

**Syrians and the Others:
Cultures of the Christian Orient
in the Middle Ages**

SCRINIUM
Journal of Patrology, Critical Hagiography,
and Ecclesiastical History

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on Eastern Christianity, while not excluding developments
in the Western Christianity.

**Syrians and the Others:
Cultures of the Christian Orient
in the Middle Ages**

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Volume 10

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Gorgias Press
2014

ISSN 1817-7530 (Print)
ISSN 1817-7565 (Online)

Scrinium. T. 10: Syrians and the Others: Cultures of the Christian Orient in the Middle Ages. Edited by Basil Lourié and Nikolai N. Seleznyov. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014. x+534 p.

SCRINIUM

*Journal of Patrology, Critical Hagiography
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations	x
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Critical Editions

Yulia FURMAN

The Origins of the Temporal World: the First <i>mē'mrā</i> of the <i>Ktābā d-rēš mellē</i> of John Bar Penkāyē	3
---	---

Yulia FURMAN

Zeus, Artemis, Apollo: John bar Penkāyē on Ancient Myths and Cults	47
---	----

Nikolai N. SELEZNYOV

The Laments of the Philosophers over Alexander the Great according to <i>The Blessed Compendium</i> of al-Makīn ibn al-'Amīd	97
---	----

Nikolai N. SELEZNYOV

"These stones shall be for a memorial": A discussion of the abolition of circumcision in the <i>Kitāb al-Mağdal</i>	115
--	-----

Anton PRITULA

The <i>Wardā</i> Hymnological Collection and Šlēmōn of Aḥlāt (13 th century)	149
--	-----

Youhanna Nessim YOUSSEF

Litanies or Prayers for Travellers	208
--	-----

Hagiography

Andrey MOROZ

Folkloric Hagiography and the Popular Cult of Saints: Formation of Beliefs and Plots	219
---	-----

Alexander V. PIGIN

Hagiographic Writings in the Old Believer Controversies over 'the Suicidal Death' at the End of the Seventeenth and the Eighteenth Centuries (Peter Prokop'ev's Message to Daniil Vikulin)	230
---	-----

Tatiana A. SENINA (nun Kassia) Concerning the Dates of St. Makarios of Pelekete's Life and the Dating of his <i>Vita</i>	245
Tatiana A. SENINA (nun Kassia) Did St. John, the Abbot of the ton Katharon Monastery, Join the Iconoclasts under Leo V the Armenian?	251
Yulia M. SHEVARENKOVA Verbal Hagiography of Seraphim of Sarov	255

Patrology

Dmitry BIRIUKOV Hierarchies of Beings in the Patristic Thought: Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, and the Palamites	281
Irina KOLBUTOVA The Book of the Body of Christ: Jewish-Christian Mysticism of Letters and the Name of God as an Origin for the Christian Spiritual Exegesis	305
Dirk KRAUSMULLER A Chalcedonian Conundrum: the Singularity of the Hypostasis of Christ	361
Alexey OSTROVSKY and Maia RAPHAVA Notes on Georgian Translations of the Works of Nicetas Stethatos ..	383
Olena SYRISOVA L'anthropologie apocryphe et le traité <i>Περὶ Ἀρχῶν</i> d'Origène	402

Review Articles

Dmitry BIRIUKOV Providence and fate in the ancient philosophical tradition and in Greek patristics	415
Basil LOURIE Notes on Mar Pinhas: A "Nestorian" Foundation Legend; the Liturgy Implied; Polemics against Jewish Mysticism; an Early Christian Apology Used; Syrian Monasticism from Athens	422

Olga MITRENINA

The Corpora of Old and Middle Russian Texts
as an Advanced Tool for Exploring an Extinguished Language 455

Aleksandr V. PIGIN

A new book on Old Russian demonology 462

Tatiana A. SENINA (moniale Kassia)

Deux livres sur Cassia de Constantinople 468

Christos A. ZAFIROPOULOS

Ahiqar, his *Tale* and the *Vita Aesopi* 479

Reviews

What Was the Question? The Inter-Byzantine Discussions

about the *Filioque*, Nicephorus Blemmydes,
and Gregory of Cyprus (B. LOURIÉ) 499

Прп. Максим Исповедник, *Богословско-полемические сочинения*
(*Opuscula Theologica et Polemica*), пер. с древнегреч.

