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# TOWARDS THE QUESTION OF ARMENIAN ANTI-DUALISM OF THE 5TH – 6TH CENTURIES AND ITS PHILOSOPHIC AND THEOLOGICAL PREMISES

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**Abstract**. The goal of this paper is to explore the diversity of Armenian antidualistic texts by authors such as Yeznik of Kołb, Yełishe, and David the Invincible. We will also examine their connections to Ancient Greek antidualistic thought, their possible philosophical foundations in Plato, Middle Platonism, and the Neopythagoreans. We are going to analyze the works of these authors – including Yeznik of Kołb's *Refutation of Heresies*, Yełishe's *Interpretation of the Created*, David Anakht's *Definitions of Philosophy* – and investigate the origins and parallels of their argumentation.

*Keywords:* Armenian anti-dualistic argumentation; Manichaeism; dualism

In the history of Armenia, the foreign policy factor played a key role, as its territory was in the sphere of interests of both Iran and the Eastern Roman (later Byzantine) Empire. Mesrop Mashtots (361 – 440) and Catholicos Sahak Partev (died in 439), who developed the Armenian script in 405, made a significant contribution to the spread of Christianity. The first significant monument of Armenian literature was the Bible, the translation of which from Greek and Syriac is characterized by high accuracy and closeness to the original, in the translation of which Yeznik of Kołb (380 – 450) also took part. Thus, already in the 5th century, a rich literary tradition was formed in Armenia. Armenian literature of that time incorporated genres characteristic of the Greek and Syriac literary traditions, including theological treatises, apologetics, liturgical texts, and polemical works aimed at defending the tenets of the Christian Church. Thus, the Armenian Apostolic Church asserted its autonomy, not submitting to the Eastern patriarchates, and formed itself as an independent religious community headed by a Catholicos, and the formation

of Armenian polemical literature in the 5th-6th centuries was aimed at defending the dogmatic positions of the Church and opposing dualistic doctrines, as well as other theological trends. In this article we would like to show how and on the basis of what common arguments the anti-dualistic polemic was formed in the 5th-6th centuries Armenia on the example of such authors as Yeznik of Kołb, Yełishe, and David the Invincible and what were its parallels in the Greek polemical tradition.

**1. Greek Prehistory: Anti-Dualistic Argumentation from Plato to Alexander of Lycopolis**

The idea of dualism in Greek philosophy does not begin with Plato but appears earlier in the Pythagorean *peras-apeiron* opposition, which was later referred to as a "form-matter dualism" (Phillips, Beretta, Whitaker 2014, p. 358), though historically it is based on the idea of two inseparably coexisting principles, irreducible to one another. However, the problem of dualism is not limited to the mere opposition of two principles. To clarify the specifics of Platonic, Middle Platonic, and Neoplatonic dualism and thus their critics, it is necessary to clarify the nature of the interaction between the two principles, which can vary, and the spectrum of interactions between opposites may not be singular. Arthur Hilary Armstrong claims that the thinkers of Pythagorean-Platonic tradition "range over all the four varieties of cosmic dualism" (Armstrong 1991, p. 34):

1. The two principles are ontologically independent, unoriginated and eternal, "opposed and in perpetual conflict." (Armstrong 1991, p. 34)

2. The two principles are independent, but "working together in harmony." (Armstrong 1991, p. 34)

3. The second principle is "derived from and dependent on the first," revolting against the first, "or at least opposed to." (Armstrong 1991, p. 34)

4. The second dependent principle gradates from "working in accord and cooperation," to being "at least passive." (Armstrong 1991, p. 34)

Any dualism is, first and foremost, a theodicy created to address the problem of evil in a world created by a good God. However, the way in which the doctrine of evil is constructed and the ethical implications it entails are largely a matter of the logic one uses. Describing the logic in the first two books of Titus of Bostra's *Adversus Manichaeos*, Gedaliahu Stroumsa argues that Titus claims to use only the *koinai ennoiai*, without grounding the argument in Scripture, "so as to give his refutation universal value – since the *notions communes* are, or should be, by definition common to all men" (Stroumsa 1991, p. 339 – 340). Titus of Bostra arranges the logical perspective on Manichean ontology at all its levels by, on the one hand, insisting on the primary axiom that the concept of *arche* logically excludes dualism as self-contradictory and impossible (Titus I.11 – 12; Roman 2013, p. 25 – 29; Stroumsa 1991, p. 342), and, on the other hand, showing that the Manichees use a flawed notion of God, denying certain qualities inherent to God by definition – im-

mortality, eternity, omniscience and omnipotence (Titus I.7; Roman 2013, p. 19 – 21; Stroumsa 1991, p. 342).

