

**THE LETTER OF FREDEGISUS OF TOURS
ON NOTHINGNESS AND SHADOW
A New Translation and Commentary**

by Nathan J. Jun

1. THE LIFE AND WORK OF FREDEGISUS OF TOURS

Fredegisus of Tours, also known as Fridugisus and Fredegis, was an Anglo-Saxon monk and scholar. We know that he was born in England sometime near the end of the eighth century and that he eventually became a student of Alcuin of York, but specific details concerning his early life are scarce and obscure. According to Froben, who first published the *Opera Omnia* of Alcuin in 1777, “In the year 765... Alcuin was placed at the head of the school of York, where he had Ludgerus, Fredegisus, Eanbald the younger, and many other students.”¹ Alcuin himself first mentions Fredegisus in an epistle written in 798, wherein the monk refers to him as *puer*.² This suggests that he probably began his studies at most five years prior to 782, when Alcuin moved to the court of Charlemagne to become the first master of the Schola Palatina.

Fredegisus, to whom Alcuin gave the nickname “Nathanael,” was by all accounts one of the monk’s most favored pupils.³ By the time he joined his teacher at the Schola Palatina some time after 793, he had taken deacon’s orders and is described by Theodulf as an “expert of the arts” (*gnarus artis*) both “decent” (*decens*) and “well-learned” (*doctus bene*).⁴ When Alcuin became Abbot of Tours in 796, Fredegisus and other former students replaced him as teachers at the Schola.⁵ Not long thereafter he became an archdeacon⁶ and eventually succeeded Alcuin as Abbot of Tours in 804.⁷ In 819 he was made chancellor under Louis

¹“Anno 765... Alcuinus scholae Eboracensi praefectus est, ubi Ludgerum, Fridugisum, Eanbaldum juniorem, aliosque plurimos discipulos habuit” (translation mine). Frobenius, *Elogium Historicum Beati Alcuini*, cap. II, no. 6, PL 101.1418A.

²Alcuinus, *Epistulae*, no. 83, PL 100.270A.

³Ibid. nos. 134, 135, 157; cf. Frobenius, *Commentatio de Vita Beati F. Albini seu Alcuini*, cap. IV., no. 34, PL 100.23B.

⁴Theodulfus Aurelianensis, *Carmina*, lib. 1, PL 105.321B; cf. Alcuinus, *Epistulae*, no. 157; Frobenius, *Commentatio*, cap. IV, no. 34.

⁵Ibid.; cf. Auctor Incertus, *Beati Flacci Alcuini Vita* (ca. 804), cap. 8, no. 19, PL 100.99C; cf. Alcuinus, *Epistulae*, no. 157.

⁶Alcuinus, *Epistulae*, no. 124.

⁷Cf. Auctor Incertus (Alcuin?), IV. 456 *Versus de Cella Cormaricensi*, PL

the Pious.⁸ According to C. J. B. Gaskoin, “the improvement in the Latin style of the Chancery from that date is attributed to his influence.”⁹ The following year his abbacy was extended to include the monasteries of St. Bertin and St. Omer.¹⁰ He died in 834.

Although Fredegisus was apparently a productive scholar who was held in the highest esteem by his intellectual contemporaries, few of his original ideas and next to none of his written work have endured the passage of time. We know that he was involved in an extended philosophical controversy with Agobard of Lyon toward the end of his life, owing to a work of Agobard’s entitled *Liber Contra Objectiones Fredigisi Abbatis*, but Fredegisus’s contributions to the debate are lost.¹¹ Apart from this, Fredegisus’s only surviving work, of which this volume is a translation, is a brief epistle entitled *De Nihil et Tenebris*, most likely written around 800.¹² Only four known manuscripts exist, each of which is partially corrupted.¹³ Four editions of the text have been published within the last two centuries: Migne (1851),¹⁴ Dummler (1880),¹⁵ Corvino (1956), and Gennaro (1963). Although I drew upon all four in producing the present opus, I am most faithful to the Migne edition.¹⁶

The treatise, which examines the ontological status of nothingness

101.1165D; Eginhardus, *Vita Caroli Imperatoris*, cap. 33, PL 97.61A; Ermoldus Nigellus, *Carmen Elegiacum de Rebus Gestis Ludovici Pii*, Liber IV, PL 105.629B; Fabricius, *Notitia Historica*, PL 105.752A; Frobenius, *Commentatio*, cap. IV, no. 34; Frobenius, *Elogium*, cap. X, no. 62; Ludovicus I Pius, *Diplomata Ecclesiastica*, nos. LXX, CIX, CLVI, CLX, PL 104.979B–1309A.

⁸Frobenius, *Commentatio*, cap. IV, no. 42; cf. Fabricius, *Notitia*.

⁹C. J. B. Gaskoin, *Alcuin: His Life and Work* (New York 1966) 59.

¹⁰Frobenius, *Commentatio*, cap. IV, no. 42; cf. *ibid.* *Elogium*, cap. VII, no. 45.

¹¹PL 104.159–174.

¹²Comprehensive studies of this text include Max Ahner, *Fredegis von Tours* (Leipzig 1878); Francesco Corvino, “Il ‘De nihilo et tenebris’ di Fredegisio di Tours,” *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia* (1956) 273–286; C. Gennaro, *Fredugisio di Tours e il ‘De Substantia Nihili et Tenebrarum’*: Edizione critica e studio introduttivo, Pubblicazioni dell’istituto universitario di magistero di Catania, serie filosofica—saggi e monografie, no. 46 (Padua 1963); L. Geymonat, “I problemi del nulla e delle tenebre in Fredegisio di Tours,” *Rivista di Filosofia* (1951) 280–288; C. Mazzantini, “Ancora intorno al ‘nulla’ di Fredegisio da Tours,” *Atti dell’Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* 87 (1952–1953) 170–196.

