

A Plotinian Turning Point. Revisiting the Relationship between Gnosticism and Platonism

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Apocalypse of the Alien God. Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism.

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The present volume offers a detailed examination of different aspects of Sethian Gnosticism, as its main written sources portray it, and of its relation to Platonism, especially Plotinus' circle. The book is written in the format of an essay, where the presentation of historical and cultural facts as well as discussion of ideas presented in the ancient sources outweighs scrupulous philological scrutiny and the dissection of philosophical arguments. This style certainly contributes to keep Burns' prose stimulating. The book is neatly organized in seven chapters preceded by an introduction. A brief *Appendix* is included containing a concise examination of the lines that Porphyry devoted to the Gnostic heretics in his *Vita Plotini*. The volume closes with a lengthy *Notes* section, where most of the bibliographical references alluded to in the main text are reported and discussed, an updated *Bibliography* and an *Index* containing the most important notions, namely Ancient sources, philosophers, scholars, figures and movements considered by the author.

In his Introduction, Burns delineates the methodological lines followed in his study and the hypotheses he advocates. Among the former we find his renouncement of the terms "pagan" and "paganism" and his preference for "Hellenes" or "Hellenic" to refer to Greek philosophers. He also points out the inadequateness of the categories "Christianity" and "Judaism" to discuss the religious history of late Antiquity and, specifically, to situate the emergence of Sethianism. The phenomenon seems to have occurred on the borderlines between Judaism and Christianity, and its liminal position explains, according to the author, the parallels and differences with both traditions, which are clarified in the book. Burns asserts that the split between the competing worldviews of "Christian" and "Hellenic" can be situated in the 260's CE, in Rome, in Plotinus' circle of associates and students. This divide, from which point it becomes meaningful to talk of philosophy, also gave rise, according to Burns, to an acute Hellenization of Platonism and to an educational program in the Platonic tradition that specifically excluded Gnostic literature. The limitation of the canon of

Platonism to “Plato, his commentators, and a healthy dose of Aristotle alongside alien authorities already comfortably subdued by Orientalizing Hellenism” (p. 150), as described by Burns in his conclusions, seems to be the main effect that Sethianism had over its pagan philosophical contemporaries. The problem of the “contribution of Sethianism to Greek philosophy” (p. 2) is one of the issues intended to be addressed in the book. However, apart from the earlier mentioned bibliographical closure, the author does not seem to provide additional evidence of significant doctrinal contributions on their part. Regarding the above-mentioned split, we can anticipate one of the suggestions that Burns propounds in the last chapter. He depicts Porphyry as the “catalyst in the explosion of the conflict between Plotinus and the Gnostics” (p. 157) and holds that the disciple “must have advised his teacher that there is more to the study of Platonic philosophy than mysticism, and that the Sethian treatises were replete with philosophical stances that demanded refutation” (p. 158). This view of the matter contributes to portraying a different Plotinus from the one I find in the *Enneads*, who engages in acute refutations of the Stoics and the Atomists, for example, and of astrology. It also depicts a Plotinus at odds with Porphyry’s own account of his master, who, he claims, finally made him change his mind in relation to the location of the intelligibles and caused him to abandon a doctrine learned with his previous teacher. We could add that Burns also seems to project upon Plotinus a conception of mysticism alien to the text of the *Enneads*. In my view, it is precisely Plotinus’ mystical reading of the Greek tradition, which must be understood as allegorical hermeneusis, that distances him from the Sethian Gnostics, who, according to Burns, advanced literal interpretations and preferred non-allegorical storytelling. The discrepancy is very interestingly discussed in the third chapter of the book.

The different sections of the volume are judiciously organized and evince a well-ordered plan which helps the reader to follow the argument. The inquiry begins with a contextual discussion of the cultural environment in which Sethian literature was circulated, delves into the closer circle of Plotinus with which the Sethian Gnostics seem to have interacted directly, and examines the main tenets of the soteriology, cosmogony, cosmology and eschatology propounded in the Sethian apocalypses. The first chapter addresses the relationship between Gnosticism and contemporary Greek education. According to Burns, the Platonizing treatises show that the Gnostics must have spent considerable time among various philosophical sects and, particularly, those of the Platonists. However, he argues that the social and philosophical movement with which the Gnostics interacted, known as the “Second Sophistic”, which included a common training in basic schooling, rhetorical training, religious life and deep involvement in the civic sphere, strongly contrasts with

Gnostic thought. Even though the Gnostics also shared an Orientalizing tendency with contemporary philosophers, Burns adds, the Sethians inverted the Hellenophile hierarchy which situated Plato over and above alien “Oriental” authorities, which orientalized themselves in order to polemicize and rebel against the cultural environment of the Second Sophistic and its prominent Hellenic philosophical figures.

