DID PLOTINUS “FRIENDS” STILL GO TO CHURCH?
COMMUNAL RITUALS AND ASCENT APOCALYPTES

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Inconvenient issues still very much haunt the cluster of texts that today are often classified as “Sethian.” There are the very well-known and fundamental questions of precisely how one establishes this cluster in the first place (i.e., which sources should be included and which excluded) and, once delineated, whether such a cluster is evidence for a significant degree of underlying social-historical continuity (e.g., a sect going through evolution) or instead something more in the direction of a looser network of literary borrowing and revising of mythemes.

One specific topic integral to these basic questions has always been the issue of ritual. Language that is obviously, or sometimes at least arguably, related to ritual appears in several of the texts most commonly classified as “Sethian”: baptism(s) of some sort; “five seals” (possibly a term for baptism(s)); robing or investiture; crowning; doxologies that seem to reflect communal worship; stories about ascents to transcendental realms or states of consciousness that have been seen as models for meditation rituals, etc. Modern scholars debate whether some of this language implies actual physical actions (e.g., water baptism, literal robing and crowning), or rather in some cases alludes only to non-physical, spiritualized rituals (e.g., imagined as “celestial” experiences in meditative exercises).

There are several very learned studies surveying the topic of “Sethian” ritual at considerable length, and in this article I do not present still another full-scale analysis of all the texts and angles involved. Instead, my goal is far more modest. I shall focus primarily on one interesting but troublesome question about “Sethian” ritual—i.e., what is the relationship of language about baptism in some of these texts to depictions of visionary ascents?

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1 Or, as some today prefer, the “Gnostic school of thought”; see most recently Brakke 2010, who in general follows Layton 1995, 334–350.

More specifically, do the striking portrayals of ascent in texts such as Zostrianos or Allogenes represent a new salvation ritual that has replaced an earlier communal baptism?

There are two historical “moments” of particular relevance for the question under discussion here. The first “moment” is certainly one that has received a lot of attention from researchers, and yet I believe that it holds implications for this discussion that have not yet been fully explored. This “moment” is the dispute between Plotinus and certain “friends,”

3 attested most explicitly in Ennead 2.9, but also famously referred to by his student Porphyry in the latter’s Life of Plotinus, chapter 16.4 Because Porphyry asserts that writings possessed by these criticized acquaintances included apocryphes of “Zostrianos” and “Allogenes,” the two tractates among the Nag Hammadi texts bearing these titles have naturally received much attention in research on Plotinus’s famous complaints against his friends’ teachings.

As a result, some scholars now see in the episode involving Plotinus and “friends” a contributing witness to a significant transition in “Sethian” ritual. Whereas writings such as the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit (NHC III,2 and IV,2; a.k.a. Gospel of the Egyptians) are viewed as possible evidence for an initiatory water baptism in Sethian communities, tractates such as Zostrianos (NHC VIII,1) are seen by some as evidence of a later evolution

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3 In Ennead 2.9.10.1–6, Plotinus mentions that the teachings he is criticizing command a following among some of his “friends” (φίλοι) for whom he still holds a “certain respect” (αἰδώς τις); that these persons had taken up these doctrines prior to becoming his “friends,” and that they remained in this persuasion even now. See, e.g., Edwards 1989, 228–232, who argues that the αἰδώς language here echoes Plato, Republic 595b–c, and Aristotle’s imitation of that passage in Nicomachean Ethics 1.6.1. Porphyry, Life of Plotinus 16, mentions an “Adelphius and Aquilinus” as persons affiliated with the teachings that Plotinus criticizes in Ennead 2.9. Eunapius (Live of the Sophists, Boissonade, 457) refers to an “Aquilinus” as one of Porphyry’s fellow students under Plotinus, but Edwards believes this ought to be corrected: “Aquilinus” was indeed among the “friends” for whom Plotinus still held some regard, but because they had been former fellow students in Alexandria under Ammonius Saccas. “Plotinus’ allusion to Plato and Aristotle is an elegant device which enables him to evade the claims of friendship in the name of a tradition whose greatest masters had been distinguished by their urbane but steadfast resistance to the august proponents of error” (231–232). Tardieu 1992, 518–519, on the other hand, suggests that Adelphius and Aquilinus must have been, like Porphyry, disciples of Plotinus, and possibly even before Porphyry came to Rome. Two important recent dissertations side with something like Edwards’s position on the Alexandrian context for the original “friendship”: Mazur 2010, 291–323; and Burns 2011, 82–83.

4 Porphyry places Ennead 2.9 as number 33 chronologically, and it is well known that it is part of a longer argument spanning Ennead 3.8, 5.8, and 5.5. The whole of this larger writing is important for analysis of the philosophical engagement of Plotinus with the criticized teachings, but it is in Ennead 2.9 that one finds the specific evidence most relevant to my topic here.