

# Photius on the Transmission of Texts (*Bibliotheca*, Codex 187)

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IN CODEX 187 of his *Bibliotheca*, Photius (ca A.D. 810–after 892) reviews a peculiar book that was rare in his time and is lost altogether in ours. He begins, “Nicomachus of Gerasa’s two books of *Arithmetical Theology* were read. This certainly is a title suited to astonish and to excite a keen desire, but the treatise—not to call it a work of computations that are based on air and are a waste of time—falls far short of its title.”<sup>1</sup> In this book, the mathematician Nicomachus of Gerasa (ca 120–196) studiously identified the numbers from one to ten with various pagan gods and goddesses, a pursuit that Photius condemns as paganism and silliness.<sup>2</sup> Photius does see some value in the book, however, because it presupposed an acquaintance with the subtleties of geometry, arithmetic and astronomy, and even with music and musical instruments.<sup>3</sup> After summarizing and disparaging Nicomachus’ work in some four pages, Photius adds a few remarks, addressed, like the whole of the *Bibliotheca*, to his brother Tarasius, on the rarity of the *Arithmetical Theology*. These are unique in the *Bibliotheca* in that they say something about the scholarly community of Photius’ time.

The passage is written in untidy and difficult Greek, considerably harder than Photius’ standard, and its difficulty has evidently led to some corruption in our text. I propose modifying in four places the text of the most recent edition of the *Bibliotheca* by René Henry (Photius III, Budé, Paris 1962) and revising his translation. Since I have been able to check Henry’s collation of the two primary manuscripts

<sup>1</sup> *Ἀνεγνώσθη Νικομάχου Γερασηνοῦ ἀριθμητικῶν θεολογουμένων βιβλία β΄. Ἡ μὲν οὖν ἐπιγραφὴ οὕτω θαυμάσαι καὶ δριμῦν ἔρωτα κινήσαι ἀξία, ὁ δὲ πόνος, ἵνα μὴ λέγω λογισμῶν κενεμβατούντων καὶ ματαιοσχόλων ἔργον, πόρρω τῆς ἐπιγραφῆς διερριμένος.* Phot. *Bibl.* 142b. 16–21. For a brief discussion of this lost work, see P. Merlan in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge 1967) 95. I would like to thank Professor Wolfgang Lebek of the University of Cologne for giving me extensive and valuable advice on this article.

<sup>2</sup> On Nicomachus’ dates, see J. M. Dillon in *CR* 83 (1969) 274–75.

<sup>3</sup> *Bibl.* 143a.2–9.

of the *Bibliotheca* for this passage and found it accurate, I shall make my arguments here mainly on the basis of the sense.

Here is the text as I would print it.

- 145a. 30 Ἄλλὰ γὰρ αὕτη σοι, ὦ φίλτατε ἀδελφῶν, καὶ τῶν  
 Νικομάχου ἀριθμῶν ὡς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ ἢ πολυθρύλητος  
 καὶ δυσεύρετος θεολογία, οὐ (μὰ τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγχίνοιαν  
 καὶ φιλοπονίαν) διὰ τὸ ἐν αὐτῇ δυσέμβρατόν τε καὶ  
 35 δυσκατάληπτον μικροῦ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀνακεχωρηκυῖα,  
 ἐπεὶ νῦν τά τε γεωμετρικὰ καὶ ἀριθμητικὰ καὶ τᾶλλα  
 τῶν μαθημάτων, ὡς καὶ σὺ συνεπίσταςαι, πολλοὶ τῶν  
 ἡμᾶς ἐγνωκότων οὐκ ἔλαττον, οἶμαι, τοῦ παιδὸς Ἑρμείου  
 (οἶδας γὰρ πάντως τὴν περὶ ταῦτα δεξιότητα τοῦ Ἀμμωνίου)  
 διακριβοῦσι, καὶ οὐδὲν αὐτοὺς λάθοι ἂν τῶν θεωρημάτων  
 40 ἃ συνεπεισκυκλεῖ Νικόμαχος τῷ περὶ ἀριθμῶν πόνῳ.  
 145b. Ἄλλὰ πόθεν ἐσπάνισεν; Ὁ χρόνος, οἶμαι, καὶ τὸ <τοῦ>  
 μὴ φείδεσθαι τῶν χρησίμων ἐκ τοῦ ῥᾶστα τὰ ἄχρηστα  
 φθείρειν ἔθος ἔλαβε μέγα καὶ ἄμαχον κράτος. Καὶ ἐκέρ-  
 5 δανεν ἂν καὶ ἡ Νικομάχου σπουδὴ τῷ μετὰ πολλῶν χρη-  
 σίμων μικροῦ νομίζεσθαι διεφθάρθαι. Ἄλλ' ἔστι καὶ πρᾶτ-  
 τεταί, οὐκ ὀλίγην δόξαν (ὡς ὄρας καὶ, οἶδα, ὄψει σαφέ-  
 στερον) ἀποκειραμένη.