¹³For a very detailed discussion of the text’s history—both paleographic and intellectual—see Gennaro (n. 12 above) 5–113.

¹⁴PL 105.751B–754D.

¹⁵MGH *Epistolae* 4, ed. Ernst Dümmler (Berlin 1895) 552–555.

¹⁶I chose this edition because I found it to be the most easily accessible. In truth, the various editions are actually quite similar in their overall representation of the original Latin text.

and shadow, was probably written during Fredegisus's residence at Tours and is addressed to his colleagues at the palace of Charlemagne. We will discuss its contents in greater detail later; for the time being, a few important ideas regarding the context of the work are worth mentioning. First, although the *De Nihil* comes across as terribly unsophisticated—especially when compared to the sort of philosophy which was being practiced only a few hundred years later—it is nonetheless an important text because it suggests, contrary to conventional assumptions, that philosophical disputation was a real and integral part of Carolingian intellectual life.

Second, the problem discussed in the treatise, as well as Fredegisus's method of solving it, anticipate various important developments in Western thought which would come into being just a few centuries after the author's death. These include, but are not limited to, the rise of the scholastic method, the debates over universals, and the proliferation of new exegetical methods. Taken together, I think these ideas provide ample justification for scholars to regard Fredegisus as a crucial figure within the history of medieval philosophy.

2. TEXT AND TRANSLATION

Fredegisi Epistola de Nihilo et Tenebris ad Proceres Palatii

Omnibus fidelibus et domni nostri serenissimi principis Caroli in sacro ejus palatio consistentibus Fredigysus diaconus.

5 Agitatam diutissime a quampluribus quaestionem de nihilo, quam
indiscussam inexaminatamque veluti impossibilem ad explicandum
reliquerunt, mecum sedulo volvens, atque pertractans, tandem visum
mihi fuit aggredi; eamque nodis vehementibus, quibus videbatur
implicata, disruptis absolvi atque enodavi, deterosoque nubilo in lucem
10 restitui; memoriae quoque posteritatis cunctis in futurum saeculis
mandandam praevidi.

Quaestio autem hujusmodi est, nihilne aliquid sit, an non. Si quis
responderit, Videtur mihi nihil esse, ipsa ejus quam putat negatio
compellit eum fateri aliquid esse nihil dum dicit, Videtur mihi nihil
15 esse. Quod tale est quasi dicat, Videtur mihi nihil quiddam esse. Quod
si aliquid esse videtur ut non sit quodam modo videri non potest.
Quocirca relinquitur ut aliquid esse videatur. Si vero hujusmodi fiat
responsio, Videtur mihi nihil nec aliquid esse, huic responsioni
obviandum est, primum ratione, in quantum hominis ratio patitur,
20 deinde auctoritate, non qualibet, sed ratione duntaxat, quae sola
auctoritas est, solaque immobilem obtinet firmitatem. Agamus itaque
ratione.

Omne itaque nomen finitum aliquid significat, ut homo, lapis,
lignum. Haec enim ubi dicta fuerint, simul res quas fuerint significant
25 intelligimus. Quippe hominis nomen praeter differentiam aliquam
positum universalitatem hominum designat. Lapis et lignum suam
similiter generalitatem complectuntur. Igitur nihil ad id quod significat
refertur. Ex hoc etiam probatur non posse aliquid non esse. Item aliud.
Omnis significatio est quod est. Nihil autem aliquid significat. Igitur
30 nihil ejus significatio est quid est, id est, rei existentis.

Quoniam vero ad demonstrandum quod non solum aliquid sit nihil,
sed etiam magnum quiddam, paucis actum est ratione, cum tamen
possint hujusmodi exempla innumera proferri in medium, ad divinam
auctoritatem recurrere libet, quae est rationis munimen et stabile
35 firmamentum. Siquidem universa Ecclesia divinitus erudita, quae e
Christi latere orta, sacratissimae carnis ejus pabulo pretiosique
sanguinis poculo educata, ab ipsis cunabilis secretorum mysteriis

instituta, inconcussa fide tenere confitetur divinam potentiam operatam esse ex nihilo terram, aquam, aera, et ignem, lucem quoque, et angelos, atque animam hominis.

40 Erigenda est igitur ad tanti culminis auctoritatem mentis acies, quae nulla ratione cassari, nullis argumentis refelli, nullis potest viribus impugnari. Haec enim est quae praedicat ea quae inter creaturas prima sic prima ac praecipua sunt aestimandum non est. Quippe cum unum
45 horum quae ex eo genita sunt aestimari sicut est aestimari non possit. Quis enim elementorum naturam ex asse metitus est? Quis enim lucis nomine aut angelicae (naturae) velamine substantiam ac naturam complexus?¹⁷ Si ergo haec quae proposui humana ratione comprehendere nequimus, quomodo obtinebimus quantum qualeve
50 sit illud unde originem genusque ducunt. Poteram autem et alia quamplura subijcere.¹⁸ Sed docibilia quorumque pectoribus satis his insinuatim credimus.¹⁹

De Tenebris, An Sint.

55 Quoniam his breviter dictis commode finem imposui, mox ad ea expedienda intentionem retuli quae curiosis lectoribus non immerito videbantur digna esse quaesitu. Est quidem quorundam opinio, non esse tenebras, et ut sint impossibile esse. Quae quam facile refelli possit sacrae Scripturae auctoritate prolata in medium, prudens lector
60 agnoscat. Itaque quid libri Genesis historia inde sentiat videamus.

