

SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT

MONOGRAPH

# **16. *Dionysius the Areopagite***

The great misunderstood



The beheadings of Dionysius the Areopagite, presbyter Rusticus and deacon Eleutherius

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Monograph No 16***

## DIVINE PHAROS

MONOGRAPH No. 16:

**DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITE**  
by  
Demetrios Makrygiannis**Short Biography**

**Dionysius the Areopagite** . He was born in Athens during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and grew up in a prominent family of Athens, attended philosophical school at home and abroad and was married and had several children. He was a judge of the supreme court in Greece called Areios Pagos (*Ἀρειος Πάγος, Supreme Court of Athens, established in 1500BC*). After his conversion to Christianity by St. Paul he was made Bishop of Athens. Eventually he left his wife and children for Christ and went with St. Paul on missionary travels. He travelled to Jerusalem specifically to see the Most Holy Theotokos, Mother of Christ, and wrote of his encounter in one of his books. He was also present at her Dormition. After seeing St. Paul martyred in Rome, St. Dionysius desired to be a martyr. He went to Gaul, along with his presbyter Rusticus and deacon Eleutherius to preach the Gospel to the barbarians. There, his suffering was equalled only by his success in converting many pagans to Christianity. In the year 96AD, St. Dionysius was seized and tortured for his Christian preaching along with Rusticus and Eleutherius. All three were beheaded under the reign of the Emperor Domitian.

To avoid confusion with others also called Dionysius he is called '**Dionysius the Areopagite**'.

## Introduction

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD during the period of Emperor Justinian in Byzantium four manuscripts appeared containing the name Dionysius the Areopagite who was considered to be the first Bishop of Athens.

Despite initial objections, they were accepted by everyone as authentic works that formed the basis of Christian mysticism in the Byzantium, Slavic countries and Western Europe.

However, in the past two to three centuries their authenticity was questioned with the prevailing view that they belong to an unknown author of the 5<sup>th</sup> century known by the name Pseudo-Dionysius.

On this subject, recently in Athens Greece, in 2017, the work of author Demetrios Makrygiannis was circulated with the title “The authenticity of the works of Dionysius the Areopagite” – (Published by ESOPTRON, pp306). This book supports categorically that these works are authentic, as they were accepted for thirteen centuries by the entire Christian world.

This monograph in summary form discloses the views and arguments that are put forward in this book.

*NB: In this monograph*

- (i) *Dionysius refers to Dionysius the Areopagite and not to Pseudo-Dionysius. (pseudo is a Greek word which translated means false).*
- (ii) *The Latin name Dionysius is a Romanised form of the Greek name Dionysios (Διονύσιος).*
- (iii) *Monophysite is a Greek word for a person who accepts only one nature of Christ, in this case God or human.*
- (iv) *For more details on what is written here, see “The authenticity of the works of Dionysius Areopagete” by D Makrygiannis. (esoptron@otenet.gr)*
- (v) *P.G. : J.P. Migne, Partologia Graeca.*

## 1. Who was Dionysius the Areopagite

Dionysius is known from the New Testament. After the teaching of Apostle Paul in Arios Pagos, (sometimes spelled Areios Pagos, *Ἀρειος Πάγος*) the Supreme Court of Athens, established in 1500BC, reported that: "Some men joined him and believed, among them was Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them" (Acts 17, 34).

**Dionysius was called the Areopagite because he was a member of the Areios Pagos, the Supreme Court, which had very extensive responsibilities.** This Court did not only deal with murder cases, but also had jurisdiction to guard the constitution, supervision of the worship of gods, the care and upbringing of children and their education etc. Therefore, members of this court were prominent Athenian citizens with a broad spirit and high moral stature.

Apart from the above-mentioned report, nothing else is known about Dionysius the Areopagite in official historical sources. On the contrary, there are many written accounts about saints and martyrs that contain a great deal of information about the apostolic activity of Dionysius the Areopagite in Western Europe, especially in the region of France and Germany. There is a characteristic phrase of Michael Syggelos in "*Praise for St Dionysius*" that "*He covered twice the distance that Paul did*" (*Patrologia Graeca* 4, 657 D).

