

CHAPTER 10



JOHN PHILOPONUS: EGYPTIAN EXEGETE, ECCLESIASTICAL POLITICIAN

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Egyptian Exegete

John Philoponus composed his work known as *De Opificio Mundi* (hereafter *Opif.*),¹ a commentary on Genesis written from the anti-Chalcedonian (Miaphysite) point of view, in the mid-sixth century either just before Justinian's Council of Constantinople (553) or shortly afterwards. He opened his text with the modesty topos, declaring that he was writing not of his own prompting but at that of his fellow Miaphysite, Sergius of Tella, patriarch of Antioch (r. 557/58–560/61)² and the first non-Chalcedonian holder of that see since the great

1. Throughout I use Johannes Philoponos, *Über die Erschaffung der Welt (De Opificio Mundi)*, ed. and trans. Clemens Scholten, 3 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1997), occasionally noting differences from the Teubner edition by Walter Reichardt (Leipzig, 1897), plus my own autoptic work on the Vienna manuscript (in 1993) and English translation (prepared in 1995). I have been greatly aided by *Jean Philopon: La Création du monde*, trans. Marie-Hélène Congourdeau and Marie-Claude Rosset (Paris: Migne, 2004), and thank the authors for kindly sending me a copy.

2. For Sergius, see Uwe M. Lang, "John Philoponus and the Fifth Ecumenical Council," *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 37 (2005): 411–36, here 426. See also Leslie S. B. MacCoull, "The Historical Context of John Philoponus's *De Opificio Mundi* in the Culture of Byzantine-Coptic Egypt," *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 9 (2006): 397–423, here 400, 409, 411; and cf. J. Schamp, "Photios et Jean Philopon: sur la date du *De opificio mundi*," *Byzantion* 70 (2000): 135–54.

Severus was deposed by Justin I in 518 and exiled to Egypt. Sergius himself, in the run-up to the Council of Constantinople, also urged Philoponus to write his Miaphysite treatise *The Arbiter*,³ so this work was another one⁴ inspired by the successor of Severus, the latter living on in Egypt as a Miaphysite hero until 538. This clearly witnesses to the transprovincial Miaphysite commonwealth of intellectuals all round the Mediterranean, thinkers who united classical and Christian *paideia*⁵ in an epoch that saw the setting up of independent Miaphysite churches in both Egypt and Syria.

Philoponus in his *Opif.* proœmium addresses Sergius in the vocative as τιμιωτάτη μοι κεφαλή, a trope of official reverence simultaneously recalling the classical poetry (especially Homer) he knew, the government politesse he encountered in Egypt (the τιμιώτατος title for officeholders in sixth-century papyri), and epithets for Christ. In the next phrase he also calls him “the greatest adornment (ἐγκαλλώπισμα, “beautification”) of those who are reckoned among the archpriests of God.” This is deeply meaningful praise for someone named to fill a *sedes* long regarded as *vacans*. (Alexandria’s own Miaphysite patriarch, Theodosius, was at the time being kept in detention in Constantinople;⁶ and indeed Sergius himself also resided in the imperial capital.)⁷ In this work, the *Opif.*, Philoponus is also honoring Sergius’s predecessor Severus,

3. Uwe M. Lang, *John Philoponus and the Controversies over Chalcedon in the Sixth Century: A Study and Translation of the Arbiter* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2001); Edward J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 249; also *The Crisis of the Oikoumene: The ‘Three Chapters’ and the Failed Quest for Unity in the Sixth-Century Mediterranean*, ed. Celia Chazelle and Catherine Cubitt (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006).

4. A third had apparently been Philoponus’s *On the Whole and Its Parts*, dedicated to Sergius before he became patriarch of Antioch (before 557/58); see Lang, “John Philoponus and the Fifth Ecumenical Council,” 426–27.

5. See Leslie S. B. MacCoull, “Philosophy in Its Social Context,” in *Egypt in the Byzantine World 400–700*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 67–82.