Sic enim inquit: Et tenebrae erant super faciem abyssi.²⁰ Quae si non erant, qua consequentia dicitur quia erant? Qui dicit tenebras esse, rem constituendo ponit. Qui autem non esse, rem negando tollit. Sicut cum dicimus, Homo est, rem id est hominem constituimus. Cum dicimus,
65 Homo non est, rem negando id est hominem tollimus. Nam verbum substantiae hoc habet in natura ut cuicumque subjectum fuerit junctum sine negatione, ejusdem declaret substantiam. Igitur in eo quod dictum est Tenebrae erant super faciem abyssi, res constituta est, quam ab esse
70 nulla negatio separat aut dividit. Item tenebrae subjectum est erant declarativum. Declarat enim praedicando tenebras quodam modo esse.

¹⁷*nominee = nomine*

¹⁸*subijcere = subiecere; quamplura = quamplurima*

¹⁹*satis, satum*, i, n., = from the ecclesiastical Latin *satōn*, a Hebrew measure of corn, etc., containing about a *modius* and a half (see Vulgate, Gen. 18.6; id. Matt. 13.33; id. Luke 13.21).

²⁰Gen. 1.

Ecce invicta auctoritas ratione comitata, ratio quoque auctoritatem confessa, unum idemque praedicant, scilicet tenebras esse!

75 Sed cum ista exempli causa posita ad demonstrandum quae
 relinquantur, faciamus palam, pauca divina testimonia aggregantes e
 pluribus, quorum percussi formidine ineptissimas ulterius voces
 adversus ea jaculari non audeant. Siquidem Dominus cum pro
 afflictione populi Israel plagis severioribus castigaret Egyptum,
 tenebris eam involvit adeo spissis ut palpari quirent, et non solum
 80 obtutibus hominum visum adimentibus, sed etiam pro sui crassitudine
 manuum tactui subjacerent. Quidquid enim tangi palparique potest,
 esse necesse est. Quidquid esse necesse est, non esse impossibile est: ac
 per hoc tenebras non esse impossibile est, quia esse necesse est quod ex
 eo quod est palpabile probatum est.

85 Illud quoque praetereundum non est, quod cum omnium dominus
 inter lucem et tenebras divisionem faceret, lucem appellavit diem, et
 tenebras noctem. Si enim diei nomen significat aliquid, noctis nomen
 non potest aliquid non significare. Dies autem lucem significat. Lux
 vero magnum aliquid est. Quid ergo tenebrae, nihilne significativae
 90 sunt, cum eis vocabulum noctis ab eodem conditore impressum est, qui
 luce appellationem diei imposuit, cassandaque est divina auctoritas?
 Nullo modo. Nam coelum et terram facilius est transire quam
 auctoritatem divinam a suo statu permutari.

95 Conditor etenim rebus quas condidit nomina impressit, ut suo
 quaeque nomine res dicta agnita foret. Neque rem quamlibet absque
 vocabulo formavit, nec vocabulum aliquid statuit nisi cui statueretur
 existeret. Quod si foret, omnimodis videretur superfluum, quod Deum
 fecisse nefas est dici. Si autem nefas est dici Deum aliquod statuisse
 superfluum, nomen quod Deus imposuit tenebris nullo modo videri
 100 potest superfluum. Quod si non est superfluum, est secundum modum.
 Si vero secundum modum, et necessaria, quia eo ad dignoscendam rem
 opus erat quae per id significatur. Constat itaque Deum secundum
 modum res constituisse et nomina quae sibi ad invicem sunt necessaria.

105 Sanctus quoque David propheta Spiritu plenus, sciens tenebras non
 inane quiddam et ventosum sonare, evidenter expressit quia quiddam
 sunt. Ait ergo: Misit tenebras.²¹ Si non sunt, quomodo mittuntur? Quod
 autem mitti potest, et illo mitti potest ubi non est. Quod vero non est,

²¹Ps. 104.

mitti quolibet non potest, quia nusquam est. Igitur missae dicuntur
 110 tenebrae, quia erant. Item illud: Posuit tenebras latibulum suum.²² Quod
 scilicet erat posuit, et quodam modo posuit tenebras quae erant,
 latibulum suum poneret. Item illud: Sicut tenebrae ejus.²³ Ubi
 ostenditur quia in possessione sunt, ac per hoc esse manifestantur. Nam
 omne quod possidetur est. Tenebrae autem in possessione sunt. Igitur
 sunt.

115 Sed cum ista talia ac tanta sufficiant, et arcem tutissimam contra
 omnia impugnamenta teneant, unde levi repulsa tela in suos jaculatores
 retorquere possunt, ex evangelica tamen firmitate quaedam poscenda
 sunt. Ponamus igitur ipsius Salvatoris verba: Filii, inquit, regni
 ejicientur in tenebras exteriores.²⁴ Attendendum est autem quod
 120 tenebras exterioris nominat. Extra enim, unde exterius derivatum est,
 locum significat. Quapropter cum dicit exteriores tenebras, locales esse
 demonstrat. Nam non essent exteriores, nisi essent et interiores.
 Quidquid autem est, id in loco sit necesse est. Quod vero non est, hoc
 nusquam est. Igitur exteriores tenebrae non solum sunt, sed etiam
 125 locales sunt. In passione quoque Domini evangelista tenebras esse
 factas commemorat ab hora diei sexta usque ad horam nonam. Quae
 cum factae sint, quomodo non esse dicuntur? Quod factum est, effici
 non potest ut factum non fuerit. Quod vero semper non est, nec
 nunquam fuit, id nunquam est. Tenebrae autem factae sunt. Quare non
 130 ut sint effici non potest.