Д. А. ЧЕРНОГЛАЗОВА и А. М. ШУФРИНА; научн. ред., предисл.
и комм. Г. И. БЕНЕВИЧА [St Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula*
Theologica et Polemica, Russian tr. by D. A. CHERNOGLAZOV and
A. M. CHOUFRINE; ed., intr. and comm. by G. I. BENEVICH] (G. B.) ... 507

Warren T. WOODFIN, *The Embodied Icon. Liturgical Vestments*

and Sacramental Power in Byzantium (T. SÉNINA) 508

Two Books on Fr Antonii (Anthony) Bulatovich (1870–1919)

and the *Imiaslavie* (Onomatodoxy, Name-Glorifying) (B. LOURIÉ) .. 510

The Monks and Their Reading (O. MITRENINA) 514

A Lonely Church as a Symbol of Faith and Power (B. LOURIÉ) 516

Syriaca et Varia Orientalia (B. LOURIÉ) 523

Das russisch-deutsche Seminar „Simon Lüdwigowitsch Frank:

der deutsche Kontext der russischen Philosophie“ (A. MALINOV) .. 528

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ТОДРА	<i>Труды Отдела древнерусской литературы</i>
XB	<i>Христианский Восток</i>
AB	<i>Analecta bollandiana</i>
BHG	F. HALKIN, <i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca</i> , 3 vols. (SH, 8a), Bruxelles, 1957; IDEM, <i>Novum Auctarium BHG</i> (SH, 65), Bruxelles, 1984
BMGS	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
CCSG	Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca
CE	<i>Coptic Encyclopaedia</i> , ed. by A. S. Atiya, 8 vols., New York, 1991
CFHB	Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
ER	<i>The Ecclesiastical Review</i>
HTR	<i>The Harvard Theological Review</i>
JCRT	<i>Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory</i>
J ECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
OC	<i>Oriens Christianus</i>
OCA	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
OCP	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
PG	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca</i> , acc. J. P. MIGNE, tt. 1–161, Parisiis, 1857–1866
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
SC	Sources chrétiennes
Scr	<i>Scrinium. Revue de patrologie, d'hagiographie critique et d'histoire ecclésiastique</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

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PROVIDENCE AND FATE IN THE ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION AND IN GREEK PATRISTICS

Григорий БЕНЕВИЧ, *Краткая история «промысла» от Платона до Максима Исповедника (Σμάρραγδος Φιλοκαλίας. Византийская философия, 11), Санкт-Петербург: Русская Христианская гуманитарная академия, 2013, 315 с. ISBN 978-5-88812-654-7* [Grigory BENEVICH, *A Brief History of Providence from Plato to Maximus the Confessor (Σμάρραγδος Φιλοκαλίας. Byzantine Philosophy, 11), Saint Petersburg: Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, 2013, 315 p.]*

This book provides an overview of the themes of providence (πρόνοια) and fate (εἰμαρομένη) in the ancient philosophical tradition and in Greek patristics. It can immediately be seen that the title of the book is slightly narrower than its content, since, as the author himself points out, the main theme of his research is the “relationship between providence and fate” (p. 103) in the philosophers and theologians under study, i. e. the work is devoted not only to the notion of providence but also to the notion of fate. Despite the fact that, as Gregory Benevitch shows, the theme of providence/fate was relevant for ancient and patristic philosophers in terms of both human and physical (natural) reality, the author focuses on human reality alone.

Benevitch’s main idea is very interesting and quite original and it seems that it has never before been explored despite its relative simplicity. This idea is to trace back how concepts relating to the providence and fate, were developed in the doctrines of significant think-

ers from Ancient paganism through to Byzantine Christianity. Furthermore, this book is “Maximus-centric,” as the author has chosen Maximus the Confessor’s doctrine of providence as the point of convergence¹ for the different lines of through which he outlines. We can also note that the research includes certain larger-scale themes which cut through the chapters, such as the relationship between providence/fate and the general and individual, the status of astrology and the status of free will etc.

