The Tyranny of Authority: Eternal Damnation in the Fragments of Clement of Alexandria?

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The Tyranny of Authority: Eternal Damnation in the Fragments of Clement of Alexandria?

In the year 1715, John Potter published the most comprehensive edition of the extant writings of the Clement of Alexandria, the second-century Church Father who is most famous for his apologetic *Protrepticus* and intensely philosophical *Stromata*. Potter’s edition includes a collection of fragments, and among these fragments, this one is conspicuous:

Ἀθάνατοι πᾶσαι αἰ ψυχαί, καὶ τὸν ἀσβεθόν, αἰς ἄμεινον ἦν μὴ ἀφθάρτους εἶναι.
Κολαζόμεναι γὰρ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀσβέτου πυρὸς ἀπεράντῳ τιμωρία καὶ μὴ θνήσκουσαι, ἐπὶ κακῶ τῷ ἐαυτῶν τέλος λαβεῖν οὐκ ἔχουσιν.1

All souls are immortal, even those of the wicked, for whom it is better that they were not deathless. For, punished with the endless vengeance of quenchless fire, and not dying, it is impossible for them to have a period assigned to their misery.2

This fragment would represent the single clearest expression of Clement’s thoughts on hell and punishment in the entire corpus: the wicked are damned eternally. As the source of this fragment, Potter cites the *Loci communes*, an anthology of famous quotations compiled by Maximus the Confessor, which reports the passage under the heading “of Clement.”3 All of the nineteenth-century critical editions of Clement’s writings include the fragment in their collections: thus, Klotz in 1834,4 Le Nourry in 1858,5 and Dindorf in 1869,6 all clearly relying on Potter’s

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1 John Potter, ed., *Clementis Alexandrini Opera, Quae Exstant*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Sheldonian Theater, 1715), 1020. See “Potter (1715),” below.
2 Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Liturgies and Other Documents of the Ante-Nicene Period*, vol. 24, Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872), 163; Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 (Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), 580. Based on the facts that nothing like these words is found in those writings of Clement that are preserved more completely, that the fragment pertains to a doctrine of the soul, and that Maximus the Confessor includes it in a section titled “on the soul,” Potter hypothesizes that the text comes from a lost treatise of Clement that was also called “on the soul.” Potter, *Clementis Alexandrini Opera, Quae Exstant*, 2:1020. See “Potter (1715),” below and Maximus, Serm. 53.
3 Reinhold Klotz, ed., *Titi Flavi Clementis Alexandrini Opera Omnia*, vol. 4 (E.B. Schwickert, 1834), 83. See “Klotz (1834),” below.
authority directly or indirectly. There are, though, two famous Early Church Fathers named Clement, and this fragment actually belongs to the Homilies that circulate under the name of Clement of Rome, the first-century Pope,\(^7\) not to any work of Clement of Alexandria. Potter, therefore, must have read the heading “of Clement” and assumed incorrectly that it belonged to his Clement.

In his early-twentieth century edition, Stählin correctly assigns the fragment to the texts associated with Clement of Rome and omits it from his collection, but his work said too little and appeared too late. It was too little, because he did not offer an argument for excluding the fragment; he only included it in a simple list and chart of misattributed fragments.\(^8\) Although Stählin’s critical edition became and remains the authority for scholars who have Greek, the lack of discussion about his decision to exclude the fragment made it difficult for anyone who was not intimately familiar with the preceding editions to notice that he had chosen to leave it out. It was too late because Roberts and Donaldson had already published an English translation of the collected fragments of Clement of Alexandria in 1872 as part of the large and influential series containing writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, relying on Le Nourry’s edition.\(^9\) Their translation became the authority for those who did not focus on the Greek text. As a result of the

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\(^7\) ἀθάνατος γὰρ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τῶν ἀσεβῶν, οἷς ἄμεινον ἦν μὴ ἄφθαρτον αὐτὴν ἔχειν. κολαζομένη γὰρ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀσβέστου πυρὸς ἀπεράντω τιμωρίᾳ καὶ μὴ θνῄσκουσα, ἐπὶ κακῷ τῷ αὐτῆς τέλος λαβεῖν οὐκ ἔχει. Ps.-Clem. Rom. Hom. 11.11.2.