Item in Evangelio: Si lumen quod in te est, ipsae tenebrae quantae
 erunt.²⁵ Neminem dubitare credo (quin) quantitas corporibus attributa
 sit quae [quia] cuncta per quantitatem distribuuntur. Et quantitas
 quidem secundum accidens est corporibus. Accidentia vero aut in
 135 subjecto sunt, aut de subjecto praedicantur. Per hoc ergo quod dicitur
 ipsae tenebrae quantae erunt, quantitas in subjecto monstratur. Unde
 probabile colligitur tenebras non solum esse, sed etiam corporales esse.

Itaque haec pauca ratione simul et auctoritate congesta vestrae
 magnitudini atque prudentiae scribere curavi, ut eis fixe immobiliterque
 140 haerentes, nulla falsa opinione illecti, a veritatis tramite declinare
 possitis, sed si forte a quocunque aliquid prolatum fuerit ab hac nostra
 ratione dissentiens, ad hanc velut ad regulam recurrentes, ex ejus

²²Ps. 17.

²³Ps. 138.

²⁴Matt. 8.

²⁵Matt. 6; Luke 11.

sententiis stultas machinationes dejicere valetis.

Explicit de Tenebris

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**The Letter of Fredegisus to the Princes of the Palace
on Nothing and Shadow**

5 *Fredegisus the deacon, to all the faithful of our most fair lord, Prince Charles, gathered at his sacred palace.*

Sedulously pondering and investigating the question about “nothing,” which has been mulled over by many people for the longest time, and which they have given up unexamined and undiscussed, as though it were impossible to explain, it finally seemed to me to be ripe for consideration;²⁶ I have released and untied it, the strong knots in which it seemed to be tangled having been broken up, and I have restored it to light, the cloud having been worn away; I have also foreseen its commission to the memory of posterity.

15 Now the question is of this sort: whether nothing is a certain something or not? If one should answer “It seems to me to be nothing,” his denial itself, as he reckons, compels him to acknowledge that something is nothing, since he says “*It seems to me to be nothing.*”²⁷ This is as though he were to say, “It seems to me that nothing is a certain something.” If it appears to be a certain something, then it cannot appear in any way to be non-existent.²⁸ Therefore the fact remains that it seems to be something. But if a response of this sort were made, [namely] “It seems to me to be nothing, not something,” this reply needs to be objected to first by reason - inasmuch as human reason permits - then by authority (not just by any reason, but only that reason which is the sole [legitimate] authority, and which alone attains un-
20 movable strength). Let us therefore push forward by means of reason.

25 Now, every finite noun signifies something, as in the cases of “man,” “stone,” and “wood.” When these [words] are spoken, we immediately

²⁶“... mecum sedulo volvens,” (line 7). I have translated this “sedulously pondering” for the sake of clarity, but a more literal translation would be “sedulously turning [it] over with myself.”

²⁷“... dum dicit, Videtur mihi nihil esse” (lines 13–14). I have italicized “it” here in order to make the argument clear.

²⁸“Quod si aliquid esse videtur ut non sit quodam modo videri non potest” (lines 15–16). Literally, “If it appears to be something then it cannot seem to not be in any way.” I have used an adjectival construction here (“non-existent”) for the sake of clarity.

understand the things that they signify. Hence, the name “man,” re-
 30 regarded without any differentiating thing, indicates the universal nature
 of human beings.²⁹ “Stone” and “wood” comprise their generality in a
 similar fashion. Therefore “nothing” refers to that which it signifies.
 From this it is proved that it must be a certain something.³⁰ Likewise,
 here is another [argument]. Every signification is what the thing it sig-
 35 nifies is. “Nothing,” however, signifies something. Therefore, the signi-
 fication of “nothing” is what the thing it signifies is—namely, an ex-
 isting thing.

Since a few points have been put forth in order to demonstrate by
 means of reason that nothing is not only something but even something
 40 great (though innumerable examples of this sort could be published), it
 pleases us to return to divine authority, which is the defense and stable
 foundation of reason. For the whole divinely educated Church, which
 was born from the side of Christ, brought up on the food of his most
 sacred flesh and the cup of his precious blood, [and] implanted from the
 45 cradle itself with the mysteries of secret things, confesses to hold with
 indomitable faith that the divine power created earth, water, air, and
 fire, along with light, the angels, and the soul of human beings, out of
 “nothing.”

Therefore, the power of the mind must be raised up to the authority
 50 of so great a zenith, which cannot be shaken by any reason, refuted by
 any arguments, [or] opposed by any powers.³¹ For this is what affirms
 that those things which are to be valued first and foremost among
 creatures are produced out of nothing. It cannot be assessed how great
 is that from which so many and such distinguished things come, since
 55 not one of the things generated from it can be appraised for what it is
 worth, or be defined. For who has measured the nature of the elements
 in detail? Who has comprehended the being and nature of light or the
 angelic nature?³² Thus, if we cannot comprehend these things which I

²⁹“... praeter differentiam aliquam ...” (line 25); e.g., a definite article, to make it clear that one is referring to *this* man rather than some other man, or to all men generally.

³⁰“... non posse aliquid non esse” (line 28). Literally, “It is not possible that it not be something.” I have cancelled the double negative in the above translation.

³¹“... quae nulla ratione cassari, nullis argumentis refelli, nullis potest viribus impugnari” (lines 41–43). Literally, “shaken by means of no reason, refuted by means of no arguments, opposed by means of no powers.” The use of “any” here makes for a more felicitous translation.

³²“Quis enim lucis nomine aut angelicae (naturae) velamine substantiam ac naturam complexus?” (lines 46–48). The intended senses of “nominee” and “velamine” are completely unclear here.