6. Stephen J. Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004), 101–7.

7. Lang, “John Philoponus and the Fifth Ecumenical Council,” 426.

famously the first person to quote the author known as (the pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite,⁸ by explicitly citing Dionysius—a writer new to the sixth-century world⁹—in his own exegesis of the work of creation.¹⁰ These citations have been little noticed, and deserve scrutiny for both their content and their context.

Book 2 of the *Opif.* is an explanation of Genesis 1:2-5. After quoting verse 2 in the Septuagint, Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus text versions (as is his usual procedure), Philoponus immediately lets the reader know that Moses was being a good *physikos* in treating all the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—partly explicitly and partly implicitly. He explains the following verses using both Basil’s *Hexaemeron* and his own *De Aeternitate Mundi Contra Proclum*,¹¹ contradicting the Dyophysites Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret by name and Cosmas “Indicopleustes” by implication. Finally he arrives at the first of the repeated Genesis formulations, “And there was evening and there was morning, one day.” This sparks off a discussion of when a day begins and ends, along with the habit of reckoning a day from the preceding sundown. And

8. In his *Against the Apology of Julian* 25, citing *De Divinis Nominibus* 2.9, he also quotes Letter 4 (PG 3.1072C, with the to-be-famous formulation θεανδρική ἐνέργεια); I thank Father U. M. Lang for verifying these references. The Julianist-controversy writings were composed while Severus was in Egypt (between 518 and 538).

9. I thank Dr. Marc D. Lauxtermann of Oxford for his e-mail comment that *Anthologia Palatina* 1.88, the three-line epigram on Dionysius that shows awareness of the *Celestial* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, is indeed probably sixth century. For parallels from just a bit later in Philoponus’s Egypt, see Clement A. Kuehn, *Channels of Imperishable Fire: The Beginnings of Christian Mystical Poetry and Dioscorus of Aphrodito* (New York: Lang, 1995), 12-14, 176-82, 205-16, and elsewhere.

10. The Ps.-Dionysius’s angelology also to some extent underlies Philoponus’s treatment of angels in *Opif.* 1.8-12, 14-22; though he does not cite him by name, he clearly knew the *Celestial Hierarchy*; see Leslie S. B. MacCoull, “The Monophysite Angelology of John Philoponus,” *Byzantion* 65 (1995): 388-95; Clemens Scholten, *Antike Naturphilosophie und christliche Kosmologie in der Schrift “De Opificio Mundi” des Johannes Philoponos* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 77, 174-76, 181.

11. Clemens Scholten, ed. and trans., *Johannes Philoponos, De aeternitate mundi / Über die Ewigkeit der Welt*, 2 vols. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009); *Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World*, trans. Michael Share and James Wilberding, 3 vols. (London: Duckworth, 2004-6).

this gets him into the question of just when Christ's resurrection and its preceding dark sky event (at the crucifixion; see Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45) happened. He cites Phlegon of Tralles on the solar eclipse of the 202nd Olympiad (*Opif.* 2.21), probably taking it from Eusebius. And he specifies the nineteenth regnal year of Tiberius, "in which occurred the crucifixion of Christ that saved the world, and at the same time the astonishing (παράδοξος) solar eclipse, not customary in nature, took place in the manner which Dionysius the Areopagite described in his letter to Polycarp the hierarch" (2.21).¹² Book 3 explains Genesis 1:6-8, the firmament and the second day of creation. Philoponus adduces the same bit—both Phlegon and Dionysius—in *Opif.* 3.9 in the course of proving that the earth and the universe are spherical, refuting Cosmas and the Dyophysites. Solar eclipses, even the one at the crucifixion¹³ that occurred paradoxically (and supernaturally) at the Paschal full moon,¹⁴ take place, according to Philoponus, when the moon (the [backlit] lunar disk) comes perpendicularly (κατὰ κάθετον) in front of the sun, which does not permit our sightlines (ὄψεις) to coincide (ἐπιβάλλειν) with the sun's light (3.9).¹⁵ What Philoponus is seeking to refute in this section of the *Opif.* is Cosmas's notion (held up to ridicule) that the ἄκρα of the heaven lie upon the "tabernacle"-shaped earth (Cosmas, *Top. Chr.* 2.17).¹⁶ Solar eclipses, whenever

12. This is Ps.-Dionysius Letter 7 (PG 3.1081A). The observer supposedly could perceive the eclipse from as far away from Jerusalem as Heliopolis. See Scholten, *Antike Naturphilosophie und christliche Kosmologie*, 77 n. 273, pointing out that Philoponus is the first Christian author to cite this evidence; also 175 with n. 113.