At the beginning of his book, Benevitch lists some “classic issues on providence.” He counts twelve such issues. Within these, he marks out the issues which are the most significant for his study and which fall within the book’s main field of attention. He focuses in particular on the “understanding of providence and fate by various philosophical schools (and by some of the key authors in such study), as well as the problem of the correlation of providence and fate in the teachings of these schools and in certain philosophers” (p. 18).

In his exposition of the historical development of the concepts of providence and fate Benevitch begins with the teaching of Socrates (as reported by Xenophon) on two aspects of the topic of providence: firstly “physics,” and secondly the concern of the gods in lives of people. Both of these aspects continued to be important throughout the subsequent thinkers which he considers (p. 21).

During his exposition of Plato, Benevitch notes that alongside the idea (associated with the goodness of the Demiurge) that providence extends to the cosmos, Plato also includes the notion that fate extends to souls coupled with bodies. This emphasis led, in the Platonic tradition, to the development of two conceptions of providence the second of which was subordinated to the first one. Another key point in Plato’s teaching was that the very soul of man became responsible for its fate, whereas the mythological tradition assumed that the lot of a person depended on Moirae (p. 24). As concerns notions of the general and the individual, for Plato, providence did extend to the individual, however he gave greater preference to providence on the general level (p. 25).

Benevitch draws attention to the way in which concepts of fate and providence coincide in Stoic teaching. In Stoic doctrine, provi-

(1) The author himself says that Maximus’ teaching is the “horizon for his research” (p. 12), but the metaphor of “horizon” is not quite clear for me in this respect.

dence/fate were capable of producing particular attitudes to misery and hardship. For the Stoics a "fate adopted stoically is the meeting point of a man with God" (p. 30). Benevitch compares the Platonic and Stoic views, noting that, in contrast to the Stoics, Plato maintains the independence of human freedom from fate (p. 33).

Considering Middle Platonism, Benevitch notes the influence of the hierarchisation of the Divine sphere on doctrine of providence, in particular through the appearance of a distinction between types and levels of providence. Thus, the Supreme God's providence did not extend to the subcelestial world; this led to the idea of a hierarchically lower fate carried out by daemons. Benevitch shows that, in Middle Platonism, ideas of punishment were rationalized, being understood as an atonement for derogation from the laws of fate. Thus, whilst the ideas of Middle Platonism did not imply a desire to withdraw from the world of fate, later Platonic as well as Gnostic teachings proceed from a desire to leave this world.

Turning to Philo of Alexandria, Benevitch notes the importance of his emphasis on the divine providence in history, where God leads his people and the world towards a particular goal (p. 42). Alexander of Aphrodisias contributes an Aristotelian stream due to his opposition to determinism in nature and his provision of a place for accident within it. In response to the Platonists' criticism that in Aristotle providence extended only to the realm of heaven, Alexander developed teaching on the relation between celestial bodies and the subcelestial region. This doctrine, implying the existence of levels of providence, brings together Alexander with Middle Platonic doctrines (pp. 46–47). At the same time, Alexander did not go so far as to admit that providence may also care for individuals and this, according to Alexander, allowed individuals freedom from determinism. However, unlike Alexander, Christian apologists who lived at approximately the same time claimed that divine providence extended to the individual and not just to the general (pp. 46–49, 53–57, 60–61).

Among the early Christian writers Clement of Alexandria deserves a specific mention as his teaching about the synergy between the saints and divine providence had an impact on subsequent Christian tradition including, probably, Maximus the Confessor (p. 61). Clement also developed ideas surrounding the correlation between providence and the Logos which cares for everything and for every smallest part of existence. Here Clement acts as a forerunner of "logo-

logy" and its connection with the doctrine of providence in Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor (p. 62).