60 have put forth by means of human reason, how will we demonstrate
either how great or what kind of thing it is whence they derive their
origin and kind? I could have added many other things, but we believe
the breasts of those who are teachable have been penetrated by means
of these points.³³

65 *On Whether Shadows Exist*

Since I have arrived at a suitable end, these things having been briefly
stated, I have now returned attention to certain things standing in need
of explanation, which rightfully seemed worthwhile for curious readers
to ask about.³⁴ There is also an opinion among certain people that shad-
70 ows do not exist, and that it is impossible that they should exist. The
practiced reader will recognize how easily this can be disproved, once
it has been introduced into the conversation, by recourse to the author-
ity of Sacred Scripture.³⁵ Thus let us observe what the account of the
book of Genesis has to say on this matter.

75 It says thus: “And the shadows were over the face of the abyss.”³⁶ If
these [shadows] did not exist, by means of what consequence is it said
that they *were*?³⁷ He who says that shadows *are*, by virtue of designat-
ing, posits a thing. But he who says that they *are not*, by virtue of deny-
ing, takes a thing away.³⁸ For instance, when we say “Man is,” we
80 designate a thing—that is, man. When we say “Man is not,” we take a
thing away by virtue of denying—that is, man. For a substantial verb
has in its nature that, to whatever subject it is joined without a negation,
it makes evident the being of the thing in question.

Hence in what is said—[namely] “the shadows were over the face of
85 the abyss”—a thing is designated which no negation separates or di-
vides from being. Likewise, *shadows* is the subject made evident by

³³“satis his” (line 51) from *satum*, translated above as “these points” (see n. 4 above).

³⁴“...commode finem imposui...” (line 55). Literally, “I have established an end suitably.” “... non immerito ...” (line 56). Literally, “not unjustly.”

³⁵“Quae quam facile refelli possit sacrae Scripturae auctoritate prolata in medium, prudens lector agnoscat” (lines 58–60). Here, “quae” is not translated, as it merely refers back to “opini”; “having been introduced into the conversation” = *prolata in medium* (literally, having been introduced into the midst or the middle).

³⁶Gen. 1.2.

³⁷“Quae si non erant, qua consequentia dicitur quia erant?” (lines 61–62). As in n. 35 above, “quae” is not translated, since it merely refers back to “tenebras.”

³⁸The text should read “Qui autem dicit tenebras non esse, rem negando tollit” (line 63). The author apparently takes the predicate of the main clause and its object to be implicit.

were. For it makes evident, by means of predicating, that shadows exist in some way. Behold invincible authority, coupled with reason, and also reason acknowledging authority, predicating one and the same thing, namely, that shadows exist!

90 But although these things, having been posited for the sake of example, suffice to demonstrate what we have claimed, nonetheless, lest any opportunity for contradiction by rivals remain, let us make plain a few passages from Scripture, drawing from among the many, [such that]
 95 those smitten by fear [of them] dare not hurl [their] most silly words against them any longer.³⁹ When the Lord punished Egypt with terrible plagues in retaliation for the suffering of the people of Israel, he engulfed it with shadows so dense they could be touched; and they [the shadows] lay under the touch of hands, not only by virtue of depriving
 100 men's sight of things seen, but also on account of their thickness. Now whatever is able to be touched and felt necessarily exists. Whatever necessarily exists, it is impossible for it not to be: and thus it is impossible for shadows not to exist because it is necessary that they exist, which is proved from the fact that they are able to be touched.

105 Furthermore, the fact must not be overlooked that when the Lord made the division of all things into light and shadows, he called the light "day" and the shadows "night."⁴⁰ To be sure, if the name of "day" signifies something, the name of "night" cannot fail to signify something. For "day" signifies light. Light is indeed a great something. Do
 110 shadows signify nothing, then, when the term of "night" is impressed upon them by the same maker who impressed the appellation of "day" upon the light? Is divine authority to be annulled? In no way. For it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for divine authority to be dethroned.

115 Indeed, the creator impressed names on the things he made, so that each thing might be known when it is called by its name. According to his inclination, he neither formed a thing without a word, nor fashioned any word unless that for which it was fashioned [already] existed. If it were otherwise, it would seem completely superfluous, and it is impi-

³⁹The text reads "... pauca divina testimonia aggregantes e pluribus, quorum percussi formidine ineptissimas ulterius voces adversus ea jaculari non audeant" (lines 75–77). I have translated "divina testimonia" as "passages from Scripture" because it is clearer than the more literal "few divine testimonies." Similarly, I have translated "quorum" as "such that" in order to clarify the relationship between the "pauca ... pluribus" clause and the subsequent appositive clause.

⁴⁰Gen. 1.5.

120 ous to say that God has done [a superfluous thing].⁴¹ However, if it is
 impious to say that God has fashioned something superfluous, then the
 name which God placed upon the shadows cannot seem in any way to
 be superfluous. But if it is not superfluous, then it is according to a
 method. And if [it is] according to a method, [it is also] necessary, be-
 125 cause [the name] was needed for the purpose of distinguishing the thing
 which is signified by [the name] from [the name itself].⁴² And so it is
 fitting that God fashioned things as well as names, both of which are
 necessary for one another, in accordance with a method.

Likewise the holy prophet David, filled with the Spirit and knowing
 130 that [the word] “shadows” does not resound emptily like a wind,⁴³
 manifestly expresses that they [shadows] are something. For he says,
 “He sent shadows.”⁴⁴ If they [shadows] do not exist, how are they sent?
 That which exists can be sent, and it can be sent to that [place] where it
 is not.⁴⁵ But that which does not exist cannot be sent to any place
 135 whatsoever, since it exists nowhere. Therefore, the shadows are said to
 have been sent because they existed.