13. Luke 23:45 has explicitly τοῦ ἡλίου ἐκλιπόντος; Philoponus (2.21) ἐκλείψαντος τοῦ ἡλίου.

14. "and also Dionysius the Areopagite narrates how it happened" (3.9).

15. Cf. Jean de Groot, *Aristotle and Philoponus on Light* (New York: Garland, 1991), 103, 109, 121.

16. On the anti-Cosmas point, cf. Anne Tihon, "Astrological Promenade in Byzantium in the Early Palaiologan Period," in *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium*, ed. Paul Magdalino and Maria Mavroudi (Geneva: La Pomme d'or, 2006), 265-90, here 270; also 289 n. 72. An interesting predecessor of Philoponus's arguments in *Opif.* 3.9-10 and elsewhere, also quoting and commenting on Isaiah 40:22b; Psalm 103:2; and Psalm 87:7 (as does Philoponus), is the fragmentary discourse of Shenoute beginning "Now

they may occur (even miraculously, since ordinarily they cannot take place at what earth-based observers see as full moon),¹⁷ further manifest even to naked-eye perception earth's sphericity, and even an authority from the first century (as was thought) noticed that.¹⁸

Philoponus gives his highest praise for Dionysius in *Opif.* 3.13, a pro-patristic, anti-Dyophysite manifesto. Book 3, expounding the firmament, has been continuing the exegete's overall project of demonstrating that Moses's cosmogony both agrees with extant reality and underlies the classical astronomies of Hipparchus and Ptolemy. He has followed Basil in describing the spherical earth nested within the spherical heaven (3.6-7), openly deriding obtuse Dyophysites—uneducated “scripture fundamentalists” (clearly Cosmas, Theodore, et al.), equivalent to what we would today call “flat-earthers”—whose lack of understanding of even Christian scripture is making Christians look silly in the eyes of scientifically educated pagans.¹⁹ But there are phenomena such as the movements of the constellations and of the Milky Way, the sun's yearly course, the stars' paths, for which these unhelpful dolts cannot even provide scriptural proof texts or traditional support even though they themselves could have had access to “Basil the Great and the holy Gregories [sc. of Nazianzus and of Nyssa] and Athanasius who

Many Words and Things I Said,” in which he discusses this concept, the “measure” (ἴσος) of heaven and earth, and the sun's course and the circumpolar stars; see Pierre du Bourguet, “Entretien de Chenouté sur des problèmes de discipline ecclésiastique et de cosmologie,” *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 57 (1958): 99-142, here 115-17 (Coptic text), 122-23 (French trans.); Stephen Emmel, *Shenoute's Literary Corpus*, 2 vols. (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2004), 1:246-47, 249, 253-54; 2:522-623, 813.

17. Philoponus goes on with a discussion of lunar eclipses, which might fruitfully be compared with his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 13.3; ed. Maximilian Wallies [Berlin: Reimer, 1909]), though that is concerned with reasoning, not with the natural phenomenon as such. Cf. Owen Goldin, *Explaining an Eclipse: Aristotle's Posterior Analytics 2.1-10* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 101-7, 110-11, 118-23.

18. See most recently Anne Tihon, “Numeracy and Science,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Jeffreys et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 803-19, here 810.