The ontology typically involved in ethical debates concerns determining the ontological status of evil – whether it is self-existing or dependent on some cause, either material or mental. Alexander of Lycopolis begins to develop his anti-dualistic argument from the ontology of matter. He defines the logical place of Manichaean doctrine as both presupposing that the matter exist and that the matter is connected with evil (Stroumsa 1991, p. 340) and supporting the so called conflict-dualism, in Armstrongs terminology (Armstrong 1991, p.34).

Thanks to a passage from Alexander of Lycopolis text on the Manicheans, we can understand how Manichaean doctrine also traces its origins to Platonic philosophy, just as anti-Manichaean argumentation does. Generally speaking, Platonic philosophy supports both dualistic and anti-dualistic axioms, as well as combines both approaches by linking matter to evil, while also disconnecting them. Alexander's argument is grounded in a strong "denial of any evil in connection with matter" (Stroumsa 1991, p. 340), which places him outside the Platonic tradition but closer to the Christian one. However, Plotinus's negative conception of evil stands in contrast to the Manichaean view, where evil is regarded as having the capacity for action. As Gedaliahu Stroumsa claims, Alexander, "willing to reject Platonic conceptions of matter too close to those of the Manichaeans" (Stroumsa 1991, p. 340), finally derives the matter from the First Principle, which is closer to Pythagorean rather than a Platonic tradition, while the Manichaeans, according to him, defined the matter as a "random motion (ἄτακτον κίνησιν) within each individual thing" (Brinkmann 1895, p. 52 – 53).

**2. Armenian Arguments from the 5th Century: Yeznik of Kołb**

Yeznik of Kołb (Kołbatsi, 380 – 450) is a prominent thinker and writer of the "Golden Age" of ancient Armenian literature, one of the participants in the Armenian translation of the Bible, as well as of the works of the Syrian Holy Fathers and of other texts translated from Syriac and Greek.

His fundamental work, *Refutation of Heresies*, written in the 440s, is a systematic exposition of Christian doctrine and a critique of pagan beliefs, including the Zoroastrian (Mazdean) religious system. In the context of religious pressure and attempts to forcibly convert Armenians to Zoroastrianism, this treatise served as an intellectual tool for defending Christian identity. In his work, he not only defends the fundamental principles of Christian monotheism but also systematically refutes the dualistic ideas of Mazdaism, situating them within a broader critique of pagan beliefs (Arevshatyan 2008, p. 7). Yeznik's critique, directed against ancient Greek philosophers, has a clear objective – to refute any concepts (ուսմունք/usmunk') that directly or indirectly acknowledge the substantiality of matter (հիւղ/hyuł/nyut'). His argumentation seeks to deny the notion of matter as an in-

dependent (ինքեան/ink'ean), self-sustained (անկախ/ašxarh) entity capable of existing apart from God. In this context, he emerges as a steadfast proponent of Christian monotheism, asserting that the world (աշխարհ/ašxarh does not possess self-sufficient being (գոյ/goy) and that its existence (գոյութեան/goyut'ean) and nature are entirely dependent on the will of the Creator: "There is no substance or matter that exists alongside God" (Arevshatyan 2008, p. 164). This conclusion is of fundamental importance to Yeznik, as it forms the basis of his critique of religious and philosophical doctrines that rely either on a dualistic concept or on a atomistic understanding of the world.

Regarding the views of ancient thinkers such as Epicurus, Democritus, and the Stoics, Yeznik does not engage in philosophical debate with them, but categorically rejects them as "godless". At the same time, despite promising to present "arguments of truth", he does not provide detailed reasoning, deeming atomistic materialism incompatible with the Christian worldview and unworthy of rational refutation. Yeznik writes: "The Stoics considered everything (that exists) to be a body and believed that this visible world is God. Some of them thought that this God consists of the essence of fire. They recognized reason as God, supposedly the soul of all the heavenly and earthly elements. They believed that everything existing was a body for Him, and the celestial bodies were His eyes. All bodies, they claimed, were perishable, while souls were reincarnating from one body to another. The Epicureans, on the other hand, say: 'The primordial entities were indivisible and complete bodies, and from them all (that exists) was formed.' They defined the highest good as pleasure and declared that there is no God who governs everything, nor any divine providence; such are the teachings of the (Greek) philosophers" (Arevshatyan 2008, p. 137).

