

## Book Reviews

Dylan M. Burns. *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. xvii + 321 pp. ISBN: 978-0812245790. \$69.95 / £45.50.

Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library scholars have puzzled over what to make of the predominance of texts typically called “Sethian,” so-called because they emphasize Adam and Eve’s third son, Seth, as savior and revealer. Dylan Burns’ first, lucid and exceptionally well-researched book *Apocalypse of the Alien God* offers the most compelling case since John Turner’s *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* for gauging the historical import of these “Sethians” and placing them in a specific socio-historical milieu. Over the course of seven chapters Burns produces astute readings of the Platonic-Sethian texts *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, *The Three Steles of Seth*, and *Marsanes* in order to support two pairs of arguments. First, the Gnostics who attended Plotinus’ famous philosophy group helped catalyze and fortify the differentiation between Hellenic and Christian identities going forward into the Middle Ages. Second, Sethian literature is best understood when seen as part of the broader class of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. These two primary lines of argument are bolstered by two secondary, somewhat more speculative arguments: a) the Platonic-Sethian texts offer a window into the development of Jewish mysticism between Qumran and the later Hekhalot texts; and b) the theological doctrines and formal elements of this literature point to a provenance in religious groups classed as “Jewish-Christian,” most closely related to the Elchasaites. Each of these arguments is successful, though in varying degrees.

Chapter 1, “Culture Wars,” details the sociological background of the Second Sophistic culture from 50-250CE. As Burns shows, it was in this period

that *Hellenismos* as an identity developed through *paideia* – broad cultural training and adherence to Greek religion and civic cult – and came to reign among elite Hellenophone intellectuals, including the philosophers. Imbricated with this freshly minted identity arose newly constructed visages of “the Orient.” Philosophers of this era including Porphyry, Numenius and Iamblichus increasingly invoke the Orient but judge and subjugate foreign authors below the authority of Plato. Burns’ major contribution in this chapter is to identify an important counter-strain, the “auto-Orientalizing” found in Hermetic literature, Chaldaean Oracles and Platonic-Sethian texts, which instead invokes the prestige and idioms of the Orient in order to authorize alternate discourses about Greek metaphysics. Plotinus’ own writings are the subject of chapter 2, “Plotinus Against his Gnostic Friends,” which Burns reads as indicating Plotinus’ attempts to differentiate and fortify this Hellenic identity against the Platonic-Sethian literature brought to his seminars. The metaphysically sophisticated “Christian friends” who brought *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* were sympathetic to “foreign” doctrines including elect soteriology, the proliferation of intermediary deities between the supreme God and stellar gods, an evil demiurge, the descent of Wisdom/Sophia/the soul, and questioned the eternal and divinely infused nature of matter. It is unfortunate that Burns’ fresh philological reading of *Vita Plotina* 16, which supports reading this group as “Christian friends” and “gnostics” offering their own “school (*heresy*)” in counterdistinction to Hellenic *paideia*, is tucked in an appendix and not in this chapter itself, since it is so critical to all pillars of his argument.

Chapter 3 concerns “Other Ways of Writing” practiced by the Sethian Gnostics. Burns’ close readings parse the distinct ways that Platonic philosophers and Sethian Gnostics approached myths, stories and definitions of imagery. Plato himself thought myths function like “images” whose efficacy was predicated on their fidelity to philosophic truth. Later Platonists, especially Plotinus, would offer allegorical readings of myth as a means to bring eternal truths to temporally bound beings. By contrast, Burns argues that the implications of Sethian literature as a form of Jewish-Christian apocalyptic have not been recognized when reading their approach to philosophy via myth. The emphasis placed on revealed knowledge through the ascent of a seer, pseudepigrapha, and invocation of Oriental authorities all indicate apocalyptic provenance and its attendant claims to authority while adopting Neo-Platonic cosmological and philosophical terminology.

