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DOMNINUS, A JEWISH PHILOSOPHER OF ANTIQUITY.

THIS essay will deal with a personage whose name has been kept in darkness for 1500 years, and concerning whom there is a risk that he might sink in oblivion. Many know him not; those who know him do not appreciate him; those who appreciate him, appreciate him not as a Jew.

I have undertaken to make him known and appreciated according to his worth, but specially to reclaim him and give him a place in Jewish history and science.

1. *Life of Domninus*.—He is mentioned by Hesychius and Suidas in the article *Δομνίνος*, by the former briefly, by the latter more fully. We get some little information concerning him from Marinus in the biography of Proclus.¹ We have, therefore, but three sources for our information, of which Suidas is the most important.

Suidas (ed. Bernhardt, I., 1432) begins as follows:—“Domninus, by race a Syrian, of Laodicea, or Larissa, a town in Syria, a disciple of Syrian, a cotemporary of Proclus. Thus it is stated by Damascius.”²

The same account is given by Hesychius (ed. Flach, p. 60), who, however, puts immediately after the name the words *φιλόσοφος Σύρος*. Marinus (ed. Boissonade), cap. 26, also states that Syrian was the teacher of Domninus, who

¹ Marinus was a native of Flavia Neapolis, in Palestine, disciple of Proclus, and his successor to the Chair of Philosophy at Athens in 485 A.D. One of his pupils was Agapius.

² *Δομνίνος, Σύρος τὸ γένος, ἀπὸ τε Λαοδικείας καὶ Λαρίσσης πόλεως Συρίας, μαθητῆς Συριανοῦ καὶ τοῦ Πρόκλου συμφουιτητής, ὡς φησι Δαμάσκιος*. Damascius was a pupil of Marinus and his successor at Athens; *vide* Photius, *Myriobiblion* (ed. Rotomagi, 1653), p. 411.

hailed from Syria.¹ Hesychius states, in addition, that the philosopher Gesius was a pupil of Domninus.²

These data are sufficient to determine the age in which Domninus lived. Syrian died in 450 A.D., Proclus was born in 412 and died in 485. Marinus, the disciple of Proclus, flourished about 480;³ but Marinus speaks of Domninus as though deceased, and consequently he could not have been alive about 480. We know, further, that Domninus attained a high age (Suidas styles him *γηραιός*), and his birth could, accordingly, not be fixed later than 400.

Domninus lived, therefore, between 400 and 480 A.D. We know very little about his life. We shall find, later on, that he once stayed at Athens, in company with Plutarch the philosopher, and that he was there seized with a violent illness. Whether he was the head of the Neo-Platonic school at Athens, it is impossible to decide; Marinus speaks of him as though he succeeded Syrian in the direction of this school,⁴ but there are cogent reasons for doubting the accuracy of that statement.⁵ It is nevertheless certain that he was surrounded by pupils. Suidas mentions the fact that he rejected a certain pupil named Asklepiodotos.⁶ Proclus calls Domninus his companion.⁷

2. *The Religion of Domninus.*—Suidas forms no favourable opinion of him. “In his mode of life,” he says, “he was not so remarkable as to deserve the title of philosopher,”⁸ and in justification of his opinion he narrates the following anecdote: “It happened in Athens that Æsculapius proposed

¹ Cf. Zeller, *Philosophie der Griechen*, 2nd edit., Leipzig, 1868. Vol. III. Pl. 2, p. 691.

² *Sub voce* Γέσιος, p. 40 ed. Flach; *vide* below.

³ *Vide* E. Munk, *Geschichte d. griechischen Prosa* (2nd ed., Berlin, 1863). Vol. II., pp. 477 and 485.

⁴ Proclus, Cp. 26, . . . ἐκ τῆς Συρίας φιλοσόφῳ καὶ διαδόχῳ Δομνίνῳ.

⁵ Zeller, as above.

⁶ At the end of the article. I do not know why Zeller makes no mention of this fact.

⁷ Proclus in Tim. 34 B. ἐταῖρος. Cf. Zeller, *loco lecto*, note 3.