Likewise, this [passage]: “He set up the shadows as his hiding
 place.”⁴⁶ Obviously he set up what existed, and he set up the shadows
 which existed a certain way, [namely] as a hiding place.⁴⁷ Likewise,
 140 another [passage]: “Like his shadows.”⁴⁸ Here it is pointed out that they
 [the shadows] are in [his] possession, and through this it is made clear
 that they exist. For everything which is possessed exists. But the shad-
 ows are in [his] possession. Therefore, they exist.

Although these passages suffice—so many and so great [as they
 145 are]—and uphold a most secure fortress against all attacks, from

⁴¹The text reads “... quod Deum fecisse nefas est dici” (line 97–98). In this sentence and the next, I have translated “dici” in the active voice because the passive construction here sounds awkward in English (e.g., “that God be said to have done [such a thing] is impious.”)

⁴²The text reads “Si vero secundum modum, et necessaria, quia eo ad dignoscendam rem opus erat quae per ida significatur” (lines 101–102). I have provided supplementary translations in parentheses for the sake of clarity.

⁴³“like a wind” = “ventosum” (line 105); literally, windy or wind-like.

⁴⁴Ps. 105.28.

⁴⁵In this and the following sentences, I have translated all forms of “esse” as “exist[s]” for the sake of clarity.

⁴⁶Ps. 18.11.

⁴⁷The text reads, “Quod scilicet erat posuit, et quodam modo posuit tenebras quae erant, latibulum suum poneret” (lines 109–111). I have omitted the final subjunctive clause, which seems superfluous.

⁴⁸Ps. 139.12.

whence, by means of an easy retort, they are able to throw back the spears to the spearmen themselves, nevertheless certain [additional passages culled] from the strength of the Gospel ought to be demanded. Therefore, let us set forth the words of the Savior himself: “The sons of the kingdom,” he says, “will be cast into the outer shadows.”⁴⁹ Now, it must be noticed that he calls the shadows “outer.” For “out” [*extra*], from whence the word “outer” [*exterius*] is derived, signifies a place. Thus, when he says “outer” shadows [*exteriores*], he is pointing out that shadows belong to a place. For there would not be “outer” shadows [*exteriores*] unless there were also “inner” shadows [*interiores*]. But for whatever is [outer], it is necessary that it be in a place. That which does not exist is nowhere. Therefore, the outer shadows not only exist, but also belong to a place.

Furthermore, in the passion of the Lord the Evangelist mentions that shadows were made from the sixth hour of the day until the ninth hour. Since they were made, how can they be said to not exist? What has been made cannot be caused to not have been made. Indeed, that which does not always exist, or else never existed, never exists. But shadows are made. For this reason it cannot be brought about that they do not exist.

Likewise [another passage] in the Gospel: “If the light which is in you is shadows, how great these shadows will be!”⁵⁰ I believe that no one doubts [the fact that] quantity is attributed to bodies, which are divided from all [other bodies] through quantity. And quantity is surely accidental to bodies.⁵¹ But accidents are either in a subject or else they are predicated of a subject. Therefore, because it is said “how great these shadows will be,” quantity is shown [to be] in a subject.⁵² Hence it is gathered, by means of a worthy [argument], that shadows not only

⁴⁹Matt. 8.12.

⁵⁰Matt. 6.23.

⁵¹The text reads, “Et quantitas quidem secundum accidens est corporibus” (lines 133–134). The word “accidens,” which I have translated as “accidental,” is a technical term in medieval philosophy. Generally speaking, an accident is (1) any characteristic or property of a thing which is not directly entailed by the definition of what that thing is, or (2) any characteristic, property, or predicate which is non-essential to the being of a thing *qua* that thing.

⁵²This conclusion obviously doesn’t follow, since there is no reason why quality could not be merely predicated of the subject. But Fredegisus wouldn’t have committed such an elementary mistake. My guess is that he neglects to add “or else predicated of a subject” because it is unnecessary for the point he is trying to make, which is simply that accidents (whether essential or not) require a subject.

exist, but also that they are corporeal.

175 And so I have taken pains to write to Your Excellence and Prudence
these few [arguments], gathered from reason and authority together, so
that, adhering fixed and immovably to them, no false opinions will be
able to entice you into straying from the path of truth.⁵³ But if by
chance something that dissents from this reasoning of ours should be
180 produced by anyone, you will, returning to this [letter] as if to a rule, be
able to throw away these foolish machinations on the basis of its pro-
nouncements.

Here Ends [the Letter] "On Shadow"

⁵³The text reads, "... ut eis fixe immobiliterque haerentes, nulla falsa opinione illecti, a veritatis tramite declinare possitis ..." (lines 139–141). A literal translation into English would be extremely awkward; I have therefore rendered "false opinion" as the subject of the sentence in order to avoid confusion.

3. COMMENTARY

Fredegisus's opening remarks, if we are to take them seriously, make it clear that the "question about nothing and shadows" was an important one for the scholars of the Carolingian court, and one with which they grappled in earnest. Since the Carolingians were if nothing else masterful and devoted exegetes, it is likely that the problem first arose within a hermeneutical context—probably in discussions about the proper interpretation of the Hexameron. However, Fredegisus' use of a more or less dialectical method in the first part of the treatise suggests that the problem was taken to have important implications for other areas of inquiry as well.

The crucial issue, according to Fredegisus, is whether "nothing" is a *certain something*, not the truth of the statement "It seems to me that nothing exists" (14–17). For the latter is obviously ambiguous. Taken in one sense, it could mean that no things in particular exist, which is not only false but also self-referentially inconsistent. Taken in another sense, it could mean simply that the word *nihil* exists, which is trivially true. Both interpretations obscure the real issue, which is whether *nihil* signifies something, and, if so, what that might be. Ultimately, Fredegisus wants to argue that "nothing" or "nothingness" is a real, positive entity that exists in the world, and not merely a negative concept which subsists only in the mind.

