Book Reviews


Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* (VP 16) tell us that in Plotinus’ Roman seminar sometime during the years 263-268 CE there were sectarians who circulated certain apocalypses by Zoroaster and Zostrianos and Nicotheos and Allogenes and Messos, at least two of which are extant in the fourth-century Nag Hammadi Coptic papyri (the Sethian Platonizing treatises *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*), and that *Zostrianos* in particular was scrupulously critiqued by Plotinus, Amelius and often by himself (*Zostrianos* identifies itself also as “words of Zoroaster”). The record of Plotinus’ own debates with the proponents of these treatises is contained in his so-called anti-Gnostic *Großschrift*, whose last treatise, 33, contains Plotinus’ most explicit antignostic critique, several of whose details are clearly directed at *Zostrianos*. Indeed, in II 9.10.19-33 Plotinus actually cites about eleven lines from *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII 9.17-10.20).

In *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, Jean-Marc Narbonne’s presents “a new paradigm for understanding Plotinus’ thought” in the form of a collection of six essays (the fourth and sixth previously unpublished), which challenges widespread assumptions in Plotinian research. The basic thesis is that Plotinus’ anti-Gnostic campaign was not confined to treatises 30-33 (the *Großschrift*), but was the main challenge of his entire Roman career. Narbonne rightly observes that the Gnostics, especially Platonizing Sethians, were activist contemplatives continually in competition with Plotinus, interpreting the same Platonic texts, and spreading a doctrine of salvation that competed with Plotinus’ own, provoking Plotinus’ protest that they “falsified” Plato.

Identifying the Alexandrian teachers who disappointed Plotinus (VP 3) with certain Gnostics (1-2), Narbonne hypothesizes an ongoing dialogue between

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1) Narbonne does not enter the debate concerning the appropriateness of the typological category “Gnosticism” as applying to Plotinus’ opponents. The misleading character of this category was first raised by M. A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), followed by
Plotinus and the Gnostics, consisting not just as of a perfunctory refutation in the so-called *Großschrift*, but career-long anti-Gnostic *Großzyklus* embracing many treatises, perhaps beginning as early as 246 CE in treatise 6 (IV, 8). Although his debate with the Gnostics came to a head in 263-268 CE in treatise 33 (II, 9), its groundwork was previously laid in treatises 27-29 (IV, 3-5)—themselves closely related to treatises 31 and 32—but then continued after treatise 33 in treatises 34 and 38 (VI, 6-7), with further echoes in his latest treatises (47, 48, 51 = III, 2-5) of his latest period.

Studies 1 (“The Controversy over the Generation of Matter in Plotinus: the Riddle Resolved?”) and 3 (“A Doctrinal Evolution in Plotinus? The Weakness of the Soul in its Relation to Evil”) center on the role of the soul (universal and partial) and matter in the origin and cause of evil. The apparent inconsistencies between treatises 33 (II, 9) and 51 (I, 8) on the issue of matter become coherent if one takes into account the “Gnostic” factor. In Treatise 51 Plotinus’ theory that matter is the primary evil, it—not any inherent weakness of the soul—is the cause—not the result—of the soul’s decline, weakness, and vices, is aimed at Gnostic thinkers who derived evil from a fallen cosmic soul or equivalent (e.g., the Sophia of the *Apocryphon of John* or of second generation Valentinians). For Plotinus, evil is exterior to the soul; as treatise 33 makes clear, if it derived from soul, then it would have to have derived from the higher principles that gave rise to soul. Nor can matter as the cause of evil have derived from soul. Treatise 33 neither explains how the activity of souls relates to the activity of matter, nor the precise activity of matter in the sensible world: “It is essentially … in Treatise 51 that we learn how the previous existence of matter is sufficient to cause the soul’s fall, that this fall corresponds to its weakness, and that both would be absent without the active machinations of matter” (93). For Narbonne, both grammatical and historical considerations suggest that the notorious sentence at the end of Treatise 51, “the soul itself would have generated matter,” is actually citing a Gnostic (actually, a nearly exclusively Valentinian) position. Matter for Plotinus is not produced by the soul (a thesis first attributed to Plotinus by Ficino), but is already there to lead the soul astray. It is self-derived by its own falling away or escape (*ἐκπίπτειν, ἐκπτωτική, ἀπόστασις, φεύγειν*) from the intelligible realm. All that is produced by the (partial) soul is the place of embodiment, whose relative

darkness is merely the extremity of the soul’s luminescence. Indeed, the evil and indefiniteness of matter “is limited by the bonds of the Good that encircle it from the outside”; rather than producing matter, the higher principles “in fact capture it and fasten it down, so as to limit its harmful influence” (91). Narbonne rightly observes that Plotinus disagreed with the “Gnostics” on the goodness of all the divine and of the world.

Study 2 deals with “The Riddle of the Partly Undescended Soul, The Gnostic/Hermetic Path of the ὁμοούσιος.” In Treatises 6 and 8 (IV, 8 and 9), the former of which Narbonne would characterize as Plotinus’ first antignostic manifesto, Plotinus’ insistence that all souls have one and the same essence (homoousios) which is equally shared with their originating principle is in fact a strategic move against Gnostic exclusivism. Plotinus’ theory of the partly undescended soul is plausibly seen by Narbonne as a reaction to the “Gnostic” idea that some souls, namely those of the spiritually enlightened, are consubstantial with the divine, thus guaranteeing their post-mortem return to their divine origin. For Plotinus, on the contrary, such persons were incredibly arrogant; rather, contrary to “the opinion of others,” namely Gnostics, the highest part of each and every human soul never loses its contact with the divine and can always return to its ἀρχαία φύσις (VI, 9.8.14), since the soul is never entirely “dragged down.” It is partially on this basis that at the beginning of treatise 6 [IV, 8] Plotinus can speak of the goal of the contemplative ascent as becoming God, suggesting that “Plotinian mysticism . . . might be described as an intellectualized heir to Gnostic and Hermetic mysticism” (73).