Finally, Dionysius settled in the small town of Paris, which was built on a small island of the Seine. There, Emperor Domitian deployed a military detachment and after Dionysius' refusal to deny his religion, the soldiers proceeded to decapitate him and both his two close associates Rusticus and Eleftherios.

According to tradition, these events occurred in the area of the present-day hill of Montmartre, which was named after the words of Mont Martyrium (mount of martyrs).

The following event is also reported: The beheaded Dionysius took his head in his hands and walked for about two miles until he met a woman, a faithful Christian, named Katoula and he handed it to her. The area inhabited by Katoula is today called Saint Dionysius (St Denis) and there, in 626AD King Dagobert I, built the famous Abbey of Saint Dionysius.

*(NB: For a number of years the Abbey figured prominently in the history of France. It is currently, after successive alterations, one of the finest in France. It is considered a 'national monument' and holds the relics of St Dionysius and is one of the richest and most important abbeys of France).*

The above texts may not be considered official or credible because they include some fantastic elements, but we believe they must not be rejected totally as unsupported myths. Those who compiled them, did not write fictional non-existent events but they were relying on written sources and on verbal traditions that contained a number of historical elements.

## 2. The writings of Dionysius the Areopagite

In the above texts that chronicle the apostolic activities of Dionysius nowhere is it mentioned that he also wrote theological works. These became public during the 6th century as a result of a random event.

In the year 532AD (*during the period of Emperor Justinian*) a conference took place in Constantinople between Orthodox Christians and Monophysites to examine some dogmatic differences between them.



St Dionysius the Areopagite. 1<sup>st</sup> Bishop of Athens

At this conference the Monophysites mentioned some works by Dionysius the Areopagite. These were questioned by the head of the Orthodox Bishop Hypatios who gave no further explanation on this subject. However, the reference to Dionysius' works formed a trigger for their greater dissemination. They became better known to a larger circle and became acceptable by all as authentic works of the Athenian Dionysius the Areopagite.

These works are:

- a) "**On Divine Names**". Refers to the names and common nouns that are attributed to the Triadic Divinity which is beyond any substance and is therefore invisible, unexplored and indeterminate.
- b) "**On Heavenly Hierarchy**". Examines the hierarchical classes of Heavenly entities, from the Supreme Deity to the last class of angels. These entities are generally called "noes" (*intellects*).
- c) "**On Church Hierarchy**". The ecclesiastical hierarchy is the earthly hierarchy as an institution of theological science, which aims at the perfection and deification of men. It is divided into three classes (hierarchs, priests, deacons) and draws its power from the Authority of Jesus Christ.
- d) "**On Mystic Theology**". This is a brief work, in which Dionysius summarises the conclusions of his long-term research as to the real meaning of God. He concludes that God, as a most perfect and unified cause of everything, is above all things and is not defined by verbal formality.

e) **Ten epistles**, addresses several persons and deals with issues of current importance.

In the above works, Dionysius makes references to some other works he had written, which are not known today. These are:

- a) "**Theological Formulations**". In this he analyses the main points of affirmative theology.
- b) "**Symbolic Theology**". This work seems to have been the most extensive of all and perhaps the most important because it illustrated the meaning of all anthropomorphic representations of Divinity in the Bible.
- c) "**On angelic qualities and classes**".
- d) "**On the soul**".
- e) "**On justice and Divine justification**". Concerns the justification of men in the Heavenly world.
- f) "**On comprehensible and sensible things**".
- g) "**On Divine hymns**".