As we have seen, Fredegisus introduces two lines of argument to support his thesis. The first, which proceeds "by means of reason" (26), begins with the observation that "every finite noun signifies something, as in the cases of 'man,' 'stone,' and 'wood.'" (27–28). From this it follows that *nihil* signifies something, since *nihil* is a finite noun, and every finite noun signifies something. He goes a step further, however by strictly identifying whatever is signified with the noun signifying it. "Every signification," he writes, "is what the thing it signifies is" (34–35). So, since *nihil* signifies an *aliquid*, it follows that *nihil* itself is what the thing it signifies is—namely, an *aliquid* (35–37).

Now, taken by itself, this argument merely shows that *nihil* has to refer to *something*—that is, it must have some sort of determinate reference in order to be a meaningful word—and that *nihil* itself must be the same sort of thing as that which it signifies. Fredegisus himself claims that we cannot know for sure what this *something* is (53–61), but it seems clear that he has in mind something more than a mere concept or abstract object. That this is so is confirmed, he thinks, by the authority

of the church, which teaches “that the divine power created earth, water, air, and fire, along with light, the angels, and the soul of human beings, out of ‘nothing’” (46–48). He does not provide any further details beyond this, but it’s quite possible that he has something a bit more specific in mind—namely, the Platonic idea of preexistent chaos. I will return to this proposal shortly, but first we ought to examine the second part of the treatise, in which Fredegisus employs similar arguments to establish the real existence of shadows.

As in his discussion of *nihil*, Fredegisus begins the section on *tenebrae* with a grammatical argument that calls attention to a sentence from Genesis 1.2: “And the shadows were over the face of the abyss.” Here, *tenebrae* is conjoined with the substantive verb *erant*. Fredegisus points out that this sentence is grammatically identical to other sentences (e.g., “*homo est*”) in which the real existence of the referent of the subject is unquestionable (77–81). This follows immediately from the nature of substantive verbs: “For a substantive verb has in its nature that, to whatever subject it is joined without a negation, it makes evident the being of the thing in question” (81–83). Therefore, since *tenebrae* is a subject joined without negation to the substantive verb *erant*, it is evident that shadows exist “in some way” (84–88). This is more or less the same argument that was used to establish the real existence of *nihil*. The crucial difference is that, whereas the former relied on a strict ontological identification between signifier and signified, this argument relies on the idea that substantive verbs “make evident” the reality of the subject to which they are conjoined without negation.

The remaining series of arguments (91–114, 129–164) evince more or less the same form. Fredegisus produces a number of quotes from Scripture in which various properties and qualities are predicated of the subject *tenebrae*. He then argues that, since such properties and qualities are only properly predicated of real, existing things, it follows that *tenebrae* must be real, existing things. For example:

When the Lord punished Egypt with terrible plagues in retaliation for the suffering of the people of Israel, he engulfed it with shadows so dense they could be touched; and they lay under the touch of hands, not only by virtue of depriving men’s sight of things seen, but also on account of their thickness. Now whatever is able to be touched and felt necessarily exists. Whatever necessarily exists, it is impossible for it not to be: and thus it is impossible for shadows not to exist because it is necessary that they exist, which is proved from the fact that they are able to be touched (96–104).

Far more interesting and original, I think, is the fundamentally essentialist theory of language Fredegisus outlines in lines 115–128. There, he claims that God himself is responsible for ascribing fixed and determinate names to the various things he created, from whence it follows that God “neither formed a thing without a word, nor fashioned any word unless that for which it was fashioned [already] existed” (117–118). If it were otherwise, he says, then God would be guilty of having done something superfluous—viz., creating a name without a real referent. But it is “impious” to suppose that God is capable of doing something superfluous, thus it is surely “impious” to suppose that the word *tenebrae* lacks a real referent. And if God did not act superfluously, then surely he acted “according to a method” (123–124). The “method” in question is simply God’s realizing that something “was needed for the purpose of distinguishing the thing which is signified through [the name] from [the name itself]” (125–126). This “something,” I take it, is the existential relation between signifier and signified to which Fredegisus alludes in his argument about *nihil*.

Admittedly, modern critics have not exhibited a particularly flattering attitude toward Fredegisus or his treatise. Many regard the latter as, at best, a charming joke and, at worse, a gratuitous exercise in sophistry.⁵⁴ While I agree that the arguments of *De Nihil et Tenebris* are crude and unsophisticated, I nonetheless feel that Fredegisus deserves far more credit as a philosopher than he is usually allotted, and that his treatise, far from being “useless,” is actually very important within the history of Western philosophy.

To begin with, it must be noted that Fredegisus’s discussion bears an uncanny resemblance to the analysis of the word *nihil* found in chapter 2 of Augustine’s *De Magistro*.⁵⁵ When Adeodatus suggests that some-

⁵⁴For examples of Fredegisus’s rather poor reception in modern scholarship, see Ahner (n. 12 above) 40; Emil Bréhier, *La philosophie au moyen Age* (Paris 1949); Frederick Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York 1952) 35; Maurice De Wulf, *History of Medieval Philosophy*, 6th ed., trans. Ernest C. Messenger (New York 1952) 1.143–144; Gennaro (n. 12 above) 110, 113; Max Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Munich 1959) 1.460; John Marenbon, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre: Logic, Theology and Philosophy in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1981) 62–64; Ralph McInerney, *A History of Western Philosophy: Philosophy from St. Augustine to Ockham* (Notre Dame 1970) 89–90; Carl Prantl, *Geschichte der Logik im Abendlande* (Gras 1955) 19–20; Jan Rohls, *Wilhelm von Auvergne und der mittelalterliche Aristotelismus*, Münchener Monographien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie 5 (Munich 1980) 111.