The second chapter turns to Plotinus’ anti-Gnostic polemics in *Ennead* 11.9 and purports to show that he was not only concerned with his opponents’ construction of revelatory authority and cultic identity, but also with their specific ideas about cosmology, soteriology and eschatology. The main issue raised in the chapter is Plotinus’ disagreement with the Gnostics in relation to the composition of Soul, its relationship to time and matter, and the logistics of its creative activity: “The(ir) most significant departure concerns the World-Soul and its demiurgic function, from which follow a number of un-Hellenic doctrines, included a cosmos created by an evil demiurge who wishes to destroy it, and which is engineered by malevolent stellar deities” (p. 44). The chapter ends with a summary of the evidence regarding Plotinus’ Christian friends whose four distinctive features Burns identifies as follows: they did not participate in public life; they did not identify themselves as Hellenes; their texts were revelatory validated by their ancient, Oriental, authority and not by arguments; they did claim for themselves a philosophical *haíresis*, to which they attributed a priority over the Greek schools. Burns stresses, furthermore, that in the Plotinus-Gnostic controversy what was at stake was the definition of philosophy itself: its engagement to public life, civic cult, Hellenic nationalism and the provenance of the Greek intellectual tradition. Consonance with, or alienation from, these aspects of life were the two opposite positions defended respectively by Plotinus and his Gnostics “friends.”

The next section provides a compelling analysis of the different ways of reading and writing prized respectively by Neoplatonists philosophers and their Gnostic counterparts. The Sethian Platonizing treatises are properly introduced in that section, including a discussion about the use that these texts make of Platonic terminology related to imagery. Three of these four treatises, as Burns points out, are apocalypses: *Marsanes*, *Allogenes* and *Zostrianos*. As such, they belong to a genre whose stock motifs pertain, not only pertain to the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literary tradition, but also rely on rhetoric and claims to authority alien to Plotinus. The Gnostic revelations, featuring the ascent of a seer to discover the secrets of the intelligible cosmos, are stories that demand to be read literally because they are presented as “a perfect image of reality transmitted by the unknown, alien God to the seer” (p. 49). The apocalyptic genre, therefore, is a kind of revelatory literature with a narrative

framework mediated by an otherworldly being, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world. Pseudo-epigraphy has been suggested to be the chief device used to reinforce the authority of the apocalypses but, as Burns remarks, this tactic must not have been used as an apologetic appeal to readers steeped in the Second Sophistic or Neopythagoreanism. Rather than appealing to Hellenes, the pseudo-epigraphic move indicates, according to Burns, that “we are dealing with specifically Judeo-Christian, in-house literature” (p. 76). These treatises, though they adapt Platonic language and imagery, transgress contemporary Platonism in several ways. Apart from their insistence on a literal, non-allegorical, way of reading, the revelatory passages present in them violate Platonic doctrines of God’s eternity and immutability, since any action of God in history would imply a change in the divine nature, a view that no Neoplatonic thinker would accept.

In chapters four and five Burns adopts two categories coined by Turner to catalogue the Sethian treatises: “descent” and “ascent”. Though he considers this distinction “unhelpful” regarding the treatises (p. 78), he seems to find it a good tool to differentiate the apocalyptic, historical aspects from the contemplative ones contained in the texts. In the first of these chapters, Burns examines the centrality of the character of Seth, who is presented as descending to earth throughout history to intervene on behalf of the elect and discusses their identity. This leads him to analyse the language of ethnicity present in the treatises regarding the “race” or “seed” of Seth and deals with Plotinus’ objections to the selective and, according to the Neoplatonist, contradictory ideas about divine providence. In my view, the central problem raised by Plotinus and followed by some scholars, as the author indicates, remains unsolved in this chapter. Though Burns makes explicit reference to the position that interprets Gnostic soteriology as deterministic, the textual evidence and arguments that he provides to demonstrate its universality, as he prefers to understand it, are not conclusive. For example, in order to undermine the deterministic interpretation, one of the main points he adduces is that the “membership in the Sethian elect was not biologically determined” (p. 89). However, if the elects are aliens on the grounds of the singular nature of their soul, the rejection of biological determinism does not seem to solve the problem at all. Moreover, the way in which the author himself explains the Gnostic use of ethnic language seems at odds with a universalistic interpretation. Consider, for instance, the following two passages: “The Sethian texts describe their in-group and its teaching not simply as superior to other races or nations but as “elect”, “saved”, in contrast to souls that will be destroyed.... [T]hey regarded themselves as something much

more—“the living, the Seed of the holy Seth!” (p. 88) and “In the Sethian texts, the cosmic Seth and his seed exist in the intelligible realm prior to the material world but are manifested in humanity through the revelations and preaching of seers [...]” (p. 87).

The fifth chapter, “Ascent”, discusses in greater detail the issue of the different categories of souls and their post-mortem fate as well as the fate of the cosmos. In this section the author deals with personal and cosmic eschatology, mainly as it is presented in the *Zostrianos*. As the Platonizing Gnostic treatises conceive the cosmos as having a temporal beginning and an end, a theory consistent with a literal interpretation of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the issue of the salvation of souls appears of great importance: “cosmic eschatology has ramifications for personal eschatology” Burns asserts (p. 106). The problem previously mentioned of the (not) determined nature of this salvation, however, remains unsettled. In his conclusion to the chapter Burns summarizes his position: “The Sethian identification of the self-begotten elect as (perfect) individuals unified by providence (the Barbelo) assigns them a position where only individuals who have chosen to join the *ethnically circumscribed elect*, rather than all individuals, are saved”. In what way, I wonder, is the unification by providence compatible with free choice (of being providentially unified)?