In addition to the above, some others that bear the name of Dionysius have survived, but they are considered ambiguous or not legitimate. These are:

- (a) "**Epistle to Apollophanes**". It survives in a Latin translation and it refers to the paradoxical phenomena of the solar eclipse during the Crucifixion of Christ, that he followed along with Apollophanes in the Heliopolis of Egypt.
- b) "**Divine Liturgy**"
- (c) "**Autobiography**"
- (d) "**Astronomical and meteorological treatise**"
- e) **Two other letters**, one to Timothy (On the suffering of the apostles Peter and Paul in Rome), and one to Tito.

### 3. The dissemination of the writings

After their publication, these manuscripts began to spread more widely, motivated directly by the interest of many scholars. The initial objections about their authenticity came from those who had not known of their existence. However, those who knew, categorically confirmed the authenticity of the works, and no further argument was heard, not even the slightest suspicion of ambivalence.

Characteristically, it is reported that Bishop Hypatios, not only did he not continue to have objections to these works, but he himself used Dionysian terminology in his work "Complementary Issues," from which a large excerpt about icons has survived.

Initially the works were commented on by Ioannis Scythopolitani (6th century) and Maximus the Confessor (9th century). Since then, all Byzantine philosophers and theologians (Leontius of Byzantium, Ioannis Damaskinos, Andrew of Krete, Theodore Stoudites, Niketas Stethatos, Michael Psellos, Gregory Palamas, Nikephoros Gregoras etc.) make extensive references to Dionysius and his works.

In Western Europe the Areopagete writings were sent during the year 827AD from the Byzantine Emperor Michael the Travlos (820-829AD) to Emperor Ludovico the

Pious, son of the Karl the Great. The texts were first translated by Ildouenos, and then by John Scottus Eriugena. Together with Augustin's works, they formed the basis for the development of Western mystic theology. Some of the more important mystics who were influenced by Dionysius are: Abelard, Bonaventura, Thomas Gallus, Albert the Great, Meister Eckhart, Nikolaos Kouzanos and Ioannis of the Cross. Thomas of Akinatos especially admired the Areopagete works. He refers to them 1,700 times!

All of them **constitute perhaps the most important certificate in favour of the authenticity of the works**, because it is not possible for false writings to engage the interest of so many great intellectual men and for so many centuries to become a fundamental centre of theological thought.

The manuscripts of Dionysius began to spread throughout the Slavic countries from the 14th century AD. For the first time in 1371 they were translated into the Slavonic language by the Serbian scholar monk Isaiah. After that, copies and new translations of these works followed in Russia.

Therefore, it is noted, that both in the East and in the West, Dionysios the Areopagite had been established for many centuries as an authority, **without ever having had the authenticity of his works questioned anywhere.**

#### 4. How the non-authenticity of the works has prevailed

The first doubts about the authenticity of the Areopagite works were expressed by the humanist scholar of the Italian Renaissance, Laurentius Valla (1407-1465). Continuing with the same views were Erasmus (1469-1536) and J Scaliger (1540 - 1609), who did not deal with this issue thoroughly.

From the 18th century, the Protestants, theologians mainly, along with their detailed, meticulous work on the critique of the New Testament, also produced the equally meticulous critique of the manuscripts of the Fathers of the Church. In these circles, doubts about the Areopagite works began to grow.

The two most recent Protestant theologians, Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr, completed the prevalence of the controversy from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> until the middle of the 20th century. Their work promoted the wide view of the non-authenticity of the works, which has been accepted almost entirely by the scientific world of theologians and philosophers.

The most decisive argument that led to the universal acceptance of the non-authenticity was the discovery of similar passages and expressions in the Areopagite works as in the works of the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus. It was therefore considered that the author of the Areopagite works had used Proclus' works. Therefore, necessarily he must be later than him. Because Proclus lived in the period 410-485AD, it was accepted that the unknown writer lived in the second half of the 5th century and gave him the conventional name Pseudo-Dionysius.

However, despite the detailed and thorough investigations, to date it has not been discovered who this famous Pseudo-Dionysius was!

