EMISSARIES OF TRUTH AND JUSTICE:
THE SEED OF SETH AS AGENTS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

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Scholars usually describe Sethian Christians as people who sought to sever ties with society because of their world-rejecting ethos. Giovanni Filoramo, for example, concludes that “to define oneself as the ‘seed of Seth’, ‘the unwavering race’, ‘the race that knows no sovereign’, earthly or heavenly, implied, at least, theoretically, a group that was more rigid and compact internally, in total retreat from the surrounding world.” For Filoramo, the Sethians not only demonstrated their retreat from the world doctrinally, in their denigration of the creator and allegedly pessimistic attitude toward the cosmos, but also enacted it socially in their community organization and relationships with outsiders; he contrasts “the more ambiguous, flexible encounter of the Valentinians with the world” with the Sethians’ “rigid, intolerant, exclusive conception of salvation typical of the average Gnostic conventicle, which was closed to the world.”

Such generic formulations about Gnostics maintain that their anti-cosmic attitude was rooted in the belief that the world was created by divine beings (angels, demons, heavenly rulers, etc.) other than the true God, and

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1 I will speak of Sethian Christians (or simply Sethians) since I think the term Gnostic is too ambiguous to be used as a helpful label for only one group of Christians. Although some scholars have attempted to define the Gnostics as a single ancient “school of thought” (e.g., Bentley Layton, Alastair Logan, David Brakke), I believe that it is still better to avoid the term if for no other reason than the fact that its conventional modern usage refers to a much larger variety of religious movements and therefore too easily obscures which groups and texts are meant. And since a variety of ancient Christians other than those more narrowly defined as “the Gnostic school of thought” by Layton et al. used the term Gnostic as a self-descriptor, it remains problematic for modern scholars to retain the term in reference to only one group. Besides, so many misleading clichés have been associated with the term Gnostic for so long that it is productive to use other labels. The potential hermeneutical benefits of replacing old labels with new ones should be clear to readers familiar with recent trends in New Testament studies, where many researchers now prefer to speak of Jesus’ early followers as members of “the Jesus movement” rather than as Christians. The new term helps free the people and texts under view from misleading and anachronistic conceptions.

that these malicious creators ensnare people into their illusory creation and afflict them with anguish throughout a meaningless life that leads nowhere but death. Although the souls of the Gnostics fell into this cesspool of a life through a cosmic tragedy, they have come, by divine revelation, to know the truth about themselves and the world; they take comfort in the fact that they alone among humanity are saved by their unique nature. Thus they feel alienated from the world and seek to remove themselves from it, looking forward to the day when their escape will be complete.  

Yet this picture of an exclusive cult “in total retreat from the surrounding world” does not fit with the evidence we have for some of the Sethians’ this-worldly activities and social concerns in third-century Rome. As Rudolph correctly observes, Sethians practiced a kind of “city religion” by living, teaching, and proselytizing in major urban centers of the Roman empire. In fact some Sethians appear to have sought out relationships with the uninitiated from both ends of the social spectrum; they made friends with esteemed philosophers such as Plotinus on the one hand, and preached to the very poorest of people (τοὺς φαυλότατους) on the other. As a number of scholars have observed, Plotinus’ Sethian friends even carried on a sort of healing ministry among the sick in Rome which, far from teaching them to hate their bodies, sought to cure them from diseases. That is, physical, bodily health was something valued by these Sethian evangelists.

The same Sethians appear very concerned—in fact too concerned in Plotinus’ opinion—about real issues of social justice as well, including economic disparity, power relations between haves and have-nots, and the unfair treatment of criminals. Plotinus insinuates that they object “to wealth and poverty, and the fact that everyone does not have an equal share in such things,” that “those who have acquired more have an advantage” and that “those in power have an advantage over private persons.” Furthermore,

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3 Jonas 1963, 42–47.
4 Rudolph 1984, 291.
5 Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.9 [33] 10.3–4; 18.17; 5.9. I follow the Greek text in Henry and Schwyzter 1964, vol. 1. Thanks to Porphyry’s detailed explanation of when Plotinus wrote his various treatises (*Vit. Plot.* 4–6), we can securely date *Enn.* 2.9 to around 263–268 CE. As far as we know, Plotinus wrote it in the city of Rome where he lectured regularly. For a chronological arrangement of Plotinus’ compositions, see the helpful table in Armstrong 1966, xxxvii. For a brief overview of Plotinus’ life and works, see Wallis 1995, 37–47.
7 *Enn.* 2.9 [33] 9.1–5.