32 οὐ (μὰ τὴν . . .) Bekker, Henry: οὐ μάτην M: ἢ μὰ τὴν A<sup>2</sup>, *quid prius pr. A non liquet.* 38 γὰρ M: *om.* A, Henry. 145b.1 *Interpunxit Henry non post ἐσπάνισεν, sed post πόθεν. τοῦ addidi.* 4 τῷ *scripsi: τὸ A M, Henry.*

I would translate, fairly literally, as follows. “Well, in any case, dearest brother, there you have in the form of a summary also Nicomachus’ famous and hard-to-find theology of numbers. It is not (I call your intelligence and erudition to witness) because of its intrinsic difficulty and abstruseness that it has almost been withdrawn from men, since in our day, in geometry, arithmetic and the other sciences, as you know as well as I do, there are many among our acquaintances who have no less exact knowledge, I dare say, than the son of Hermias (for you of course know the skill of Ammonius in those fields), and none of the propositions that Nicomachus piles up together in his work on numbers would be obscure to them. But why *did* it become rare? Time, I suppose, and the practice of not sparing useful things as

a result of destroying useless things very casually, took on a great and irresistible power. And even the treatise of Nicomachus would have profited by its being believed [by] almost [everyone] to have been destroyed among many useful things. It does exist, however, and is studied, shearing itself (as you see and, I know, will see more clearly) of no small renown.”

The translation will make clear how I understand most points of the Greek. Since the book’s “intrinsic difficulty and abstruseness” are given as conceivable *causes* of its being μικροῦ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀνακεχωρηκυῖα, these words can hardly refer again to its abstruseness, but must refer to its unobtainability, the whole point of the paragraph.<sup>4</sup> In line 38, M’s γὰρ seems to help bring out the fact that Ammonius and the son of Hermias are the same man, whom Photius mentions elsewhere as a paragon of learning.<sup>5</sup> In line 145b.1, punctuating after ἐσπάνισεν, as both manuscripts do, seems to make the sense clearer than punctuating before it. The addition of τοῦ in the same line, presumably lost by haplography after τὸ, gives the sentence some kind of structure and ἔθος in line 3 a satisfactory function.<sup>6</sup> In line 4, the accusative τὸ is presumably a copyist’s error for the now homophonous dative τῷ. In the next line, my glossing of μικροῦ as “by almost everyone” seems necessary. The other conceivable meanings are (1) that people almost but not quite believed that the book had been destroyed, or (2) that people (correctly) believed that the book had been almost destroyed; but neither of these cases would help the book’s reputation, now deflated by Photius’ studying a single manuscript of it. Finally, in the last line, πράττεται must mean “is studied”

<sup>4</sup> Henry translates “hors des facultés humaines.”

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Bibl.* 127a.5–10, 172a.2–9 and 173a.32–34 (though this could also be Ammonius Saccas), and 341b.1–28. Ammonius Hermiae taught in Alexandria in the second half of the fifth century; see A. C. Lloyd in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 316–17.

<sup>6</sup> Henry translates “La tendance à ne pas garder les œuvres utiles du fait que les inutiles corrompent aisément les habitudes a acquis une grande et invincible force,” making ἔθος the object of φθεῖρειν (which seems to require an emendation to ἤθη). But this leaves the reader confused by the apparent but false balance between μὴ φείδεσθαι τῶν χρησίμων and τὰ ἀχρηστὰ φθεῖρειν, and by the apparent but false similarity between φθεῖρειν (‘corrupt’) here and διαφθάρθαι (‘be destroyed’) in line 5. One might think of the proverb Φθειρούσιν ἤθη χρηστὰ ὀμιλῖαι κακαί (quoted in I Cor. 15.33), but since the question in Photius is of useless things and not of evil ones, the parallel is not apt. Emendation could be avoided by taking both ἔθος and κράτος as objects of ἔλαβε, but such dissimilar objects offend against parallelism and are hard to understand.

in such a context, leaving *οὐκ ὀλίγην δόξαν* as the object of *ἀποκειραμένη*; this gives an acceptable sense after the preceding sentence.<sup>7</sup>

What does this brief and none too clear passage tell us? First, that about a third of the way into the *Bibliotheca* Photius was still addressing his comments to his brother Tarasius.<sup>8</sup> Some have maintained that the preface and postface are either literary fictions or part of a version of the *Bibliotheca* earlier than ours.<sup>9</sup> But if the preface and postface are literary fictions, the fiction is sustained into the middle of the work; if they belong to an earlier version of the text, that version includes codex 187, and, to judge from the *καὶ* in line 30, all the codices that precede it.

