

Dylan M. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God, Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism*. University of Pennsylvania Press: 2014. Pp. xvii+321. ISBN 978-0-8122-4579-0. \$69.95.

Apocalypse of the Alien God is an extended study of Sethian Gnosticism and especially the four Platonizing Sethian treatises (“apocalypses”) from Nag Hammadi (*Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, the *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Marsanes*) that takes issue with what has for the past decade been more or less the consensus concerning their relationship to the academic Greek philosophy of Middle Platonism and the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and his early successors. The book is clearly and compellingly written, well-argued, and controls the primary and secondary literature relevant to its subject. The two main arguments of the work are: 1) the authorship of the Sethian treatises, including the Sethian Platonizing treatises that mention neither Jesus Christ or Scripture, is fundamentally Judeo-Christian, thereby rejecting an earlier scholarly consensus, stemming largely from the present reviewer, that these texts represent a non-Christian or pagan development of Sethianism; and 2) that Sethianism played a catalytic role in “the acute Hellenization of Neoplatonism” that, beginning with Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s critique of the Gnostic apocalypses treatises proffered by the interlocutors in Plotinus’ circle, subsequent Neoplatonists rejected all forms of Christian Platonism to yield a strictly Hellenic philosophy distinct from and actively opposed to Jewish and Christian traditions and literature, which were to be exiled from their schools once and for all.

Chapter 1 examines the context of philosophical study groups in the Hellenic “culture wars” of the second and third centuries CE, where the Second Sophistic movement developed a Hellenophile ideology permeating educational life that was nevertheless countered by rising interest in “Oriental” sages like those invoked by Plotinus’s Christian Gnostic opponents. Chapter 2 examines Plotinus’s attacks upon the cosmology, anthropology, and soteriology of these groups that he once called his friends, accusing them of developing a kind of deviant Platonism whose objectionable features are not Hellenic but Judaeo-Christian, which points to their distinctly Christian background. Chapter 3 examines the genre of these mainly “Sethian” texts, whose rhetoric, mythical motifs, and claims to authority are typical of contemporary Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature rather than contemporary Platonic treatises models that habitually used allegory to interpret myths. Chapter 4 discusses the apocalypses’ attitudes toward soteriology, focusing on the identity of the Sethian savior (a cosmic Seth who descends to earth throughout history to intervene on behalf of the elect), the Judaeo-Christian valence of their soteriological language, particularly their self-understanding not only as aliens temporarily resident in world, but also as an elect group for whom the divine providence is specifically reserved. Chapter 5 characterizes Sethian eschatology, both personal—the postmortem fate of the soul—and cosmic—the fate of the cosmos—typical of Christian, not Hellenic (“pagan”) Platonism. Chapter 6 examines the conceptual, ritual, and visionary strategies for divinization in these texts, arguing that they are not Platonic, but typical

of Jewish and Christian sources, reflecting the mysticism found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish apocalypses, and Hekhalot literature. Chapter 7 summarizes the conclusions of the first six chapters and argues for the likelihood that Sethian traditions developed in a Jewish-Christian environment comprised of those inhabiting the border between Judaism and Christianity such as the Elchasaites, Ebionites, and authors of the Pseudo-Clementine literature that produced Mani, who likewise drew widely on Jewish apocryphal traditions in formulating a religion that included many descending savior-revealers, including but not necessarily focusing on Jesus.

Although Burns recognizes the role played by the Sethian Platonizing treatises in the development of Neoplatonic metaphysics and contemplative practice, he argues that the genre, rhetoric, motifs, claims to authority, attitudes towards personal and cosmic eschatology, ethnicity, providence, and approach to myth and revelation in these Sethian apocalypses resemble Christian much more than Hellenic Platonism. Against the present reviewer's thesis that the Sethian Platonizing treatises represent a shift away from an earlier Judaeo-Christian phase of Sethianism towards a non-Christian or pagan development of Sethianism, they instead express a mixture of Neoplatonic metaphysics with mythopoeic, cosmological, eschatological, and ritual themes that are only intelligible in the worlds of Christian Platonism and Jewish ascent literature.

Burns maintains that the "Platonizing" Sethian treatises have not only a conception of the elect (which is ethnically-reasoned), but also of the non-elect. In terms of personal eschatology, the texts are non-universalist; in terms of cosmic eschatology, they presume that the cosmos will be destroyed. In the passages discussed here, it is clear that there will be an "end time" where non-elect souls "pass away" and others are "judged." However, these texts do not speak of a destruction of the physical cosmos itself, but rather of the destruction of the regime of its present evil rulers, spiritual and otherwise. Moreover, Lance Jenott¹ has recently shown that, "contrary to usual descriptions [including that of Burns] of Sethian Christians as alienated 'Gnostics,' several of their texts suggest that they had a rather positive outlook about their purpose in the cosmos. Their myths inculcated within them the self-image of persons intimately linked with the perfection of human deficiency and the establishment of truth and justice [*Gospel of the Egyptians* III 59.9–60.2; 60.19–61.1]; they were couriers of the providential spirit that worked toward the rectification of deficiency [*Apocryphon of John* BG 63.12–64.13 = NHC II 24.34–25.16]; they were 'fruit-bearing trees' [*Apocalypse of Adam* 75.8–17], 'the holy people of the great light coming into the world to illuminate the whole aeon' [*Gospel of the Egyptians* III 51.1–5]." In the *Gospel of the Egyptians* III 62.24–64.3, the primordial plan of the heavenly Adam is that "through the agency of Seth's race, the 'dead aeon'—that is, the future world which will fall under the governance of an

¹ Lance Jenott, "Emissaries of Truth and Justice: the Seed of Seth as Agents of Divine Providence," in K. Corrigan, T. Rasimus *et al.*, *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World. Essays in Honour of John D. Turner* [Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 82. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013], 43–61, here 59 and 55.

apostate angel—shall ‘arise’ and be ‘dissolved,’ not “in the sense that the world itself shall be destroyed, but rather its present state of death and corruption; hence later in the [*Gospel of the Egyptians* III 63.4–64.9], one reads of ‘the reconciliation of the world’ effected by the savior, heavenly Seth, who arrives in the person of the living Jesus.”

While Burns acknowledges that the Platonizing texts are imbued with Neoplatonic thought and focus on contemplative ascent rather than soteriology, he argues that they also presume a soteriological schema featuring Seth as a descending savior, whether in the form of the “Thrice-Male Child,” or as the seers Zostrianos or Allogenes. However these identifications, however attractive they may be, are not explicit in these texts; these figures are not said to descend into the world to perform any saving work upon aspirants so as to effect their salvation, but function rather as revealers of the transcendental realm and models of contemplative ascent, while the fulfillment of salvation is actually left up to the aspirant himself or herself.

The *Apocalypse of the Alien God* certainly makes an original and provocative contribution to scholarship on the nature of the four Platonizing Sethian treatises (“apocalypses”) from Nag Hammadi. The main shortcoming of Burns’ thesis is that, if the Christian authors and users of these texts were so markedly anti-Hellenic, it does not explain why—despite their failure to incorporate forms of academic philosophical argument and explicit appeal to the authority of Plato typical of academic Platonists—did these texts 1) incorporate the massive amount of technical Platonic metaphysics that one finds in these texts and 2), if they are intelligible only in the worlds of Christian Platonism and Jewish ascent literature, why did they fail to award the Christian savior Jesus Christ any explicit role in the attainment of salvation or enlightenment? Nevertheless, there is much to be learned from this excellent book, which is approachable by scholars and the educated public alike.

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