We will deal with the subject of Proclus later. We must first clarify an unknown aspect of the whole issue, namely why the Protestant theologians have made such persistent attempts to prove the non-authenticity of the Areopagite works.

The Protestants accept that the only source of the Christian religion is the Bible. The Holy Tradition can only be accepted as long as it agrees with the Bible. Only two mysteries: baptism and thanksgiving are testified in the Bible; therefore, the other five mysteries must be rejected. Amongst them is that they do not accept the mystery of priesthood, believing that during the initial period of Christianity there was no ecclesiastical hierarchy, nor ceremonies, but all these were created in subsequent centuries.

These views can be radically overturned by the Areopagite writings. However, because they could not ignore them, they followed the easy solution by disputing their authenticity! Unfortunately, this view was accepted unaudited and untested by all others, resulting in the universal scientific world view prevailing, supposedly as a result of scientific philological critique!

### 5. How the authenticity of the works can be proven

As stated before, the main argument that convinced almost everyone involved with this issue, was the identification of some similar passages in Proclus' works. However, finding some similarities between the texts of two authors, A and B, is not enough in itself to determine who has precedence. That is, we cannot be sure whether A copied from B or B from A.

In this specific case, Koch and Stiglmayr **arbitrarily assigned the priority to Proclus!** We say "arbitrarily," because they did not present any other proof that confirms that he is ahead in time from the writer of Areopagite works.

By carefully investigating this issue, we have come to the opposite conclusion, namely that **Proclus is the one who used the Areopagite works** and has copied a number of them. The evidence confirming this conclusion is as follows:

a) Maximos the Confessor, in his introduction of his comments on these works writes: *"Some of the national philosophers, and indeed Proclus, often uses the theorems of the blessed Dionysius, and indeed with exactly the same words ..."* (PG 4:21).

At that time (7th century) the works of Proclus were much more widespread than those of Areopagite. Yet Maximos does not hesitate to emphasize from the outset that Proclus has used the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite and indeed copied word for word literally some philosophical formalisms (which he calls "theorems"). This means that he was absolutely convinced that this is how the similarities are explained.

Of course, at that time there were others who found the same similarities between the writings that we are examining. And yet, no one has expressed the view that the author of the newly-appeared works copied from Proclus! That is, no one has

opposed Maximos' categorical statement, not only at that time, but not even in later periods. This fact is a major presumption that was not appreciated as it should have been.

b) Looking at the similar sections and similar expressions we ascertain that Dionysius uses them with maximum precision and depth of meaning, while Proclus uses them subtly and with relative mental ambiguity.

c) The works of Dionysius **are entirely original** and cannot be compared to any other. On the contrary, the works of Proclus do not present great originality, since most of them are **comments on the works by earlier writers** (Plato, Hesiod, Euclid etc.). In particular, the most controversial work "*On the Substance of Evil*" is only a compilation of the views of earlier writers regarding the nature and substance of evil, as he writes in the prologue.

However, Proclus **leaves completely unmentioned** on the names of the forebears as well as which views he has taken from each and what works he used. It is therefore obvious that he recorded as his own work the views of Dionysius Areopagite without mentioning his name.

At this point it is interesting that all his biographer Marino the Neapolitan tells us is that Proclus had studied all the theological systems of the Greeks and the barbarians. Of course, amongst them is included Christian theology, that was at its pinnacle during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century. Proclus had studied many of the works of the great Fathers of the Church, had copied many points from them, but has never mentioned the name of even one Christian author.

d) By objectively comparing the two writers, Dionysius and Proclus, we ascertain that **Dionysius prevails greatly in spiritual enthusiasm and in depth of meaning.** This is demonstrated directly by the effect they had on those who came subsequently. Dionysius had a tremendous impact on the development of theological thought, both in the East and in the West. On the contrary, the influence of Proclus is much less, confined among the followers of Neoplatonic philosophy. It is therefore logical that the inferior copies from the superior.