\(^9\) See footnote \(^2\), above and “Roberts and Donaldson (1872),” below. Interestingly, Le Nourry’s admittedly confusing format of presentation for the two fragments, which Potter assigned to a treatise titled “on the soul,” has led to a misunderstanding about their respective sources. Roberts and Donaldson clearly cite Cod. Barocc. 143 as the source for the fragment about eternal punishment, but this manuscript actually records the earlier fragment. Cf.: Κλήμεν(τος) () Πάντων ἀναπνέουσαι αἱ ψυχαί: τὸ ζῆν ἔχουσι: κ᾽ ἂν χωρισθῶσι τοῦ σώματος: (καὶ) () τὸν εἰς αὐτὸν εὑρεθῶσι πόθον ἔχουσαι: εἰς τὸν θ(εο)ῦ κόλπον φέρονται θάνατοι () ὡς ἐν γεωμένοις ὁρά οἱ ἀτμοὶ τῆς γῆς () ὑπὸ τῶν τοῦ ἡλίου ἄκτινον ἐφελκόμενοι() γονιδίων: φέρουσιν πρός αὐτὸν. Cod. Barocc. 143, 181r13–20. See “MS. Barocc. 143, 181r13–20,” below.
dependence of scholarship on either of these editions, a significant divide on the issue of punishment and hell in the writings of Clement of Alexandria arose, and these two, mutually exclusive positions have remained all but entirely discrete. One group, relying on Stählin, rightly supported a more Platonic view of corrective punishment that leads eventually to universal salvation, but the other, relying on Roberts and Donaldson, incorrectly perpetuated a myth of eternal damnation in Clement’s thought. Neither was in conversation with the other. This brief analysis helps engage two discrete traditions in debate, and helps us ultimately to prefer one, having proved the other to be dependent upon Potter’s misattribution of the fragment. Clement did not think of the punishment of the soul as persisting eternally. More importantly, though, I think that this investigation raises an important question that is more broadly relevant to the disciplines of Classics and Early Christian Studies, namely, how ought scholars engage with the critical editions of the texts that they study. With regard to this question, this case study demonstrates not only that editors’ decisions can have a profound, lasting, and unnoticed effect on later scholarship, but also that a lack of appreciation of the theories, ideas, and traditions that underlie editorial decisions can elevate the text from a level of authority to a tyranny. By way of conclusion, then, I suggest that the best way to combat this


tyranny of authority is to remain critical of our printed texts and to stay cognizant of the fact that what we read in a standard critical edition and modern translation is the result of countless decisions that were made by, in some cases, hundreds of people other than the author. To a greater or lesser degree, positively or negatively, these people are always at work influencing our thoughts about a text and its author, and it is helpful to remember that their voices occupy this same textual space.

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Bibliography


Potter (1715)

**FRAGMENTA Libri De Anima**

EX MAXIMI Serm. LIII. De Anima pag. 656. & ANTONIO MELISSA.

Omnibus solutae ac respirantes animae vitam habent, & licet a corpore separate existant, inque illud desiderio ferantur, in Dei tamen finum evolant immortales: haud fecus ac hyberna tempus factae terrae vapores radiis foliis attacti, verus ipsum feruntur.

Hae sententiae quoque legitur Cod. 143. Barocc. cap. 85 n. 4. 

Immortales sunt omnes animae, etiam impiorum, quibus praetaret, haud esse incorruptibles. Dum enim ignis inextinguibilis perpetuo torquentur supplicio, nec unquam moriuntur, nullum malo suo finem nuncici possunt.

Hae cum in editis Clementis Alexandrini libris nusquam reperiantur, ex ejus lib. De Anima omnino petita videntur, cum ad doctrinam de ea pertinente, & à Maximo in cap. De Anima allegantur.

Klotz (1834)

**Fragmenta libri de anima.**

Ex Maximi Serm. LIII. De anima p. 656. et Antonio Melissae.

Pantos anapanthos sui phulai to zhu exousia, kai xworisthosi tou symatos kal tou elis autou efre-10thetai, paidon exousia eis to to theou kolpon fereontai athanatoi, oun en xemianos wma oti atmou this gyz und tou tou zilou aktinwv exelidhmenoi fereontai pro auton.


Athanatoi pasei sui phulai kal touv aserboi, ous aumeinoun zin meli pharshartos elinai. kolazomeinai gar upo tou aserbetaon puron alerantov tisowria kal meli theskousoi eli kovw tov evantov telos labein ouk 20zousin.
Le Nourry (1858)

XI.

FRAGMENTA.

Ex Clementis Alexandrini libro De anima.


Omnibus solute ac respirantes animae vitam habent, et libent, et dicent a corpore separato existimant, in quem uix desiderio feruntur; in Dei tamen simum evolant immortales; haud scis ac hiberna tempesstate terræ vaporem radiis solis atacti, versus ipsum servitur.


Immortales sunt omnes animae, etiam impiorum, quibus præstaret, haud esse incorruptibles. Dum enim ignis inextinguisibilis perpetuo torquetur supplicio, nec enquit moriuntur, nullum malum fines nancisci possunt.

Dindorf (1869)

Περὶ ψυχῆς.


5 Πάντων ἀναπνεύσαι αἱ ψυχαὶ τὸ ζῆν ἔχουσιν, κἂν χωρισθῶσι τοῦ σώματος καὶ τὸν εἶν αὐτῷ, ἐφεξῆς ἐπὶ ζῶν ἔχουσιν, εἰς τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ κόσμον φέρονται ἄθανατοι, ὡς ἐν χειμῶνοι ὥραι οἱ ἄτμοι τῆς γῆς ὑπὸ τῶν τοῦ ἡλίου ἀκτίων ἐφελκόμενοι φέρονται πρὸς αὐτὸν.