⁵⁵PL 32.1193.

thing is a sign (*signum*) only insofar as it signifies something, Augustine replies by asking what is signified by the word “nothing” (*nihil*). Adeodatus’s answer is “What something does *nihil* signify except that which is not?” (*Nihil, quid aliud significat, nisi id quod non est?*), to which Augustine responds “But that which is not can in no way be something. Therefore [*nihil*] is not a sign, because it does not signify something” (*Quod autem non est, nullo modo esse aliquid potest. Quare ... non est signum, quia non significat aliquid*). Ultimately, the point of Augustine’s argument is to demonstrate that Adeodatus’s definition of *signa* is in some sense inadequate—not, as in the case of Fredegisus, to establish that *nihil* is something. Still, the obvious similarities between these two texts suggest that the Carolingian iteration of the problem bears some important relationship to earlier philosophical discussions, which in turn speaks to a greater level of continuity between pre and post-imperial Christian philosophy than is usually presumed.

There is further evidence of such a relationship as well. In the second part of the treatise, Fredegisus argues that shadows, by virtue of being divisible, are receptive of quantity, which, as he rightly points out, is accidentally predicable of bodies (166–173).

That Fredegisus would employ such concepts in his argument is perhaps unsurprising, since Porphyry’s theory of predicables (by way of Boethius’s translation) was a staple of pre-scholastic curricula. What is surprising is the implicit assumption, made both here and earlier (e.g., 23–30), that predicables necessarily correspond to *real* entities. When Fredegisus points out that “every finite name signifies something, as in the cases of ‘man,’ ‘stone,’ and ‘wood’” (27–28), he talks as though the *reality* of the *something* in question was simply taken for granted by grammarians. His failure to provide any further argumentation could certainly be read as a mere indication of his philosophical naiveté. But it could also be understood as evidence that realism about predicables had in some sense become “institutionalized” among Carolingian intellectuals—a fact which, if correct, sheds considerable light on the debates which ensued in subsequent centuries. For, if realism of this sort had come to be regarded as axiomatic within all relevant disciplines of the *trivium* by the eighth century, the anti-realist ideas of later thinkers like Roscelin and Abelard were in actuality far more daring and intrepid than they are usually assumed to have been by many modern scholars.

One final point merits discussion. As I mentioned earlier, Fredegisus seems to have been involved in an extended philosophical controversy with Agobard of Lyons, a record of which is provided in a letter of Agobard's dating from about 830.⁵⁶ The controversy in question seems to have involved certain opinions of Fredegisus on the ontology of human souls. Though Agobard's discussion is horribly vague, Fredegisus appears to have believed that human souls existed prior to the creation of their respective bodies, having been formed from an unknown matter (*incognita material*) in a void (*in vacuo*).⁵⁷

Some authors believe that a similar view is expounded in the *Dicta de Imagine Dei* of Candidus Fuldensis, a contemporary of Fredegisus, which in turn suggests that the view may have been popular among Alcuin's students.⁵⁸ Others have argued that there is a significant parallel between this view and Fredegisus's discussion of *nihil*.⁵⁹ I find both theories highly plausible, but I would go even further. Although the Carolingians did not have many classical philosophical texts at their disposal, they were certainly familiar with and, indeed, highly influenced by Plato's *Timaeus*.⁶⁰ The same no doubt holds true of Fredegisus. This is confirmed, I think, by his belief that souls preexist corporeal substances, a view to which Plato himself subscribed (*Timaeus*, 40d–44d). Now, if Fredegisus accepts *that* particular Platonic doctrine, it seems likely that he would also have been interested in appropriating other doctrines as well. One such doctrine, which is found in *Timaeus* 29d–31b, is the idea that the Demiurge created the world out of a “pre-existent chaos.” I think it is quite possible that this is what Fredegisus has in mind when he talks about the real existence of *nihil*.

Granted, the conspicuous absence of any and all references to Plato or any of his commentators in the *De Nihil* casts considerable doubt on this theory. This might be explained by the fact that rampant hostility toward “pagan learning” was still prevalent in Fredegisus's day, which obviously would have given the author ample cause to avoid making

⁵⁶See n. 11 above.

⁵⁷The source of the controversy is the quote “Anima quando ad corpus pervenit,” which comes from a lost work of Fredegisus. See *ibid.* no. XIV, 168A–169A.

⁵⁸See Marenbon (n. 54 above) 65; for a complete edition of the *Dicta Candidi de Imagine*, see Barthélemy Hauréau, *Histoire de la philosophie scolastique* (Paris 1872) 1.134–137.

⁵⁹See, for example, Ahner (n. 12 above) 50.

⁶⁰See *From Athens to Chartres. Neoplatonism and Medieval Thought: Studies in Honour of Edouard Jeuneau*, ed. Haijo Jan Westra (Leiden 1992).

Plato the focal point of his treatise. In any case, the only real alternative is to conclude, as many scholars have, that the *De Nihil* is simply a silly, amateurish work bearing no real connection to the more sophisticated Neo-Platonism of the eighth and ninth centuries. But if this is so, it seems probable that Fredegisus's other writings were every bit as vapid as the *De Nihil*, which in turn makes me wonder why a distinguished thinker like Agobard would have bothered responding to them at all!

The point is that this work needs to be understood and appreciated in the broadest possible historical context. If we limit ourselves to its content alone, we find nothing but the crude and unpolished work of a sophist. That much cannot be denied. But if we attempt to situate the text within its native intellectual locus, we find something far more valuable—namely, real evidence of sincere, thoughtful, and, ultimately, highly influential philosophical discourse among Carolingian scholars.

Department of Philosophy
University of Pennsylvania
433 Logan Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6304