Origen is interesting on account of his concept of the "heavenly book," an alternative to pagan astrological fatalism. Disputing the correspondence of fate to the location of stars, Origen argued that nevertheless the location is not accidental and can be perceived *qua* signs. As Benevitch writes, "this concept to varying degrees was assumed by many Christian writers, although we cannot consider it to be a generally accepted church doctrine" (pp. 66–67). Here we may note a certain vagueness on the part of the author since later, discussing the relationship between astrology and Ancient Christian teaching, Benevitch writes that, in the framework of Ancient Christian doctrine as a whole, stars did not affect the circumstances of a human life (p. 129). An important aspect of Origen's teachings consists in the idea that God, having foreknowledge of the future, does not pre-determine it. Later, this doctrine was taken up, in his own way, by Maximus the Confessor (pp. 68–71). Finally, Origen influenced the development of ideas of *logoi* of providence and judgment in subsequent Christian tradition (p. 76).

With regard to Plotinus, Benevitch shows that, while he integrated various aspects of Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, and Middle Platonists into his own doctrine, at the same time he introduced new elements. Plotinus suggested the possibility of withdrawal from the power of fate through a focus on the true and highest soul, of overcoming the passionate part of the soul, and of the achievement of independence of soul from sensory impressions. According to Plotinus, providence is spread out in the world in appropriate proportions (κατ' ἀναλογίαν) to all its parts. Afterwards, this idea played an important role in Proclus, Dionysius and Maximus (pp. 86–87).

The specificity of Iamblichus' understanding of providence/fate is associated with his rejection of the Plotinian idea that the true soul dwells in the divine sphere and is independent of the body. While Plotinus proceeded from the assumption of the need to leave behind the passionate part of soul that lives according to the laws of fate, Iamblichus aspired to develop a positive approach and thus his doctrine involved a positive use of the laws of fate.

Discussing Hierocles, Benevitch notes that he (in a similar manner to John Chrysostom) put forward the doctrine of God's two providential wills: the prior will that "those who sin would not die," and the posterior will that "those who have fallen into evil, would finally

die." Later this topic was also developed by John of Damascus (p. 98). Benevitch demonstrates that the distinctive feature of Proclus' teaching on providence consists in his elevation of providence to the level of the One that made the sphere of providence prior to the realm of the ideas. Like his Platonic predecessors, Proclus distinguished the spheres of activity of providence and fate; the distinction between the two spheres corresponding to that between the intelligent and corporeal natures. In contrast with Hierocles, for whom fate was understood primarily in relation to its ethical dimension, Proclus' understanding was framed according to onto-cosmological terms, as something relating primarily to the cosmic whole (pp. 114–122).

Of the Christian authors prior to Maximus the Confessor, Benevitch touches on Nemesius of Emesa, Evagrius, and Dionysius the Areopagite. He analyzes the polemics between Nemesius and Middle Platonic philosophers on whether the result of our actions depends on fate. Benevitch relates the specifics of Nemesius' position in particular to Christian guidelines regarding communication with God and prayer which offer connection with God without the need for mediation by the laws of fate. Disagreeing with a layered understanding of providence and fate, Nemesius refused to distinguish between the two. According to him, one and the same God extended his providence to all created beings, including individuals, and God did not entrust the functions of providential care for the subcelestial region to any daemon or celestial body. It is worth noting that Nemesius does not offer a clear answer to the question of the relationship between providence and what depends on us (p. 146). Later, Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene would suggest their own solutions to this issue.

Benevitch analyzes Evagrius' doctrine relating to *logoi* of providence and judgment later to be revised by Maximus the Confessor. He also deals with the doctrine of Dionysius the Areopagite, noting that, unlike Proclus, whom Dionysius is based largely upon, Dionysius did not use the concept of fate, but instead allows providence to become all-embracing so as to include all actions of the Godhead in relation to created beings.

