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***Ab initio temporis* Debates in the School of Gaza**

In the sixth century, the School of Gaza became the authoritative centre for the study of Christian Platonism, apart from the eccentric goings-on of Leontius in Byzantium. The School of Gaza developed out of the Alexandrian School-- a Hellenic (i.e., non-Christian) academy famed for its Platonised commentaries on Aristotle's works. The Christian school's founder, Aeneas of Gaza, was in fact a student of the Alexandrian Platonist Hierocles. Aeneas rejected the Platonic understanding of the soul for the Aristotelian conception and wrote his major work, *Theophrastus, or, On the Immortality of the Soul and the Resurrection of the Body*, arguing against the divinity and pre-existence of the soul. Aeneas wrote this work in the style of a Socratic dialogue. Much to the delight of any Christian Platonist scholar, Aeneas specifically names his Hellenic opponents in his dialogue-- Syrianus, Proclus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus-- a highly unusual practice by a Christian polemicist. Of particular interest, for the purposes of this paper, is the final section of Aeneas's work, which deals specifically with the eternity of the world. The argument against the eternity of the world became the major bone of contention in the School of Gaza, just as it had for John Philoponus in the Alexandrian School. The Christians in Gaza, especially Aeneas and Zacharias, attacked non-Christian Platonists on the question of *ab initio temporis*, but they did so using Platonic principles shared by their Hellenic predecessors.

Aeneas argues that God, as pure Act, could not have been inactive at any point, and hence, must have been creator from all eternity. This argument is taken up again and elaborated on by Aeneas' colleague, Zacharias. Zacharias's work, *Ammonius, or On the Creation of the World*, argues that God is the eternal creator of the universe because he possesses eternally in himself the Logos, which acts as the creative force in the universe. As Zacharias argues, God is always creator, as he always holds the creative Logos even when he is not in the act of creating, just as a doctor is always a doctor, even when he is not curing diseases. God created both the substances and the forms, not merely the forms, as Proclus would argue. Zacharias argues that God holds the seminal reason principles within himself, that he is the only eternal being, and hence everything else, being temporal, is dependent on him.

What is of great interest here, is the very fact that these Christians in Gaza attacked the problem of the eternity of the world, which is a fundamental Platonic problem. The Christian School of Gaza wrestled an issue that had been problematic for Platonists since the time of the late academy. Notably, Calvenus Taurus, Albinus, and Philo, struggled with the description of a temporal creation in *Timaeus* 28B. Early Platonists found this passage troublesome, as it seemed to imply that the world or matter existed before God's existence, and hence was not dependent on God as an external cause. This problem was rectified once one understood "created" to mean "process of creation": the cosmos was always in a process of generation, and thus, was eternal. The Hellenic argument focuses on God as eternally producing the universe because God eternally holds the creative Logos. Philo's *On Creation of the World* posits a divine reason-principle that is an active element of God's creative thought. Philo describes a double creation, first of the

intelligible world, then of the sensible world. The later Platonists, especially Proclus, explain the idea of an eternal creation as the godhead continually emanating creation, while simultaneously remaining in itself, unchanged.

Of even greater interest, moreover, is the manner in which the Gaza Christians attempted to solve the problem. While these Christians reach an end opposite to that of their Hellenic predecessors, both remarkably based their conclusions on the same Platonic principles: that God is the creator from eternity because he possesses the creative Logos and that from this Logos comes the sensible universe. The Christian argument rests on the notion that this Logos was actualised at a particular moment—hence, creation takes place at a particular moment in time --even though the Logos remains eternally in the mind of God. The Hellenic argument underscores the eternal existence of the Logos in the mind of God, thus an eternal creation. The argument seems to boil down to two sides of one coin --the theological repercussions, however, are phenomenal.

Due to time constraints, this paper will deal primarily with Zacharias' *On the Creation of the World*, which sums up the argument of *ab initio temporis* quite nicely, with references to Aeneas' *Theophrastus*. I hope that this paper will force some attention to be paid to Zacharias, of whose work, sadly, no modern translations or editions exist.