⁸ ἦν δὲ οὐδὲ τῆν ζωνὴν ἄκρος, οἷον ἀληθῶς φιλόσοφον εἰπεῖν.

one and the same cure to Plutarch, the Athenian, and to Domninus, the Syrian; the latter was subject to frequent attacks of spitting of blood, so much so that he was named after this disease (?). I am unacquainted with the former's malady; the cure consisted in their eating much pork. While Plutarch did not keep to this prescription, though there was nothing in his religion to forbid it. . . . Domninus, on the other hand, following the dream in contradiction to his law (which is in vogue among the Syrians), and caring nothing for Plutarch's example, ate of this flesh both on this occasion and subsequently. It is said that if he omitted to partake of it for but a single day, he had a fresh attack of his illness, until he again stuffed himself with it." ¹

It is not difficult at first sight to understand that a *Syrian*, to whom the prohibition not to eat pork was a *national* one, could only have been a *Jew*. It is well known that Jews are often styled Syrians by both Greek and Latin authors. The refusal to eat pork is in itself no clear evidence that the person must have been a Jew, for we have reliable accounts which state that other races, besides the Jewish, abstained from pork; ² but Suidas speaks of a *national* law which prohibits the eating of swine's flesh, and such a law is known to Judaism alone, whilst among other people it is but a voluntary act of self-denial.

Plutarch, being a heathen, could have partaken of swine's flesh, but he did not do so, while Domninus the Jew

¹ ὁ γὰρ Ἀθήνησιν Ἀσκληπιῶς τὴν αὐτὴν ἴασιν ἐχορημῶδει Πλουτάρχῳ τε τῷ Ἀθηναίῳ καὶ τῷ Σύρῳ Δομνίνῳ. τούτῳ μὲν αἷμ' ἀποπτύουσι πολλάκις καὶ τοῦτο φέρουσι τῆς νόσου τὸ ὄνομα, ἐκείνῳ δὲ οὐκ οἶδα ὅ, τι νεοσηκότι. ἡ δὲ ἴασις ἦν ἐμπίπλασθαι χοιρείων κρέων. Ὁ μὲν δὲ Πλούταρχος οὐκ ἦν ἐσχετο τῆς τοιαύτης ὑγιείας καίτοι οὐκ οὔσης αὐτῷ παρανόμον κατὰ τὰ πάτρια. . . . Δομνίνος δὲ οὐ κατὰ θέμιμν πεισθεὶς τῷ ὄνείρῳ, θέμιμν τοῖς Σύροις πάτριον, οὐδὲ παραδείγματι τῷ Πλουτάρχῳ χρησάμενος, ἔφαγε τότε καὶ ἦσθιεν αἰὲ τῶν κρεῶν. λέγεται πού, μίαν εἰ διέλειπεν ἡμέραν ἄγευστος, ἐπιτίθεσθαι τὸ πάθημα πάντως, ἕως ἀνεπλήσθη.

² *Midrash Kohélet̄h Rabbaḥ* on I. 8 (p. 8a, ed. Wilna) לָבַדְתִּיךָ, etc. Vide Blau in the Hungarian periodical *Magyar-Zsidó-Szemle*, XI., 286.

followed the advice of Æsculapius in preference to the dictates of his religion. Suidas, therefore, lays stress upon this weakness of his as sufficient reason to deny him the title of philosopher, whilst society ridiculed him and invented the story about him that he had ever after to feed himself with the flesh of swine. But, further, Plutarch himself refers in unmistakable language to the Jewish faith of Domninus, inasmuch as he enquires of the god Æsculapius whether he would prescribe for the *Jew* also as medicine the flesh of swine.¹ But there is really no necessity for inferring indirectly what was the faith professed by Domninus, for Hesychius states clearly that Domninus was a Jew.²

In the course of this article we shall touch upon a few further details, which only become intelligible upon the supposition that they have reference to Judaism.

3. *The Works of Domninus.*—Suidas entertains no high opinion of the scientific labours of Domninus: "In mathematics he was well grounded; in other branches of learning all too superficial. Hence the cause of his having perverted many of Plato's teachings."³ We thus learn incidentally what Hesychius clearly states, that Domninus adhered to the

¹ ὃ δέσποτα ἔφη, τί δὲ ἂν προσέταξας Ἰουδαίῳ νοσοῦντι ταύτην τὴν νόσον.

