

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 world-views 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 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 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 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