19. Scholten, *Antike Naturphilosophie und christliche Kosmologie*, 385.

contended with them in apostolic struggles, and Dionysius, who with the highest degree of philosophy adorned [or “beautified”] in piety the see of the church of Athens.”²⁰ What these “proto-orthodox” people—including Athanasius, Alexandria’s pride, in the company of fathers who had studied ancient Greek wisdom—had to say agrees with the facts far better, and Christians (here properly educated Miaphysites) do not have to be ashamed of their *paideia* in any company.²¹

Note Philoponus’s pan-Mediterranean stance on authorities, combining Cappadocian exegetes with an Egyptian one (always known by the epithet “the apostolic”) and adding the figure thought to have been the first head of the see of Athens, a city famous for philosophy (where two of those Cappadocians, Basil and the elder Gregory, had studied) whose Christian Neoplatonic school had ceased to function in the same year (529) that Philoponus himself produced his refutation of the Athenian Proclus. Our author is showing that the supersession of the older wisdom by the new—actually itself older than the classical Greeks—has been going on for a long time. Thinkers on both shores of the sea have been participating in this process, one in which contemporary Egypt plays as active a role as other Byzantine lands in the past.²² Above all, he concludes, “let nothing in any manner get in the way of the truth” (μηδὲν γὰρ ἔστω μηδενὶ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐπίπροσθεν, 3.17), recalling 3.13 where he proclaimed that “anyone honoring what is true, by whomever it may be found, honors Christ, the Truth” (τὸ γὰρ ἀληθές, ὑφ’ ὅτου ἂν εὔρεθείη, τιμῶν τις αὐτὴν τιμᾶ, Χριστὸν τὴν ἀλήθειαν).

One further text may help to interweave Philoponus into the tradition of Dionysian thought. A passage originally transmitted as part

20. καὶ τὸν μετὰ φιλοσοφίαν ἄκραν τῇ εὐσεβείᾳ τὸν Ἀθήνησι τῆς ἐκκλησίας θρόνον κοσμήσαντα Διονύσιον (3.13), using an epithet for Dionysius similar to the one he earlier used for Sergius the dedicatee himself. This sets Sergius (in the present) and Dionysius (in the apostolic past) on side-by-side thrones of prestige, as it were (with κοσμῶν recalling the *kosmos*).

21. Scholten, *Antike Naturphilosophie und christliche Kosmologie*, 386.

22. See MacCoull, “Philosophy in Its Social Context,” 67–82.

of Maximus the Confessor's scholia on the Dionysian corpus (PG 4.21D-24A) has recently been reattributed to the sixth century and specifically to Philoponus.²³ Interestingly, it repeats the Proclus connection, with a bit of a twist. "One must know that some of the 'outside' (ἔξω [i.e., non-Christian]) philosophers, and especially Proclus, often used observations (θεωρήματα) of the blessed Dionysius, even dry formulations (λέξεις), and from this it is possible to gather the suspicion (ὑπόνοια) that the more ancient of the philosophers in Athens made his matters (πραγματεῖαι) their own and concealed them, as is recorded in the present book, so that they might be seen as the fathers of his divine sayings (λόγια). And through God's dispensation (οἰκονομία) now the present matter (πραγματεία) has appeared (i.e., the Dionysian writings have become known)²⁴ so as to confute their vainglory and fakery (ῥαδιουργία [a word used of falsifying scriptural texts])." This comment continues with a quote of the old "Plato is Moses speaking Greek [lit. "Atticizing"]" topos and a reference to Eusebius of Caesarea to show that "those of the 'outside' (ἔξω) wisdom like to steal what is ours [i.e., Christians']."²⁵ This is a fine opposite to what we in the twenty-first century know to have been the actual temporal order, according to which the composer of the Dionysian texts made extensive use of Proclus! Whether or not this passage is really by Philoponus,²⁶ it would be just like him to claim that the

23. Beate R. Suchla, "Verteidigung eines platonischen Denkmodells einer christlichen Welt: Die philosophie- und theologiegeschichtliche Bedeutung des Scholienwerks des Johannes von Skythopolis zu den areopagitischen Traktaten," *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, phil.-hist. Klasse* (1995): 1-28, at 12, 19-20.

24. As they were brought in evidence at the 532 Constantinopolitan council (*Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* IV.2 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1914], 172-73), though they were thought spurious by the council's Dyophysite presider, Hypatius of Ephesus (whom Sergius of Tella would have regarded as unqualified).