² S. v. Γέσιος (p. 40, ed. Flach). The passage is as follows (Domnus and Domninus are, of course, one and the same) :—Γέσιος, ἰατροσοφιστής, Πειραῖος τὸ γένος, ἐπὶ Ζήνωνος. Καθελὼν δὲ Δόμον τὸν ἑαυτοῦ διδάσκαλον, Ἰουδαῖον ὄντα καὶ τοὺς ἑταίρους εἰς ἑαυτὸν μέτασθησάμενος ὀλίγου πάντας, πανταχῇ ἐγνωρίζετο καὶ μέγα κλέος εἶχεν. οὗτος καθώρθησε τέχνην ἰατρῶν καθ' ἑαυτὸν πάντων. As from these words it appears that this Gesius played an important part in the life of Domninus, we will add here another characteristic of this person according to Photius, *Bibliotheca*, p. 325: Magnum honorem Gesius consecutus est, non solum quod arte medica valeret et docendo et operando, sed etiam ob omnem aliam eruditionem, Dialecticis sese instruens.

³ Ἐν μὲν τοῖς μαθήμασιν ἱκανὸς ἀνὴρ, ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἄλλοις φιλοσοφίμασιν ἐπιπολαιότερος (the text is not quite correct in this place), διὸ καὶ πολλὰ τῶν Πλάτωνος οἰκείους δοξάσμασιν διέτριψε. We must observe that from οἰκειον δόξασμα may be deduced that by birth and education Domninus belonged to quite a different circle, i.e., he was a Jew.

philosophy of Plato.¹ On account of his perversion of the Platonic philosophy, he was attacked by Proclus in a special work, whereupon Domninus published his views in a collected form in the work *Καθαρτικὴ τῶν δογμάτων Πλάτωνος* (*The Teachings of Plato purified*).² This work is lost.

A *Manual of Mathematics* (*ἐγχειρίδιον*), with Domninus, or Domnius of Larissa, a philosopher, as author, is occasionally quoted, and is still extant in MS. As regards name, place and tendency, our Domninus might have been the author; but this book is generally ascribed to the renowned Heliodorus, who also came from Larissa.³

Marinus relates that shortly before his death, Syrian commissioned his pupils, Proclus and Domninus, to write a commentary upon the Orphic hymns or the oracles (*λογία*). Domninus chose the former, Proclus the latter, but nothing came of the project.⁴ We therefore possess not a single work written by Domninus.

4. *Theurgic Science in the Neo-Platonic School.*—The Orient was always the classic ground for crass superstition and witchcraft, and it appears that this craft of ancient Babylon and Chaldæa was continued by the Neo-Platonic school under the cloak of a branch of science. These philosophers, whom we meet in the immediate company of Domninus, were all much occupied with such theurgic sciences. It is positively asserted of Plutarch, for instance, that he was quite a master in the science; that, in fact, in his case it was a sort of heritage.⁵ The same we find in the instance, too, of Proclus, the fellow-student of Domninus. Proclus sets about his work with Chaldaic formulæ of prayer (*συστάσις*), *i.e.*, with prayers, the object of which is to propitiate the Godhead on man's behalf; with Formulæ of Oaths (*ἐιτυχίαι*), and with *ineffable magic wheels* (*ἄφεγκτοι*

¹ S. v. Domninus, *ἔγραψε κατὰ τῶν τοῦ Πλάτωνος δοξασμάτων.*

² Suidas, in the passage quoted.

³ *Vide Pauly's Real Encyclop.*, II., p. 1223.

⁴ *Procl.*, cp. 26. Zeller, III., pt. 2, p. 691, note 2.

⁵ Zeller, p. 677, note 1.