Second, we learn that, at least in Photius' opinion, there were scholars active when he was writing whose mathematical and scientific knowledge equaled that of the ancients. If, as I suspect, the *Bibliotheca* was composed in 845, these scholars would include John the Grammarian (*ca* 775–after 847), Leo the Mathematician (*ca* 790–after 869), and their students.<sup>10</sup> Note that Photius does not include himself among these really expert mathematicians; his own strongest fields were philology and theology. Still, he does seem to have been the one who discovered Nicomachus' book, which he describes as if it had previously been considered lost, and *πράττεται* in the last sentence may mean that he taught from it in his school.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Henry translates, "Mais il subsiste et se fait un grand renom (comme tu le vois et comme tu le verras encore plus clairement, je le sais) même dans les abrégés qu'on en fait." This is evidently a slip, taking the aorist middle participle *ἀποκειραμένη* as if it were passive. In any case, Photius' whole review shows that the book, far from attaining a great reputation, is now so badly discredited that it would be better for it if people believed that it had been destroyed. For the phrase *δόξαν... ἀποκειραμένη*, cf. a verse inscription quoted in Paus. 9.15.6 (*ἡμετέρας βουλαῖς Σπάρτη μὲν ἐκέειρατο δόξαν*) and Dion.Hal. *Ant.Rom.* 9.23.2 (*ἡ 'Ρωμαίων πόλις ἀνδρῶν τοσοῦτων καὶ τοιούτων ἀρετὰς ἀποκειραμένη*); Henri Estienne, in his *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* I (rev. ed., Paris 1831–65) 1467, also cites without giving specific references Gregory of Nazianzus (*τὴν δόξαν τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἀποκείραντες*) and St Basil (*ἀποκειράμενος τοιαύτην δόξαν*).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the preface, *Bibl.* 1.2–3: *ἀδελφῶν φίλτατέ μοι, Ταράσιε*.

<sup>9</sup> So Cyril Mango, "The Availability of Books in the Byzantine Empire, A.D. 750–850," in *Byzantine Books and Bookmen: A Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium* (Washington 1975) 39–43.

<sup>10</sup> On John, Leo, their dates, their teaching and their students, see Paul Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin* (Paris 1971) 135–76.

<sup>11</sup> Unlike Lemerle, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) 197–99, I think it is fair to call the group of students that Photius describes in one of his letters a school, and I do not share Lemerle's doubts (163–65) that Photius and Leo the Mathematician taught St Constantine-Cyril about 843. Cf. the review of Lemerle's book by Ihor Ševčenko, *AHR* 79 (1974) 1533–34.

Third, this passage gives us some idea of Photius' view of the process of transmission of ancient texts and the beginning of the Byzantine revival of learning. Photius says, evidently referring to the 'Dark Ages' of the seventh and eighth centuries, that people used to discard books very casually on the ground that they were of no use, a habit which led to the destruction of many useful books as well as useless ones. No doubt accidents and decay over the course of time (*ὁ χρόνος*) caused most of the losses; but the verb *φθείρειν* seems to refer to the deliberate destruction of books, either by erasing them to copy new texts on the parchment or by dismembering them to use the parchment for various household purposes. By Photius' time, however, things are plainly different, and a number of scholars exist who know that many useful books were destroyed and have been inclined to count among them the treatise of Nicomachus, apparently known to them only from citations. Most recently, Photius, perhaps among others, has discovered a copy of the book and studied it, with the result that he can now announce to Tarasius, probably among others, that it has been much overrated. What we have here, then, is a description of a revival of learning that is well under way, datable probably to 845, and in any case no later than 857.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I treat the question of the date of the *Bibliotheca* at length in a book, *The Nature of the Bibliotheca of Photius*, which is to be published in the series of *Dumbarton Oaks Studies*. The traditional date is 855, but some (e.g., Lemerle, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.10] 37–40) argue for 838 and others (e.g., Mango, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.9] 40–42) for after 876.