25. On the ἔξω formulation, see Katerina Ierodiakonou, "Introduction," in *Byzantine Philosophy and Its Ancient Sources*, ed. Ierodiakonou (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 1-13, esp. 9-10.

26. The main place where he seems to go in for the ἔξω label for non-Christian thought is right here in the *Opif.* prooemium, where he describes his own *Contra Proclum* as having been written in refutation (ἐλεγχον) of "outside discourses" (ἔξωτερικῶν λόγων). Cf. Michele Trizio, "Byzantine Philosophy as a Contemporary

pagan Athenian Proclus, whom he himself had refuted, had been “stealing” from Paul’s Christian Athenian disciple Dionysius just as much as Plato took from Moses (*Opif.* 1.2).

Ecclesiastical Politician

Philoponus in his *Opif.* procœmium praises another individual besides Sergius of Tella: Athanasius, a “fellow-worker” (συνεργός) in Sergius’s “zealous effort” (σπουδασμα), whom Philoponus describes as “famous in family” (γνώριμος τοῦ γένους) and no less so in piety toward God (θεοσέβεια). This was a young man of indeed imperial descent, Empress Theodora’s nephew,²⁷ who had been Sergius’s pupil and would be mentioned as a possible “short-list” candidate for non-Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria in 566. He would also in future support Philoponus in the latter’s later-life controversies over “tritheism” and the resurrection. Here Philoponus nicknames Athanasius σκύμνος, a “lion cub” accompanying in the race (συμπαράθελον) the one who reared him for “excellence” (ἀρετή). This metaphorical label “lion cub” is an explicit Miaphysite marker: it is the favorite epithet in all of Coptic homiletic, hagiography, and hymnography (μασμογι) for Cyril of Alexandria, the authority most revered by the self-fashioning Egyptian church.²⁸ To be a “lion cub” was to be a second Cyril, an infallible touchstone

Historiographical Project,” *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 74 (2007): 247–94; and for more on “inside” and “outside,” Anthony Kaldellis, “Byzantine Philosophy Inside and Out: Orthodoxy and Dissidence in Counterpoint” (forthcoming; I thank the author for a prepublication copy).

27. *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (hereafter *PLRE*) 3A:147, Athanasius 5 (giving “grandson,” but nephew seems more likely in the chronology); cf. *Opif.*, ed. Scholten, 1:75 n. 13. Theodora famously favored the Miaphysites.

28. Among many examples, see De Lacy O’Leary, *The Difnar (Antiphonarium) of the Coptic Church* (London: Luzac, 1926), 11a: “Truly I magnify the wonders and my mind is amazed; I seek words for your honor, Cyril the lion cub and our fathers the bishops who gathered in Ephesus”; 21b: “Athanasius the apostolic and Basil the teacher of piety; the second Gregory the true theologian . . . our father Cyril the strong lion cub who underwent troubles for orthodoxy”; and now Maria Cramer and Martin Krause, *Das koptische Antiphonar (M575 und P1196?)* (Muenster: Aschendorff, 2008), 310–11, listing Mark, Dionysius, Peter the martyr, Athanasius, Cyril the lion cub, Dioscorus, Theodosius, and Benjamin, plus Severus of Antioch.

of orthodox (Miaphysite) belief²⁹—which must have seemed quite a qualification for someone seeking to occupy Cyril’s see! The epithet came of course originally from Genesis 49:9, “Judah is a lion’s cub,” and was applied to Cyril as being the nephew and successor of the respected Theophilus. By extension it came to denote Cyril as the victor at Ephesus and deposer of his opponents. In his prooemium Philoponus describes the teacher-pupil relationship of Sergius and Athanasius as “a gray-haired mind” (πολιὸς νοῦς) in the exercise of discourse creating “a venerable youth” (αἰδέσιμον νεότητα). So it is both the elder ecclesiastic and the *puer senex* nobleman who have prompted Philoponus to explain Genesis.

