with regard to its existence itself as well. At least we cannot observe any coming into being, either physical or technical, in which the cause is not pre-existent to the effect."<sup>77</sup>

According to Zacharias God created the world *ex nihilo*, i.e., without there being a pre-existing matter.<sup>78</sup> Otherwise matter would be eternal and created at the same time, which is impossible. Philoponus equally tries to demonstrate that matter need not be eternal (as the Neoplatonists thought),<sup>79</sup> and that it is necessarily the product of a *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>80</sup>

Another correspondence between Zacharias and Philoponus is their view that there is only one form of eternity. Since they both reject the eternity of the world and time, only divine eternity remains. In contrast to Ammonius, neither Zacharias nor Philoponus still has to make any distinction between a static divine eternity on the one hand, and the perpetuity of the world on

74. *Amm.*, 754–61.

75. *Amm.*, 1028–74.

76. *Amm.*, 774–78.

77. Philoponus, *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*, 14.14–20. See Aeneas, *Theophr.*, 46.15–16.

78. *Amm.*, 492–95, 885–86.

79. Philoponus, *De aet. mundi*, 446.21–447.2.

80. *De aet. mundi*, 458.7–26.

the other. The result is a mitigated concept of divine eternity, which allows of a beginning of time and the world. Whereas Zacharias does not enter any further on the problem of how to conceive this kind of eternity, Philoponus tries to clarify its nature. In Book V of *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* he insists on what one might call the linear character of God's eternal being. Just as time, he argues, is the measure of the movement of the heaven, so also eternity is the measure of eternal being.<sup>81</sup> If eternity, Philoponus says, is the measure of the life of what is eternal, then it is impossible for it to be a single point: on the contrary, it must of necessity be conceived as a certain extension (*platos*) or continuance (*paratasis*) that stretches out alongside (*sumparateinomenon*) the being of things eternal. But it differs from time in that it is entirely undifferentiated and uniform.<sup>82</sup>

According to Zacharias, time originates "in eternity." For Philoponus, such a beginning of time is conceivable only if the creator's eternity leaves room for the supertemporal succession of the absence and the beginning of time, even if human thinking and human language are unable to form an adequate idea of such a supertemporal 'earlier' and 'later.'<sup>83</sup> Anyway, the 'linear' character of divine eternity is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition for the beginning of time and the world. For Zacharias, the world was created 'when' it was the most useful for it. Again, it is Philoponus who attempts to penetrate deeper into the problem. Even though God, Philoponus says, from all eternity wants the world to exist, that does not mean it always exists.<sup>84</sup> An additional element is needed for the world to come into existence,<sup>85</sup> this additional element being that it is impossible for the world to exist from all eternity, due to its own finite nature.<sup>86</sup> Needless to say that this argument is not very satisfying. What is interesting, however, is that both Zacharias and Philoponus reject Ammonius' Neoplatonic idea of a hierarchical difference between the static eternity of 'God' and the everlastingness of the world and time. Here too, Zacharias and Philoponus are applying the principle of the anteriority of the cause to the effect. Any form of linear eternity, they argue, must of necessity be uncreated. As a consequence, only God can be said to be eternal, and there is no need any longer for a distinction between a higher, static form of eternity at the level of God and a temporal form of eternity at the level of the world, a distinction which was essential for Ammonius' Neoplatonic metaphysics.

81. On this point Philoponus agrees with Proclus. See Proclus *ap.* Philop., *De aet. mundi*, 103.19–20; Proclus, *El. theol.*, 54.

82. Philoponus, *De aet. mundi*, 114.19–116.1.

83. Philoponus *ap.* Simpl., *In Phys.*, 1157.13–1158.29.

84. Philoponus, *De aet. mundi*, 566.4–6.

85. See the use of the term *prosdiorismos* at *De aet. mundi*, 567.2.

86. E.g., *De aet. mundi*, 79.6–11.

We already know that for Zacharias the end of our world will be its transformation into a better world. This transformation, Zacharias says, does not conflict with God's goodness. Only a complete annihilation of the world would do so. In *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* Philoponus argues that God will not give this world a supernatural imperishability.<sup>87</sup> This means that he can and will, one day, destroy this world. Philoponus too, however, emphasizes, that the end of the present world will only be its transformation into a more perfect world.<sup>88</sup> Accordingly, there is a close proximity between Zacharias and Philoponus on the issue of the end of the world.

Finally, it is worth noticing that Zacharias and the later Philoponus defend the same position with regard to the harmony of Plato and Aristotle. In sharp contrast to Ammonius, the early Philoponus and Simplicius, they both reject the idea of such a harmony. As we have seen, Zacharias opposes both Ammonius' emanationist interpretation of Aristotle and his eternalist interpretation of Plato. In Philoponus' *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* we find the same exegesis of Plato and Aristotle as in Zacharias' *Ammonius*. The later Philoponus is convinced that there is a fundamental disagreement (*diaphonia*) between Aristotle and Plato,<sup>89</sup> and applies to Aristotle the famous dictum *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*.<sup>90</sup> Obviously, the aim of Zacharias' and the later Philoponus' exegetical position is double. On the one hand it is intended to break the closed antichristian front of pagan philosophy, by showing that Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies are incompatible. On the other hand it opens the possibility to claim the authority of Plato for the Christian rejection of the eternity of the world.

In conclusion, it is clear that Zacharias' *Ammonius* is an important document for our understanding of some of the basic characteristics of both Ammonius' Neoplatonism and the opposition of Christian philosophers to it. The comparison of Zacharias' views with similar ideas of the later Philoponus (and vice versa) may have shown once more that Ammonius' philosophy was not an 'Alexandrian Neoplatonism' in the sense of a semi-Christianized Neoplatonism, and that the Christian alternative to it, represented by Zacharias and Philoponus, was not some kind of reconciliation between Christian philosophy and Neoplatonism either. Fundamentally, no compromise was possible between the Neoplatonic idea of an eternal and necessary emanation of the world from the Good and the Christian idea of a creation of the world by a free act of God.

87. *De aet. mundi*, 128.13–134.16.

88. Simplicius, *In Phys.*, 1177.38–1178.5; Philoponus, *Against Aristotle on the Eternity of the World*, trans. C. Wildberg (London/Ithaca: Duckworth/Cornell U Press, 1987), 143, 148.

89. *De aet. mundi*, 26.24–32.13 *passim*.

90. *De aet. mundi*, 144.20–23.