Quite in line with the Greek tradition, Yeznik rejects the main Manichean axiom of the interdetermination of evil and matter along with the idea of a second creator: "However, some maintain that those creatures which are excellent\splendid (գեղեցիկ/gełec'ik) were created by a good creator, while the evil beings by an evil one. Such a view is held by Greek pagans, Persian magi, and heretics, who oppose goodness with a certain evil entity, which they call matter (ὕλη)" (Minasyan 2003, p. 434). To this assertion, his first and preliminary response is as follows:

1. Presupposing the complete rejection of a second creator, he asserts that the good creator brought nothing evil into existence: "The good Creator has created nothing evil, nor does there exist any thing that is evil by its very essence, nor is there a creator of evil things, but only of good ones" (Minasyan 2003, p. 434).

2. He then attempts to distinguish between good and evil and to provide definitions for both, by proposing the idea of defining evil as a deviation from the good order: "So then, which of the created things could they consider good and which evil? For often, what is regarded as good, when taken by itself without being combined with something else, turns out to be harmful – a fact acknowledged

by all without exception. For example, the sun, in itself, is good, but without the combination with air, it becomes scorching and desiccating" (Minasyan 2003, p. 434; Arevshatyan 2008, p. 45).

3. He, like the Greeks, attempts to explain the dualistic theodicy by pointing to their abandonment of the idea of creation *ex nihilo*, arguing that they claim the good God to create from matter, which He was unable to fully shape or exhaust: "One cannot consider God the creator of such phenomena and assume that the emergence of evil depends on Him" (Minasyan 2003, p. 437), "for evil is contrary (անընտանի/anəntani) to His essence (ի բնութենէ/i bnut'enē). For this reason, it is believed that along with Him there was something called matter, that is, substance, from which He created all creatures and, with His highly skilled wisdom, separated and gave them a beautiful form. And from this substance, it is believed, evil was born; this substance was without any body or form (անիրան եւ անկերպարան/aniran ew ankerparan, Greek ἄμορφος, ἀειδείς), wandering without any order (խառն ի խուռն/xaṙn i xuṙn, Greek ἀδιορίστος; աւգտելով երթեւեկէր/awts'telov yert'eveker, Greek πορεία), and in need of the organizing creativity of God" (Minasyan 2003, p. 437; Arevshatyan 2008, p. 50). We would like to focus on this quote in more detail, because it seems quite interesting to us that Yeznik of Kołb in this place recounting the doctrine of dualists defines matter as wandering without any order, which in the Armenian text sounds like խառն ի խուռն աւգտելով երթեւեկէր (xaṙn i xuṙn awc'telov ert'ewekēr), using words that correlate with the Greek words ἀδιορίστος and πορεία, which of course does not quite match verbatim the Manichaean definition of matter as random motion (ἄτακτον κίνησιν) from the text of Alexander of Lycopolis cited above but it is close to that definition in meaning.

4. It seems that for refutation, Yeznik of Kołb already had at hand a sort of Platonicized Manichean theory, one that was Platonicized in the spirit of the Neopythagoreans-Platonists, for whom matter as such is not opposed to good, but rather that which remains in it indifferent to the process of shaping and formation: "And when creating, He took from the substance as much as He needed for the creation of the creatures. The rest, which settled as unsuitable for creation, He left behind. From this worthless residue come all human miseries" (Minasyan 2003, p. 437; Arevshatyan 2008, p. 50).

His own reasoning is presented in the following manner:

1. He starts with the famous Platonic-Parmenidean principle, typical of both Titus of Bostra and Alexander of Lycopolis "if two, then three": "It must be acknowledged that two uncreated beings cannot exist together, for where there are two present, there must be someone in the middle to separate them" (Minasyan 2003, p. 438).

