

Words Cannot Name Thee: A *Hymn to God* and Its Author ¹

By Robert K. Clark

Among the most moving and beautiful celebrations of the Absolute is a *Hymn to God*, which has been attributed to various authors. It embodies a profound poetic expression of the transcendence of the supreme Principle of Principles to all attempts to define It or describe It, or even give It an adequate conceptualization. For *dianoia*, discursive reason, while accurate within its sphere is yet limited, and can never attain to a full and true knowledge of God, Who transcends all knowledge and all conceptions.

The *Hymn to God* expresses the dependence of all things upon That Which cannot ever be expressed in words. It embodies at once the deep yearning of the path of devotion and the profound knowledge of the path of knowledge, in knowing what one can and cannot attain to except by a power beyond ordinary knowing, *agnosia*, or mystical unknowing. It is a mystical attempt to ascend to That Which is the source and goal of all, proceeding through both the *via affirmativa*, in ascribing to the Supreme the highest attributes, and the *via negativa*, denying any adequate description to That Which is beyond all.²

*Hymn To God*³

Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite⁴

O Thou Who art beyond all,
 What else may we rightly call Thee?
How shall I extol Thee,
 Who art preeminent over all?
How can any word praise Thee,
 When words cannot name Thee?
Alone unutterable,
 Thou art the cause of all that can be spoken.
How can the mind consider Thee,
 When no mind can grasp Thee?
Alone unknowable,
 Thou art the cause of all that can be known.
All things, both the speaking
 And the speechless, proclaim Thee.
All keen longings, all deep pains,
 Are but yearnings for Thee.
To Thee is the prayer of all.
To Thee all, perceiving Thy sign,
 Utter a silent hymn.

¹ © 2012 by Robert K. Clark. This author would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance that the staffs of the libraries of the University of Notre Dame and the University of Chicago provided in helping him obtain copies of several of the resources consulted in researching the authorship of the *Hymn to God*.

² E.g., 'Thou art the cause of all that can be known', while 'Alone unknowable'.

³ Translation © 2002 and 2012 by Robert K. Clark.

⁴ This hymn has also been attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus and Proclus. However more recent scholarship suggests that it may well have been written by Dionysius the Areopagite, a conclusion with which, after careful consideration, this author agrees. Please see the discussion of the authorship of this hymn below.

All things come forth from Thee
And Thou from nothing.
Thus art Thou alone.
In Thee all things abide.
And all ceaselessly hasten toward Thee,
For Thou art the Goal of all.
Thou art One, and All,
Yet neither one, nor all.
O Most-Named, how then shall I address Thee,
Who alone art unnamable?
What Heaven-born Mind could ever penetrate
Thy veil above?
I pray Thee, be gracious.
O Thou Who art beyond all,
What else may we rightly call Thee?

The Authorship of the *Hymn to God*

In Olympiodorus' *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias*, which dates from around 525 A.D.,⁵ are to be found several of the opening verses of the *Hymn to God*⁶. Unfortunately, Olympiodorus omits any reference to the authorship of the hymn. As the hymn was included among manuscripts of Gregory of Nazianzus⁷, it was long thought that Gregory was the author. It was included in the collection of Gregory of Nazianzus' works in the original Greek published by J.-P. Migne in Paris in 1860, along with a Latin translation, and still remains the standard edition of Gregory's works⁸. While there have been many who have suggested that this *Hymn to God* was not written by Gregory, it still appears in books with his name listed as author.⁹

In 1832, the French Neoplatonist and educator Victor Cousin concluded that the *Hymn to God* could not have been written by Gregory of Nazianzus, as its language was too modern, and was probably written by the Neoplatonist Proclus.¹⁰ This attribution was supported by Albert Jahn in 1891¹¹, and Mario Meunier included a translation of the *Hymn to God*, under the authorship of Proclus in his collection of

⁵ L. G. Westerink, ed., *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, volume I: *Olympiodorus* (Amsterdam, Oxford, New York: North Holland, 1976), p. 21.

⁶ See Robin Jackson, et. al., trs., *Olympiodorus Commentary on Plato's Gorgias* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 1998), p. 86.

⁷ *Ibid.* Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389 A.D.) was an early Church Father.

⁸ *Patrologia Graeca*, volume 37, pp. 507-08. Reprinted by Brepols, Turnhout, Belgium, 1979.