Hæc quæm ex Clemente afferat Maximus in capite periçepi ψυχῆς, 10 ex Clementis libro periçepi ψυχῆς sumta esse conjectit Potterus.


"Αθάνατοι πάσαι αἱ ψυχαὶ καὶ τῶν ἁσεβῶν, αἰς ἀμειωτῶν ἡ μὴ ἀφθάρτους εἶναι. κολαζώμεθα γὰρ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀσβέστου πυρὸς ἀπεράντως ὑπὸ τῆς τοῦ ἡλίου ἀκτίων ἐφελκόμενοι ἐκεῖ κακῷ τῷ ἄνατῳ τέλος λαβεῖν οὐχ ἔχουσιν."
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Clemens Romanus
X. Unechte Fragmente.


490, 4—8 Ἀλλὰ τὰ τοῦ Ἰσαὰ — ἀκούεις ἐιδέοιον ist zu Strom. IV 1
160, 1 gestellt. Die Fortsetzung 490, 8—491, 29 gehört, wie schon
Potter erkannte, Clemens nicht an; vgl. auch Zahn, Forsch. III S. 6.

491, 31—33 Non hic hominis — magnitudinem declarare ist die Über-
setzung von Fr. 57.

491, 35—492, 9 Forte autem per violas — cum operantibus iniqui-
tatem ist die Übersetzung von Fr. 58.

492, 11 Ποιητέων ἐλεμοσύνας — παιδ τοῦ υἱόστον ist eine Verkürzung
von Fr. 53. Die Fortsetzung 494, 12—15 οὐά δὲ τοῖς ἔχοντες — λαμβάνων
κατακρήσειται stammt aus Constit. apost. IV 3; vgl. oben S. LXV f. Bem. zu Fr. 53.

492, 17—20 ὃ τῆς τοῦ ὅρθρων φαιλεῖς — κύρες ἐπειρήνει τι
τις ist zu Paed. I 96 gestellt. Die Fortsetzung 492, 21—25 εἰς τοσαύ-
την ἢ αὐθέν — μεταφόρος ὑστάρας ist Fr. 54.

492, 27—31 Ἕσσε μαγευτής — ἕρωτ ἐκλάμης σώματος ist zu 6
Paed. II 118, 5 gestellt.

493, 20—30 Der erste Teil καὶ τοσοῦτον, φραίν, — ἀκρήτων ἐξ ἓ
σῶμα gehört Clemens nicht an; vgl. oben S. XXXIV Bem. zu Fr. 2; der
zweite Teil ὀδηγεῖν ἡμῶν τὸ κατὰ σάρκα — ἐν δ' 'Υποτυπώσεων ist
Fr. 2 (＝ Dind. III 493, 10—14) in etwas vollständigerer Form.

494, 2—9 Der erste Teil καθάρειν γὰρ τὸ θεωμὸν — σωτήρ τῆ
ψυχῆν gehört Clemens nicht an; vgl. oben S. XXXIV Bem. zu Fr. 3; der
zweite Teil ἡ καρδία — ἐν τετάρτῃ 'Υποτυπώσεων ist Fr. 3 (＝ Dind.
III 493, 16—18).

497, 22—27 τὸ τηρεῶντα δὲ — ἀφεῖται διακονίαν stammt nicht
mehr aus Clemens; vgl. oben S. XLII Bem. zu Fr. 14.

499, 5—8 Πάντων ἀπαντόνωσαι — ρέοντοι πρὸς αὐτὸν (aus 10
Maximus Cap. 53; Barocc. 143 f. 181r; auch in Laur. VII 15 f. 226v;
Flor. Monac. [＝ Melissa Augustana] f. 84r) ist Sacr. Par. 22, 2—7
Holl ＝ Pseudo-Clemens Hom. XVII 10.

499, 13—16 Ἀδικοῦται πάσης — οὐκ ἔρεν (aus Maximus Cap. 53; 11
auch in Laur. VII 15 f. 226v) ist Sacr. Par. 16 Holl ＝ Pseudo-Clemens
Hom. XI 11.

499, 20—23 Μηδέποτε αἰδεοθῆς — τὸν πληθὺν λαθαμενός aus 12
(VI)

FROM THE BOOK “ON THE SOUL.”

FOUND IN MAXIMUS, SERMON 53, “ON THE SOUL,” P. 156, AND ANTONIUS MELISSA.

Souls that breathe free of all things, possess life, and though separated from the body, and found possessed of a longing for it, are borne immortal to the bosom of God: as in the winter season the vapours of the earth attracted by the sun’s rays rise to him.

FOUND IN THE BAROCC MS. 143, FOL. 181, P. 1, CHAPTER “ON CARE FOR THE SOUL.”

All souls are immortal, even those of the wicked, for whom it were better that they were not deathless. For, punished with the endless vengeance of quenchless fire, and not dying, it is impossible for them to have a period put to their misery.

MS. Barocc. 143, 181r13–20

The full, digitized MS can be found at The Bodleian Library Webpage