Chapter four marks the turn in the book from the discursive analysis of Neoplatonic authors vis-à-vis Gnostics to analyses of particular Sethian doc-

trines. “The Descent” challenges U. of Nebraska Nag Hammadi doyen John Turner’s reigning partition of Sethian literature into early texts that emphasize the “descent” of a savior figure into this world and later “ascent” models where a seer is transported to heaven. Burns finds this unhelpful. Rather, he argues all Sethian texts presume the heavenly savior figure, typically but not exclusively Seth, making multiple descents to this world in order to save his race or seed. Furthermore, the “corporate religious identity” (79) of the Sethians is argued not to be exclusive but part of a tripartite soteriological model that includes the already saved, the damned, and those undecided capable of salvation should they accept baptism and receive the revealed gnosis. Taken together, these doctrines place the Sethian texts within the idioms of “proto-Orthodox” Christians (“the new race”) and Jewish language of the *genos*.

Chapter Five, “The Ascent,” focuses on eschatology. Here Burns exhibits his remarkable hermeneutical and translation skills in reconstructing the eschatological doctrine of the Sethians, primarily through *Zostrianos*. The cosmological levels of the Sojourn, Repentance and Autogenes aeons are argued to correspond to a tripartite soteriological structure of the converts, the ascetics and the truly elect respectively, with two further lower classes destined to be destroyed at the end of time. This reading challenges a presumed “universalist” reading of Sethian soteriology as well as those reconstructions of texts such as *Marsanes* that presume the world is either “renewed” or “transformed” at the end of time. Instead, the categories of election, the presence of models of reincarnation and the destruction at the end of time clearly point to a Jewish-Christian providence akin to the Elchasaites, and were all argued against specifically by Plotinus.

Readers of this journal may be especially drawn to chapter 6, “The Crown,” dealing with the ritual and divinization practices of the Platonizing-Sethian writers. Burns touches on alphabet mysticism, the “baptism in living water” and its relation to anti-baptismal polemics, visionary ascent, angelification, communal practices, and heavenly liturgies. He dissents from views that label such practices “Sethian theurgy” and instead argues that the practices are consistent with early Christian magical and Jewish ritual traditions, especially *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. His reading is successful and will require very strong counter-arguments from scholars wishing to read these practices from a Greek or Platonic perspective. That said, Burns’ argument that the Platonic-Sethian texts help illuminate the development of Jewish mysticism between the destruction of the second temple and the Hekhalot *corpoi* would have benefited from more analysis and comparison of primary texts themselves. Departing from

his typical close readings, in this chapter Burns tends to cite formal similarities (angelic participation in *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (131); visionary ascent replacing Hekhalot throne mysticism with Platonic metaphysics (136)) that offer more suggestive parallels than strong evidence for his secondary argument.

Chapter 7, “Between Judaism, Christianity, and Neoplatonism” offers a prohibitive reconstruction of the Sethian history and import based on the previous findings. Burns avers that the peculiar mix of Platonic metaphysics, Jewish apocalyptic traditions and Christian baptismal teachings do not point to an origin in any of these three contexts individually but rather to the “borderlines” that challenge our scholarly projection of such categories into the past. The Sethian texts are evidence for how groups drew from a broad well of Jewish mythologumena, priestly lore, and Christian practice to come to an emphasis on encratism, baptismal ideas, Adamic and Sethian lore, reincarnation, and the veneration of Jesus as an incarnation of the savior much like the Elchasaites and later Manichaeans (144). The presence of the Platonizing-Sethian texts in Plotinus’ seminar are also charged to have catalyzed the “acute Hellenization of Platonism,” after which the Platonic canon is closed, interest in “barbaric” ideas is shunned and Platonic philosophy is codified as a culturally Hellenic practice.

On the whole, Burns’ primary arguments are sound and will require formidable counter-arguments in order to be challenged. He also contributes important readings to the case disproving the “Johanine splinter” origin of Sethian literature offered by Alaistar Logan and others. Further, the book is a testament to how certain theoretical approaches – particularly discourse analysis, identity construction and the distancing from “Others” – can offer fresh insights on material while still building on close readings of primary texts. It is unfortunate, then, that this revised dissertation is still writ with an expectation of a specialist’s background in three distinct fields (Neoplatonic philosophy, Sethian Gnostic literature, early Jewish Apocalyptic literature) that will prove challenging for non-specialists. The lack of background information on many of the individual texts analyzed and the assumed knowledge of contemporary debates in each field likely entails that the book will be most rewarding for specialists in Gnosticism, Early Christianity and Middle and Neoplatonic philosophy. Yet all those who are up to the task are urged to read the book, as it is clearly the product of a talented and important new voice in the field.

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