

## BOOK REVIEW

Dylan M. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); 321 pp; ISBN 978-0-8122-4579-0; RRP £45.50.

The desire to push the envelope in Neoplatonic studies has resulted in some strange theories, none more so than the views that Plotinus was an apostate Gnostic or that he was, according to a chapter in *Late Antique Epistemology*, a lecherous metaphysician. Dylan Burns, by contrast, is a more levelheaded scholar, but his own book is just as exciting as Mazur's chapter. Burns is not unduly enslaved to the new correctness in what used to be called patristics. He is not afraid of using the word "Gnostic" in a broad sense, refusing to restrict it to the Sethian Gnostics who are the subject of his study. He insists, however, in calling them Christians though he distinguishes them from what he terms the proto-orthodox. He reflects the current tendency to view the Gnostics as yet another essentially Christian group like the Melitians. My main terminological fault with him is his employment of "Hellenic" for "pagan," a word I do not find pejorative but one which rather connotes a salutary exuberance.

*Apocalypse of the Alien God* hinges on a treatise in Plotinus' second *Ennead* and on certain remarks in Porphyry's biography of his master. It is clear that Burns' sympathies are with the Gnostics and not Plotinus who he claims is vicious, angry, and unfair in his attack on them, but the book is more about them than it is about Plotinus. His account of Plotinus' philosophy is too generalized which establishes a potential breeding ground for misconceptions, especially his assertions that the Nous is in heaven and that human intellects combine to form it. Burns, following Jaspers' almost Gnostic critique of Plotinus, tellingly classifies Plotinus' theodicy as Panglossian. He notes that it is marred by the assumption that Providence cares for humanity but not individual human beings. Plotinus thought the Gnostics, who held that the world was evil, were incurable whiners and complainers and invited them to commit suicide if they hated reality so much. This ironically echoed the Roman persecutor Antoninus' words to self-destructive Christians who had thronged to his judgment seat in the second century.

Most scholars agree that Plotinus was opposing Gnosticism rather than orthodoxy, but there is a certain similarity between his attack on the Gnostics and Porphyry's attack on the Christians. Plotinus' great translator, A. H. Armstrong, knew that Plotinus' criticisms could be leveled against Abrahamic religion in general. Burns claims the Gnostics were closer to the orthodox than they were to the Neoplatonists. I would dispute this; for one

thing the Creator was good for Plotinus and evil for the Gnostics. Plotinus shared with the Gnostics their interest in Eastern wisdom and their dislike of matter, illustrated by his shame of being in the body. In his effort to distance himself from the Sethians in *Ennead* 2.9 he forces himself to look at the good in the universe, and the treatise cannot therefore be regarded as the final word in his opinion of matter and the body.

Yet the contrasts Burns draws up between the Sethians and the Neoplatonists are formidable. He enumerates six key points where they differed: authority, storytelling, cosmology, soteriology, eschatology, and practice. The Sethians believed in a beginning and an end to the universe and in a deity who cared specifically for them. Gnosticism, like orthodoxy and unlike Neoplatonism, maintained that human souls could be superior to angels and daemons. The apostle Paul, for instance, had asked his readers, “Do you not know that we will judge the angels?” Burns’ quotations from the Sethian writings, and his use of the word “angelification,” are illuminating and help reveal how strange these texts must have seemed to Plotinus and his circle. What could he have thought of names like Youel and Allogenes? Why did the Sethians call the Demiurge Yaldabaoth? He was clearly frustrated with their “exiles, impressions, and repentings.” But once one has gotten over the Sethian jargon the differences between the Gnostics and the Neoplatonists tend to fade.

Burns distinguishes between Sethian ritual and Neoplatonic theurgy, but such compartmentalizing does not strike me to the quick. If Plotinus marginalized or exiled the Sethians we would expect less not more theurgy in subsequent Neoplatonism. We would expect less not more of the proliferation of hypostases such as we encounter in Iamblichus and Proclus. The Neoplatonists had already absorbed orientalism in the form of the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the Hermetic writings. Why couldn’t Iamblichus and Proclus have gotten their proliferation of entities from the Gnostics, albeit without acknowledgement? The Neoplatonists overtly accepted the *Oracles* and the *Poemandres*, Burns alleges, because they did not invoke an alien, Judeo-Christian authority. He avers that Iamblichus’ silence about Christianity speaks volumes. Could it not rather be that Iamblichus, like Plotinus, didn’t see Christianity as a real philosophical threat? But when he says the Sethians were closer to Christian Platonists like Clement and Origen than they were to the Neoplatonists he reveals that all three factions were Platonic.

Like a good novelist Burns saves his likely scenario, what he calls his provisional narrative, for the last few pages, and it is Porphyry rather than Plotinus who emerges as the chief villain, acting as an evil Svengali to his hapless master. Burns shares current scholarship’s hostility toward this anti-Christian figure. Such hostility, it has long seemed to me, stems from a residual or transformed Christianity, like contemporary society’s extreme compassion for the underdog. Burns believes the Sethians, together with the Manichaeans, hailed from an Elchasaite environment. This theory has already been

advanced by such scholars as Elsas, Jackson, and Quispel. He further draws a comparison between the Manichaeans and the Sethians in that they each rejected water baptism and preferred a ritual of five seals. He posits that the Sethian writings could have originated in Apamea, the only city besides Rome where Elchasaite, Gnostic, and Neoplatonic traditions coexisted. We know that the Elchasaite Alcibiades spent time in Rome. So did such Gnostics and semi-Gnostics as Marcion, Valentinus, and Tatian. Plotinus was unlikely to have escaped noticing them, and his second *Ennead* proves he did not.

Sethian writings influenced by Judaism, Elchasaitism, and Barbelo Gnosticism were allegedly brought by Alcibiades from Apamea to Rome in the 220s. They were read by Plotinus' circle though not, I would maintain against Burns, in his philosophically intense seminar. Plotinus' most ambitious pupil Porphyry fell out with the Sethians and urged Plotinus to repudiate them. Plotinus is said to have been interested in Sethian mysticism but not Sethian cosmology or soteriology. This is in fact something we would expect from a philosopher who had in his younger days set out for Persia in order to learn Eastern mysticism. Plotinus, won over by Porphyry against the Sethian treatises, wrote *Ennead* 2.9 and commissioned Porphyry and Amelius to pick apart the treatises themselves.

Burns turns conventional wisdom on its head. Whereas we have been trained to accept that patriarchal Christianity viciously marginalized its enemies, he has Plotinus doing the same thing to the Christians as represented by the Sethians. To follow his theory to its logical conclusion the Neoplatonists, in exiling the Sethians, exiled themselves. It would have been good, nonetheless, to have had some mention of Pseudo-Dionysius who brought Procline Neoplatonism firmly into the orthodox camp, so much so that it became an integral part of the religion and rituals of the Hesychast mystics who had never heard of it.

*Apocalypse of the Alien God* is a thought-provoking book that brings us close to absolute reality. It advances a new theory but not an impossible one, and it is backed up by a rigorous and erudite scholarship that takes into its purview subjects as diverse as Elchasaitism and Jewish Hekhaloth mysticism. Burns reminds us of the Gnostic deprecation of the feminine in the Sethian treatises, a habit that is increasingly sidelined. The female entity Barbelo is said to be masculine at times, even thrice masculine. He hints in his final pages of one indisputable fact: If a philosopher of Plotinus' caliber thought the Sethians were important enough to attack, they were important indeed.

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