2. However, he then proceeds with a critique of Platonic philosophy, including an examination of Plato's own ideas. According to Yeznik, Plato "who asserts that God, matter, and the idea are equally existent, reveals his thought that

God is the creator of forms, rather than of entities" (Minasyan 2003, p. 492). In turn, the heretics, according to him, further adopt the errors of Plato, claiming that, "just as God is a being (էութեամբ/eut'eamb), so too are matter and idea" (Minasyan 2003, p. 492). And they claim, according to Yeznik, that "God only had the ability to give form to matter, which was in chaotic motion, rather than bringing all that exists from non-being into being, as the Almighty should have done" (Minasyan 2003, p. 492). From his perspective, however, this once again leads to a contradiction with the very concept of God as omnipotent and as the only existent being: "This ascribes weakness to God, as if He were compelled to request matter from someone" (Minasyan 2003, p. 492). Plato, according to Yeznik, contradicts his own premises, asserting "that the world was created and will undergo destruction" (Minasyan 2003, p. 492), and right after claiming "the world to be co-eternal with God" (Minasyan 2003, p. 492). Yeznik deals with this contradictory argument using the methodology of indirect proof, reducing both possible alternative arguments to a contradiction: "However, if the world is born and subject to destruction, how can it be co-eternal with God? And if it is co-eternal, according to their statements, then just as the shadow of an object is never separated from the object itself, so too would this world be inseparable from God. If this is the case, "then the assertion that 'this world is a creation subject to annihilation' becomes futile" (Minasyan 2003, p. 492).

3. Subsequently, he arrives at his own conclusion of non-necessity and even contradiction of the assumption of co-eternal matter as an evil second god: "From all this, it follows that, alongside God, there was no substance, that is, matter, from which, according to the Greek sages, all creations were made, and from which, it is claimed, evil entered the world – as believed by heretics that, basing on this, deified matter, opposing one God to another" (Minasyan 2003, p. 495).

He devotes significant attention to refuting dualism and polytheism, as these posed a genuine threat to 5th-century Armenia. Unlike the philosophical doctrines of the Stoics, Epicureans, Platonists, and Pythagoreans—whose influence, though not negligible, remained secondary—the primary ideological and political threat came from dualistic religious systems such as Mazdaism, as well as the heresies of Manichaeism and Marcionism. In rejecting the substantiality of matter, he pursues several key objectives.

1. Firstly, from the standpoint of the Christian Neoplatonic philosophy, he asserts the existence of a single divine substance.

2. Secondly, he rejects the substantiality of matter through the method of indirect proof: if the substantiality of matter and its co-eternity with God are acknowledged, then the very act of creation, according to Christian doctrine, would be called into question.

3. But evil, according to Yeznik, is also not created by God, unlike other beings. Even proponents of the idea that matter is the source of evil agree that God is the good principle and the creator of all good beings. However, this logically leads to a

contradiction in terms: if, alongside the divine good substance, there exists an evil substance, it would imply that God does not possess absolute power and cannot prevent evil, allowing it to coexist with good. From the perspective of Christian philosophy, such a conclusion is unacceptable on the grounds of *contradictio in adjecto*, as it contradicts the very definition of God, particularly His qualities of omnipotence and omniscience.

4. For Yeznik, the assertion that God allowed the existence of evil as an equal substance contradicts the idea that evil is not an independent entity: "And the Plato (Պղատոն/Płaton) acknowledges God, but he also acknowledges substance (հիւղ/hiwł) and idea (իդեա/idos), of which the former is matter and the latter is something separate [from matter]" (Minasyan 2003, p. 492; Arevshatyan 2008, p. 137). Such a form of dualism was also unacceptable to Eznik.

Yeznik uses his critique of ancient philosophical concepts as the basis for refuting the dualism of Mazdaism, Chaldean astrology, Manichaeism, and the Marcionite heresy. From the perspective of Christian monism, he asserts that the only source of being is God, and that evil cannot exist as an independent substance, but is merely a deviation from the divine order (Arevshatyan 2008, p. 20). Thus, through his analysis of free will, he arrived at a philosophical justification for Christian monism, rejecting Iranian dualism, astrological determinism, and other concepts that limit the role of human choice in the cosmos.