Study 4, “A New Sign of the Impact of the Quarrel against the Gnostics on Plotinus’ Thought: Two Modes of Reascent in 9 (V 9) and 38 (VI 7)” turns from concern with the descent of the soul to its reascent to the One. In Treatise 9 (VI, 9.11.51), the notion of the solitary (φυγὴ μόνου πρὸς μόνον, an expression perhaps borrowed from Numenius) ascent of the soul, so that the soul “becomes a god” or rather “is a god,” seems to be moderated in Treatise 38 (VI, 7), where the soul is no longer alone, but it is accompanied by or borne above Intellect. This subtle shift, according to Narbonne, is due to the fact that Plotinus realized that his former position was dangerously close to what he perceived as the Gnostic view that by ascending to the supreme Principle one comes to occupy a position immediately subjacent to God, the Gnostic believes himself able to abandon the Intellect, and therefore must hold himself to be superior to it (II, 9.9.48-52) and indeed to the celestial Gods themselves. Such “elevation of human souls over the world soul and the astral bodies, and over the Intellect itself, all of which are in fact superior to the individual soul, led him to correct his doctrine . . . in such a way as to show that the ascent of the soul firstly in fact depended on the ascent of the Intellect itself” (113-14).
Study 5, “A New Type of Causality: Plotinian Contemplative Demiurgy,” takes up with Plotinus’ theory of natural production through contemplation. In apparently contradiction to Plato’s (Timaeus 30b; 34a) view that the Demiurge created the universe through reasoning, Plotinus flatly declared that it was not produced contingent upon the result of any process of calculative reasoning (διάνοια or λογισμός, III, 2.3.4; II, 9.2, 4, 8, etc.), but necessarily as the product of natural contemplation (θεωρία, especially III, 8), a declaration evidently in opposition the Gnostics, who viewed the world as the byproduct of the failed contemplation of an ignorant demiurge, and misinterpreted the Timaeus (esp. 39e7-9) by hypothesizing an unnecessary multiplication of hypostases (e.g., multiple intellects, one contemplated, another contemplated, and one that deliberates, such as in the Kalyptos, Protophanes, and Autogenes levels of the Sethian Aeon of Barbelo).

Study 6, “New Reflections on God as Causa sui in Plotinus and its possible Gnostic Sources,” deals with Plotinus’ remarkable new theory, expressed in treatise 39 (IV, 8) but almost nowhere else, that creation is an expression of the free will of the One, in which the One appears virtually as a personal God. In the notorious concluding chapter of its first section, Plotinus lashes out against an “audacious” argument: “Unless some rash statement starting from a different way of thinking says that since (the nature of the Good) happens to be as it is and does not have the mastery of what it is, and is what it is not from itself, it would not have freedom, and its doing or not doing what it is necessitated to do or not to do is not in its power” (VI, 8.7.11-15). Narbonne argues that Plotinus’ audacious statement is actually a citation of the view of certain Gnostics, mainly Christian Valentinians2—that divine sovereignty is exhibited by God’s free will to create reality just as and whenever he chooses—as an alternative to the blind impersonal necessitatism of Plotinus’ emanative scheme. Plotinus goes on to argue that the reason for the being of the One is neither necessity nor chance, but its own freedom: the One exists because it is free self-productive activity,3 thus somewhat ironically arguing against the Gnostics using their own conceptuality. Whatever already possesses the good wishes only itself; since being and willing coincide, being coincides with the Good itself. In a certain sense the Good creates itself, all

2) E.g., Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I.1; Hippolytus, Ref. VI.24; Tri. Trac. 55,34-56,3; 60,3-16; cf. Corpus Hsr. X.1.
3) E.g., Tripartite Tractate 56,1-6: “It is in the proper sense that he begets himself as ineffable, since he alone is self-begotten, since he conceives of himself, and since he knows himself as he is” (NHC I); Zostrianos 74,20: “The ineffable, unnamable one—it is from himself that he [truly] exists, resting himself [in] in his perfection.” Corpus Hermeticum IV.10: “The monad, because it is principle and root of all things, is in them all as root and principle. Without a principle there is nothing, and a principle comes from nothing except itself if it is the principle of other things.”
the more because the Good, in and through itself, wants to be what it is. While other beings may participate in the Good, the Good contains in itself the choice and the will for its own being, which is self-productive activity (VI, 8.13).

Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics is very solid and well documented, with numerous citations of primary and secondary sources. It appears in a relatively recent series that has already contributed important insights to the study of Platonism. The author is a recognized specialist in Plotinian studies who has clearly mastered the text of a difficult and often ambiguous ancient thinker, and his work stands at the very cutting edge of recent—sometimes controversial—discussions on Plotinus’ thought, which in view of the present reviewer will greatly alter our estimation not only of Plotinus but also of the Gnostics themselves as profoundly original and challenging thinkers. As a work translated from the original French, it is lucid and very readable by scholars and educated laypersons who have some familiarity with Plotinus’ thought, since all the sources discussed appear in English translation.4

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4) The text of Plotinus mostly follows Armstrong's LoebLibrary translation with occasional modifications, while citations of Gnostic sources are taken mostly from the 1988 revised edition of The Nag Hammadi Library in English rather than the more recent 2007 edition Nag Hammadi Scriptures: the International Edition. There are also a number of typos and translation mistakes partly because the original language of these essays was in French rather than English.