⁹ For instance in F. Forrester Church & Terrence J. Mulry, *Macmillan Book of Earliest Christian Hymns* (New York: Macmillan, 1988). In contrast, it is notable that Brian Daley, in his recently published work on Gregory of Nazianzus, while he does include a *Hymn to God* among the translations of ten of Gregory's poems and hymns, it is not this hymn. (Brian E. Daley, S.J., *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 162-71). In preparing his work, in the absence of a critical edition of Gregory's works, Daley utilized the *Patrologia Graeca* edition of Gregory of Nazianzus' works. He pointedly notes that 'the state of the texts of this edition is uneven in quality, and the identification and classification of the poems, especially, needs considerable correction.' (Daley, p. 259).

¹⁰ Victor Cousin, 'Du Commentaire inédit d'Olympiodore, philosophe alexandrin du VI^e siècle, sur le *Gorgios* de Platon', Paris: *Journal des Savants*, 1832, p. 751. It is interesting, however, to note that Cousin did not see fit to include the *Hymn to God* among Proclus' hymns in his own edition of Proclus' works, nor does he mention it in his discussion of the hymns. (Victor Cousin, *Procli Philosophi Platonici Opera Inedita* (Paris: Prostant Apud Aug. Durall, 1864). Proclus lived 410 or 412-485 A.D. (Simon Hornblower & Antony Spawforth, eds., *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1250).

¹¹ Albert Jahn, ed., *Philosophia Chaldaica von Proclus* (Halle: Pfeffer, 1891), pp. 62-77.

philosophical hymns in 1935¹². Laurence Rosán, in his well-received work on Proclus published in 1949, placed his own translation of this work just after the preface.¹³ Even recently, a translation of the *Hymn to God* was published with Proclus assigned as its author, even as fairly the same hymn was still attributed elsewhere to Gregory of Nazianzus.¹⁴

Questions about the legitimacy of assigning the authorship of the *Hymn to God* to either Gregory of Nazianzus or Proclus have been posed over more than a century. In 1988, an author named Martin Sicherl gave the question careful consideration in his essay on the *Hymn to God*.¹⁵ In his extensive discussion of the terms employed by Gregory of Nazianzus, Proclus and Dionysius the Areopagite, he found numerous parallels between the expressions employed in the works of Dionysius and the author of the *Hymn to God*. He determined that it clearly could not have been written by Gregory and that, while it certainly includes Neoplatonic ideas to be found in Proclus, these are also common to Dionysius, who was certainly influenced by Proclus. Indeed some of the ideas incorporated in the hymn are also to be found in Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* but are absent from Proclus. He concluded that it was neither Gregory of Nazianzus nor Proclus who wrote the *Hymn to God*, but rather 'that Ps-Dionysius is the author of the hymn'¹⁶. While this remains a point that may never be conclusively established, the evidence does suggest that Dionysius the Areopagite may well have been the author of this uplifting *Hymn to God*.¹⁷

¹² Mario Meunier, tr., *Aristote, Cléanthe, Proclus: Hymnes philosophiques* (Paris: L'Artisan du Livre, 1935), pp. 111-14.

¹³ Laurence Jay Rosán, PhD., *The Philosophy of Proclus: The Final Phase of Ancient Thought* (New York: "Cosmos", 1949), p. ix.

¹⁴ Michael Hornum, tr., 'Proclus's Hymn to the One', *Alexandria: The Journal of the Western Cosmological Traditions*, volume 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Phanes Press, 1995), p. 198.

¹⁵ Martin Sicherl, 'Ein Neoplatonischer Hymnus unter den Gedichten Gregors von Nazianz', in J. Duffy and J. Peradotto, eds., *Gonimos: Neoplatonic and Byzantine Studies Presented to G. Westerink at 75* (Buffalo, New York: Arethusa, 1988), pp. 61-83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82. As the author Dionysius the Areopagite was not the person mentioned in Acts 17: 34 of the New Testament, but an author whose writings exhibit definite influences of Proclus and therefore must be placed chronologically after Proclus, he is often referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius.

¹⁷ In his translation of the *Hymn to God*, Henri Saffrey also ascribes it to Dionysius the Areopagite (Henri D. Saffrey, tr., *Proclus: Hymnes et prières* (Paris: Arfuyen, 1994), p. 79), while Van Den Berg, in his recent authoritative work on Proclus' hymns, concludes that it is likely that this hymn is the work of Dionysius. (R. M Van Den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 2001), p. 7.