The following section deals, in the first place, with the claim of scholars who suggest that Sethian literature exhibit an engagement with the Neoplatonic tradition regarding ritual practice. Burns considers that Sethian ritual practices, such as celestial baptism, ecstatic speech, prayer and alphabetic mysticism do not merit the term “theurgy” and his discussion of the issue enables him to review other Plotinian objections to the Gnostics. Regarding ecstatic speech, for example, in conjunction to alphabetic mysticism, which were claimed to exert power over the gods, Burns recalls Plotinus’ denial of the possibility that the incorporeals are affected by sounds, a pitfall that appears not to have bothered the Gnostics. The other ritual practice that seems to violate the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being is the liturgical transformation of the self: “Sethian divinization, says Burns, turns the Platonic cosmos on its head, identifying certain human souls as superior to all but the Invisible Spirit itself” (p. 113). This aspect of Sethian ritualism, albeit contrary to Neoplatonic thought, made me hopeful of finding an answer to the dilemma of (non) deterministic salvation discussed earlier. Can salvation be interpreted as the result of angelification? If so, the Platonizing Sethian treatises might precisely be the doorway to salvation insofar as they are conceived to have been “manuals intended to teach individuals how to elicit visionary experiences culminating in contact with the Godhead” (p. 136). Burns almost seems to go in this direction when he asserts that “the quality of being saved was tantamount to transformation into

an angelic being" (p. 132). My hopes, however, quickly evaporated when Burns asserted that *Zostrianos* and the *Trimorphic Pretennoia* "explicitly describe the transformation of the elect into angels" (p. 131) or that "elect humanity ... are foreigners on this planet but fundamentally at home when approaching the unknown, alien God" (p. 139). These statements seem to place the causal priority on the fact of being elect, which implies salvation, rather than on the process of angelification or of approaching God.

The last chapter summarizes the conclusions arrived at in the different sections and expands on the parallels between Sethian Gnostics and other traditions. The author firstly points out several parallels between Gnostic literature and Jewish mystical treatises. In addition to the common well of Jewish mythologoumena, he mentions the persistent language of power to characterize interactions between heavenly and earthly beings, descriptions of crowns in heaven, the culmination of visionary ascent in the joining of the heavenly liturgy, the angelification of the seer, ideas about storytelling, elect soteriology, among others. Burns also suggests a number of correspondences and parallels between Sethian literature and Manichaeism: environments of baptismal communities, encratism, deep interest in Jewish lore, belief in reincarnation and a veneration of Jesus as one of many incarnations of the savior. These similarities are interpreted by Burns as a common background between these religious groups rather than indicative of a direct genetic relationship. He also refers to the problem of elucidating the connection between Sethianism and Christianity. Against Turner's interpretation of the absence of the figure of Jesus Christ in the Platonizing treatises, Burns rejects the possibility of a pagan provenance of the texts or of a Gnostic attempt to Hellenize its literature and to exclude Jewish or Christian themes. On the contrary, he understands the problem as resulting from the way in which scholars have tried to adapt this early moment of Christian history to modern categories. Sethianism emerged, he claims, "from the borderlines between Judaism and Christianity" (p. 146), and the treatises were written for an audience "familiar with and receptive to Judeo-Christian ideas and themes and could have hardly served in an attempt to appeal to Hellenes" (147). He finally provides a provisional narrative consistent with the evidence he examined about the Sethian tradition by situating its emergence in an Elchasaite environment, around the beginning of the second century CE. Sethian books, he suggests, were brought from Apamea to Rome by Alcibiades in the 220s. A few decades later, Sethian literature would be read and questioned in Plotinus' circle (p. 156).

As a Plotinian scholar, I have found Burns book very stimulating and compelling regarding Sethian Gnostic literature. His whole argument is easy to follow and his main theses related to the location of Sethian tradition and the

catalyzing effect it had on the fixing and closing of the Platonic tradition are well supported. I found this second proposal very illuminating in relation to the history of Platonism, especially regarding the different attitudes that late Antique Platonists had towards the literature of alien, non-Hellenic, provenance. Burns' discussion of the distinct nature of Neoplatonic theurgy and Gnostic ritual practice is lucid and has allowed me to understand better both phenomena and their relationship. Furthermore, although some of the questions that concern me most regarding Plotinus' thought and his objections to Gnostic philosophy have not received an unequivocal answer, Burns' book has allowed me to appreciate several aspects of these issues that I had not noticed before. Finally, *Apocalypse of the Alien God* has kindled my interest in a challenging and profound field of study.

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