I would like to float the hypothesis that Philoponus’s addressee Athanasius may further be identified with *PLRE*’s Athanasius 4, the *dux* of the Thebaid (in 567) praised in Dioscorus of Aphrodito’s encomiastic poetry and target of his petitions. This Athanasius also, we now know (thanks to P.Vindob. G 16334), had in ca. 550–55 served as *dux* and *augustalis* of Alexandria and as *curator* (*phrontistês*) of the imperial estates (*domus divina*, θειοτάτη οἰκία)—that would have been Theodora’s estates—in the Thebaid.³⁰ As a (pious) layman³¹ there would have been in that period no impediment to his being mentioned in the 560s as a possible successor to Patriarch Theodosius—just the opposite. His blood kinship to the late, beloved empress who was such a friend to the Miaphysite church in its beginnings, a kinship that had qualified him to look after his late aunt’s Upper

29. On the prestige of Cyril, see Daniel King, *The Syriac Versions of the Writings of Cyril of Alexandria* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2008), 7–15, 27–33, 44–46.

30. The identification of Athanasius the *dux* of the Thebaid with the Alexandrian *dux* and Theban *curator* is owed to the insight of Federico Morelli, “Zwischen Poesie und Geschichte: Die ‘flagornerie’ des Dioskoros und der dreifache Dux Athanasios,” in *Les archives de Dioscore d’Aphrodité cent ans après leur découverte: Histoire et culture dans l’Égypte byzantine*, ed. Jean-Luc Fournet (Paris: de Boccard, 2008), 223–45. On 230–31 n. 27 Morelli mentions working conversations in Cairo, and since the honorand of this volume and the present writer were in 1978 the first two Fellows of the American Research Center in Egypt ever to have been appointed in Coptic studies, I hope he will recall similar interactions.

31. The word *monk* may have to be deleted from the *PLRE* entry for Athanasius 4.

Egyptian estates in an official capacity, would have been seen as an extra point in his favor along with his having been educated by the impeccably Miaphysite Sergius of Tella. At the time when Philoponus was composing his *Opif.* proœmium, probably toward 560, he yoked together the elder Miaphysite prelate and his imperially born pupil, the Miaphysite official, in a bid for patronal support at the very highest level of the Byzantine state. Athanasius, who—if the identification is valid—had administered the very city of Alexandria in which Philoponus lived, lectured, and wrote, as well as being in charge of Upper Egyptian imperial lands, clearly had power at court thanks to his lineage and was to return to Egypt, this time also as a government official, not as a prelate in orders. He was to continue to support Philoponus even through times when their fellow Miaphysites stood against him. In the proœmium to Philoponus’s hexaemeral magnum opus we can see how our exegete was writing at a time when Egypt’s Miaphysite church was beginning to build and decorate its own structures, compose its own liturgies, ordain its own clerics,³² and interpret the Bible its own way. We can see this late antique polymath acting simultaneously as an Egyptian exegete and as an ecclesiastical politician doing his best to keep Constantinople aware of the validity of the position held by the majority of his countrymen and women. He and they were convinced that the Incarnation of the Word (rightly understood) was the fundamental mystery of creation.³³ This insight was unfolded in the Pseudo-Dionysian writings³⁴ of which Philoponus was aware. He was making it plain to his scriptural audience and his political supporters that only the Miaphysite understanding,

32. For example, Leslie S. B. MacCoull, “‘Sleepers Awake’: More Light on *PSI* I 65,” *Le Muséon* 121 (2008): 1–10.

33. Cf. Bogdan G. Bucur, “Foreordained from All Eternity: The Mystery of the Incarnation according to Some Early Christian and Byzantine Writers,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 62 (2008): 199–215, esp. 200, 214 (“inscribed in the very design of creation”).

34. Bucur, “Foreordained,” 200–203.

their understanding, of who the incarnate Christ was could make sense of the universe.³⁵

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35. Also in loving memory of Mirrit Boutros Ghali (1908-92) (Pondus meum amor meus: eo feror quocumque feror, Augustine, *Confessions* 13.9).