And so, it is proven that Proclus has used Areopagite texts extensively and that their author at least pre-existed Proclus. Therefore, they can only be genuine works of the real Dionysius Areopagite.

It is also said that the hypothetical Pseudo-Dionysius appeared as a student of the Apostle Paul and that he staged the entire scene to present his works as if they were by the Athenian Dionysius Areopagite.

Such views are totally opposite to reality. The author of the works **says absolutely nothing about himself or his place of origin.** Only once (in a letter to Apollonphanes) does he mention incidentally the name "Dionysius". On the other hand, there are many contraindications to any one particular direction, as references to unknown people of the apostolic era, the memorization of words not present in the New Testament, the absence of other more tangible evidence, etc.

## 6. Why are the Areopagite works not mentioned?

The second serious argument against the authenticity of Areopagite works is that none of the Fathers of the Church and the Christian writers explicitly refers to them, especially Eusebius, the most important historian of the first period of Christianity.

The most important reason for this to have occurred is the deep theological content of the works, which may not easily be understood by others of faith. They belonged to the **mystic teaching of Christianity** that is not revealed other than to the more advanced in terms of faith and knowledge.

Besides, the author himself repeatedly orders Timothy (who is the recipient of all the works) **not to reveal these to the uninitiated**. Therefore, these writings circulated secretly from hand-to-hand within a limited circle, and were transmitted only to those who demonstrated that they were really capable of understanding them.

Following the same principle of secrecy the great Fathers of the Church, sometimes referred to them obliquely without naming them. An indicative example is this: Gregory of Nazianzus (4th century), commenting on the sayings of the prophet Isaiah about Seraphim (Isaiah 6:2), writes: "*therefore, the holy of holies, that are concealed and glorified with three sanctifications from Seraphim, come together in dominance and divinity. For this subject, someone, preceding us has philosophised very well and at the highest level*" (38<sup>th</sup> Logos).

There is no one previous author, who has philosophised "*very well and at the highest level*" about the Holy of Holies, the Seraphim and the Heavenly Powers, than Dionysius Areopagite. He has given an excellent interpretation of Isaiah's Seraphic Hymn (About Ecclesiastical Hierarchy D γ 5-10) and has analysed extensively the Seraphim angelic order (On Heavenly Hierarchy, chapters 6-7).

However, there are references namely to Dionysius, as well as to some others who emerge from his biography, such as the following.

John Chrysostom, describing the miraculous events that happened during the Lord's Crucifixion, writes among other things: "***Have you seen the darkness in Egypt and the changes in the elements? ...***" (Logos In 142nd Psalm 5; PG 55, 454).

This phrase proves that Chrysostom knew from Dionysius the relevant description of the phenomena, with the strange solar eclipse, as he watched them in Heliopolis of Egypt, together with his companion, Apollophanes. Dionysius is the only writer of antiquity who talks about "the darkness in Egypt," while everyone else talks about the darkness in the Palestine only.

## 7. Conclusions

The challenge to the authenticity of the writings of Dionysius Areopagite had as a consequence a reduction of their great value. Whilst, for example, for fifteen centuries they were considered to be **the most important texts of the Christian Secretariat after the New Testament**, they were downgraded as the response of Christianity to Neoplatonic philosophy and similar.

In other words, indirectly the perception dominated that since they were false and fake objectively it is not possible for them to have either great theological or doctrinal value. This view was reinforced by the existence of partial phrases which drew conclusions contrary to the validity of existing dogma, such as the support of Monophysism.

This is in stark contrast to the enormous resonance that these writings had in the East and the West, as we stated earlier. The younger scholars, having the satisfaction of discovering the alleged plagiarism, overlook their value and are indifferent to their essential meanings.

Therefore, with the restoration of the works of Dionysius the Areopagite authenticity will return to the perspective of theological science and its true glory, so that they can be re-examined carefully and in depth. This will create new broad prospects both for the exploration of the first period of Christianity and for the revelation of its actual and meaningful teaching.

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