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.*

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 renunciation 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 260s CE, in Rome, in Plotinus’ circle of associates and students. This divide, from which point it becomes meaningful to talk of Christian 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 contem-
poraries. 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 sug-
gestions 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 incisive 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 hermeneutics, that
distances him from the Sethian Gnostics, who, according to Burns, advanced lit-
eral 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 rela-
tionship 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 move-
ment with which the Gnostics interacted, known as the “Second Sophistic”,
which included a common training in basic schooling, rhetorical training, reli-
gious life and deep involvement in the civic sphere, strongly contrasts with