Nicola Denzey Lewis


Even the most casual reader of religious literature in the Roman Empire, particularly works today dubbed “Gnostic” and “Hermetic,” detects that these texts suppose our present cosmos to be administrated by beings dwelling with the stars and planets who might not have our best interests at heart. Through “necessity,” “fate,” or even “providence,” these rulers of ambiguous mores run the show down here — but there is a way out from under their collective thumb, if only the reader takes care and hearkens to the message the text has to offer. Nicola Denzey Lewis (henceforth “DL”) here offers a desperately needed survey and diagnostic of this material, together with an antidote for the scattered but pervasive scholarship which has hitherto misunderstood it. Particularly influential was Hans Jonas, who painted the Gnostics as the ancient counterparts of modern nihilistic and existential thought (pp. 13–15). Historians of Roman religion and philosophy famously characterized late ancient religious life as a series of pathological responses to “existential oppression in the third-century Empire,” expressed in the language of astral fatalism or determinism (pp. 15–22). DL rightly observes that the metaphor in question — “enslavement to fate” — is much more specific, and hardly characteristic of any Zeitgeist, but rather “derives from those individuals in closely bound groups who . . . came to consider themselves outside the prevailing socio-religious system or ethos” (p. 28). This “rhetoric of cosmic enslavement” is a “part of a discourse of alterity, distinguishing one group from another” (p. 8). It must have been particularly compelling to Christian converts of the second century facing stigma from their contemporaries and so wished “to re-evaluate (and hence devalue) the forces which they believed influenced the behavior of those outside their religious community” (p. 190).
A chief virtue of the book is its demonstration that such rhetoric was hardly unique to or even characteristic of Gnostic literature in particular, instead being widespread in the early Roman Empire, particularly amongst Christian groups seeking to marginalize their competitors. Rather, “orthodox” Fathers like Athenagoras and Tatian drew upon contemporary Middle Platonic distinctions between *pronoia* and *heimarmenē* (Greek; “providence” and “fate”) thus participating in “the same streams of cosmological theorizing as other Christians whom modern scholars have labeled ‘Gnostic’” (p. 36). Indeed, Gnostic myths like the *Apocryphon of John* and *On the Origin of the World* also agree with the Platonists in distinguishing between various sorts of *pronoia* in order to describe manifestations of God’s plan for the cosmos. In these texts, *pronoia* describes not just God’s production of the aeonic cosmos or the gift of humanity’s innate ability to know God, but also human enslavement to the archons, whether through the introduction of sexuality or the planets’ role in constructing the (psychic) human body (pp. 37–50). Conversely, “cosmic pessimism within second to fourth-century Christianity … finds its root not just in prevailing Graeco-Roman conceptions of a malevolent cosmos, but also in later exegeses of the Pauline corpus” (p. 53). D.L. unearths classic passages in the Pauline corpus adduced in studies of Gnosticism and Paul, such as Galatians 4.8 and Colossians 2.8 (regarding astral fatalism and cosmic conflict), or 1 Corinthians 2.12–2.13 (regarding the psychic and pneumatic bodies), showing how they inspired a number of famous Gnostic ruminations on cosmic enslavement and liberation (see especially pp. 65, 72–73, 75, 77). Paul thus constitutes “what may be the earliest Christian rhetoric of escape from fate” (p. 83).

The clichés of Gnostic “determinism” and “enslavement to fate” are also dispelled by a close reading of the texts. *ApJn* is not a “pessimistic” or “deterministic” treatise, since its discussion of the “counterfeit spirit” “suggests that people can still exercise the power of making choices, whether bad or good” (p. 97). Meanwhile, *OrgWorld* describes *heimarmenē* as a tool of cosmic enslavement, but not a permanent or even overwhelming one; rather, its existence is “necessary” (p. 98). We thus find in these treatises a kind of “soft determinism” typical of second-century Christian literature (p. 100). Meanwhile, “at no point … does the rhetoric of ‘enslaving fate’ exist within the context of people themselves to be enslaved” in this literature (p. 101). A chapter on this language in the formidable Hermetic corpus offers a particularly useful survey of the various and conflicting ways in which the Hermetica levies the language of contemporary philosophy to describe the relationship between God, the stars, demons, and human beings (pp. 114–123). Yet as in Christian literature, it is other beings, rather than the Hermetic writers themselves, who are occasionally described as oppressed by fate (p. 126).