στρόφαλοι).¹ Proclus had adopted these things while in the house of Plutarch. Both the pronunciation (ἐκφώνησις) and the mode of application (of those magic wheels) he had acquired from Asklepigeneia, the daughter of Plutarch; she was, in fact, the only one who had received these things by tradition from the great Nestor, in addition to all kinds of theurgic arts which she acquired from her father.²

Who does not perceive in all this a relation to Judaism? A reference to the mystic prayers and the secret theory of the chariot (מעשה מרכבה)? And an Ineffable Name! Can this be aught else but the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable name of God in Hebrew? Even the term "Chaldaic," as applied to prayers, probably means "Hebrew," or such as were composed for and by Jews. It is true that the Greeks also had their mysteries, and the whole might, if pressed, refer to Greek conditions; but the personages included in this environment are so imbued with the Jewish spirit,³ that we feel constrained to judge their mode and aspects of life from the Jewish point of view.

But this is certain beyond doubt, that in Domninus' circle theurgic arts were practised. And although Domninus is not directly mentioned as having practised such arts, yet his *Syrian* descent leaves no doubt in our mind that he must have been addicted to them even more than his *Greek* friends; as a proof, his very cure, as we saw above, was the result of a *dream*. Domninus must, therefore, be regarded as the type of a Greek Jew towards the end of the fifth century, and his life has, accordingly, a real historical significance.

5. *A Speaking-Machine in Ancient Times.*—To understand aright the life of Domninus and his circle, we must have a

¹ Marinus, *Proclus*, cp. 28. Zeller, p. 678, note 1.

² Marinus, *Proclus*, cp. 28.

³ Domninus was a Jew, his pupil Gesius came from Petra, in Idumæa. Marinus, the biographer, came from Flavia Neapolis, in Palestine; the name of *Syrian* may not be accidental. Plutarch resided with Domninus the Jew, and Proclus resided at the house of Plutarch.

knowledge of a marvellous arrangement which existed in olden times, viz., the speaking-machine. It sounds strange, but it is nevertheless true, that a sort of telephone or phonograph dates from antiquity.

The work of a Syrian philosopher, Oinomaos,¹ *Περὶ κυνισμοῦ*, is also cited by the title *Κυνὸς αὐτοφωνία*.² What does this mean? "The very voice of the dog."

Crusius has set it down that in ancient times there existed an apparatus which, at the request of its owner, began to speak automatically. According to Lucian, in specially important cases, a scientific apparatus was set in motion in the oracle of Æsculapius, presided over by the false prophet Alexander. Such oracles (*αὐτοφώνως μαντεύεσθαι*) were quite current. This matter becomes as clear as we could wish it when we take into account what Suidas relates under the head of *Domninus*. After he, accordingly, relates that Plutarch had refused to eat the flesh of swine, as had been ordered him by Æsculapius for the cure of his sickness, he continues as follows: "He (Plutarch) arose from his slumbers, supported himself on his bed with his fists and stared at the figure of Æsculapius (for it happened that he slept in the court of the temple), and exclaimed: 'O Lord! what would thou prescribe for a Jew if he had such an illness? Wouldst thou bid him to gorge himself with *perk*?' Whereupon the figure spoke, and, lo, Æsculapius furthermore suffered another most sonorous expression to proceed from it, giving a remedy for the disease."³

Considering that this speaking-machine is first mentioned by Oinomaos, the Palestinian, and was employed by persons in Athens who formed, as it were, a Jewish circle, we may infer that the speaking-machine was well known to, perhaps even invented by, Jews. At least Cumont (*Alexandre*

¹ Also in the Talmud **סוּמַנְיָא**.

² All these details are collected by Crusius in the *Rheinisches Museum*, New Series, vol. XLIV., p. 309.

³ ταῦτα εἶπεν ὁ δὲ Ἀσκληπιὸς αὐτίκα ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀγάλματος ἐμμελίστατον δὴ τὰ α φθόγγον ἑτέραν ὑπεγράψατο θεραπείαν τῷ πάθει.

d'Abonotichos, p. 27) is of opinion that it was no Greek invention, but Oriental (Syrian or Egyptian).

To the lover of history the sketch which is here presented of the life of Domninus, drawn as it is from ancient sources, will not be less pleasing because even when pieced together from materials of varied style and sources, the result is but a fragment.

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