### 3. Further Armenian Arguments from the 5th and 6th Centuries: Yełishe and David the Invincible

Yełishe, a 5th century Armenian historian and theologian, was a monk and one of the younger students of Sahak Partev and Mesrop Mashtots. In the educational institutions founded by his mentors, he mastered not only the Armenian language, but also Greek, Syriac and Persian. In order to deepen his education, Yełishe, together with Movses Khorenatsi, philosopher David and Mambre Vertzanoch, was sent to the West to study in the leading centers of the time. Around 434 he arrived in Edessa, and then continued his studies at the School of Alexandria under Cyril of Alexandria. In the last years of his life, Yełishe accepted monasticism and then retired to the region of Mokk, where he created a number of historical works, canonical works and commentaries.

The texts by him crucial to our paper are *The Word of the Armenian War* and the philosophical treatise *The Interpretation of the Created*. Against the dualists, he argued that "God is an immaterial and individual entity and He is sufficient for everything. He transformed immateriality (զանձիւթն/zanziut'n) into matter (նիւթացոյց/niut'ac'oyc') and created everything from it" (Keoseyan 2003, p. 769). It schould be noted, however, that his concept of immateriality is not the same as the Greek concept of non-being (μὴ ὄν), but to determine its more precise meaning would be a separate and interesting research task, which is beyond the scope of this study. However, here

are two more quotations that might shed light on his original use of the concepts of material and immaterial: "Theodotion's writing says that the Septuagint has one force (զաւրուԹիւն/zorut'iun) – [to give] birth, since God created creatures out of nothingness by word and writing, which transform the immaterial into the material (զանձիւթն ձիւթացոյց/zanniut'n niut'ac'oyc'), since the voice utters the word and writing preserves it on card or parchment" (Keoseyan 2003, p. 781). He also uses the concept of matter within his own theodicy, and concludes that "the world is not a matter of contempt but of necessity" (Keoseyan 2003, p. 850).

David Anakht, also known in medieval sources as David Nerginatsi, is said to have been born in Western Armenia in the mid-70s of the 5th century. He was educated and later taught philosophy in Alexandria. His teacher was Olympiodorus the Younger, a prominent representative of the Alexandrian Neoplatonist school, whose name he mentions in his works and whose authority he refers to when considering a number of philosophical issues. He wrote four philosophical treatises: *Definitions of Philosophy, An Analysis of Porphyry's Introduction, An Interpretation of Aristotle's Categories* and *An Interpretation of Aristotle's Analytics*, in which he discusses in detail the main points of ancient philosophy and logic (Arevshatyan 1975, p. 7 – 8).

For the purposes of our article, one of his works is of greatest interest, namely *Definitions and Divisions of the Philosophy of the Three Times Great and Invincible David*, written against the four propositions of Pyrrho the False Wise.

In *Definitions and Divisions* he distinguishes the different levels, i.e. the human and divine, in defining the good and the evil to show that the evil is an impossible action on the divine, but possible on the human level: "Similarly, the good, knowledge, and power in God and in humans are different, for the good manifests differently in God and in humans. Thus, the good is the essence (էուԹիւն/ēut'iun) of God and exists within Him; He is incapable of accepting evil due to the excess of good, just as the sun cannot be dark because of the excess of light. A human, on the other hand, acquires goodness; therefore, he is also susceptible to evil, much like air is capable of being illuminated when lit by the rising sun and can also perceive darkness, as it becomes dark after sunset" (Arevshatyan 2004, p. 173).

**Conclusions and summary**

Greek education played a particularly important role in shaping the anti-dualistic views of the Fathers of the Armenian Church. Frequent parallels can be observed between the arguments against dualists put forth by Armenian theologians and those of ancient Greek authors, as we have demonstrated in our article. The theological perspectives of Armenian Church Fathers in the fifth and sixth centuries were primarily directed against pagan and heretical dualistic doctrines. These critiques subsequently influenced the anti-Paulician, anti-Nestorian, and anti-Chalcedonian literary traditions, which in turn shaped key aspects of Armenian dog-

matics. This body of work served as a significant factor in the eventual formation of the theological identity of the Armenian Church as an autonomous institution. The Church positioned itself in opposition both to the Chalcedonian theology of Byzantium and the Nestorian currents of the Eastern Church, while simultaneously preserving the traditions of Greek and Syriac polemics within its anti-dualistic discourse. In the earlier period, however, anti-dualistic polemics were not primarily employed as a theological or ecclesiological tool to defend the ecclesiological independence of the Armenian Church. Rather, they reflected continuity and parallelism in argumentation with the Greek tradition.

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