Finally, Benevitch analyzes Maximus the Confessor's teaching on providence in the context of his *logoi* theory, his Christology, his ecclesiology, his soteriology, and his anthropology. Maximus borrowed from Nemesius his definition of providence the rationale for its existence, as well as concept of the relation between providence and the

individual. At the same time, in contrast with Nemesius, Maximus went so far as to specify the relationship between providence and what depends on us. Maximus also reworked Evagrius's doctrine on *logoi*, providence and judgment; he considered providence not so much in moral as in onto-dynamical terms, *qua* referring not only to human reality but to all things (pp. 173–175). Benevitch considers the Dionysian impact on Maximus' concept of judgment, while discussing differences between the approaches of Dionysius and Maximus in this regard. Benevitch shows that, unlike his pagan predecessors, Maximus did not consider God's judgment and justice as "lower" levels of deity. In Maximus, both divine providence and judgment belonged to the One God, as his forces directed towards creation.

Thus, Maximus transformed the ancient doctrines of providence and fate into doctrines of divine providence and judgment. His approach presupposes an understanding of providence and judgment in terms of onto-dynamics, in which judgment, taking part of the role of fate in pagan philosophical thought, acquired ontological significance. This understanding, implying the equivalence and "simultaneity" of divine providence and judgment, competes with the doctrine of the two wills of God which is found in John Chrysostom, Hierocles, John of Damascus, and several later authors (e. g. Thomas Aquinas and Gennadius Scholarius) (pp. 220–221).

While the title of the book states that it is dedicated to the history of providence up until Maximus the Confessor, the final chapter contains the author's observations on the subject of providence in John of Damascus and in late Byzantine literature.² In the chapter on John of Damascus Benevitch in particular criticizes the conclusions of the

(2) I might here note that in the section on late Byzantine literature Benevitch mentions the topic of providence in the controversy between Gregory Palamas and Nicephorus Gregoras and therefore refers to the commentaries written by both me and Dmitry Makarov which have been published in the book: Д. БИРЮКОВ и Д. МАКАРОВ, "Комментарии," in: Георгий Факрасис, *Диспут свт. Григория Паламы с Григорией философом. Философские и богословские аспекты паламитских споров*, пер. с древнегреч. Д. А. ПОСПЕЛОВА, отв. ред. Д. С. БИРЮКОВ [D. BIRIUKOV and D. MAKAROV, "Commentaries," in: Georgy Fakrasis, *Disputation of St Gregory Palamas with Nicephorus Gregoras, a Philosopher. Philosophical and Theological Aspects of the Palamite controversy*, trans. D. POSPELOV, ed. D. BIRIUKOV], Москва, Святая гора Афон, 2009, с. 87; and doing it, he confuses authorship and attributes my commentary to Makarov (p. 216, n. 864).

lengthy article by John Demetrakopoulos on theodicy in the Damascene.³ Namely, unlike Demetrakopoulos, who considers the doctrines of Ammonius son of Hermias and Stephan of Athena in particular to be important sources for the Damascene's teaching on divine predestination and predetermination, Benevitch sees no need to take into account these authors in this context, pointing instead to the teachings of Maximus the Confessor and of Origen (p. 201, n. 825).

This brief overview has shown that Gregory Benevitch's book is a supremely meaningful, informative and conceptual study. Two shortcomings are worth mentioning in conclusion, firstly the omission of early Christian writers between Origen and Nemesius (e. g. the Cappadocian fathers are given very little consideration, and Athanasius of Alexandria is not mentioned at all), and secondly the lack of discussion surrounding the relationship between concepts of providence and theodicy in the considered authors (this topic is briefly outlined by the author, but it does not get a satisfactory treatment in the book — apparently because the topic of theodicy is absent in the doctrine of Maximus the Confessor whose teaching is one of the key anchor points for the converging lines traced by the author).

(3) Unfortunately, the publication information for this paper has been left out of the bibliographic section of the book. Benevitch meant the following article by Demetrakopoulos: "In Search of the Pagan and Christian Sources of John of Damascus' Theodicy," in *Byzantine theology and its philosophical background*, ed. by A. RIGO in coll. with P. ERMILOV and M. TRIZIO, Brepols, 2011, pp. 50–86.