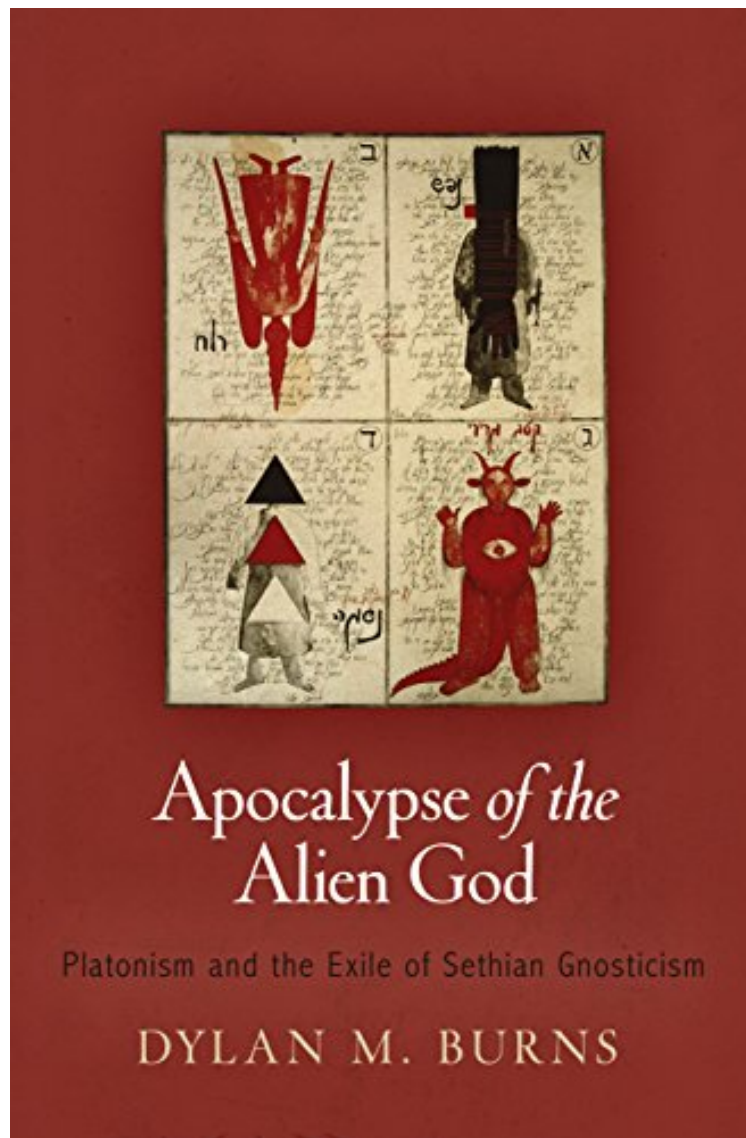


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Dylan M. Burns

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Dylan M. Burns : Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism (Divinations: Rereading

Late Ancient Religion):

In the second century, Platonist and Judeo-Christian thought were sufficiently friendly that a Greek philosopher could declare, "What is Plato but Moses speaking Greek?" Four hundred years later, a Christian emperor had ended the public teaching of subversive Platonic thought. When and how did this philosophical rupture occur? Dylan M. Burns argues that the fundamental break occurred in Rome, ca. 263, in the circle of the great mystic Plotinus, author of the *Enneads*. Groups of controversial Christian metaphysicians called Gnostics ("knowers") frequented his seminars, disputed his views, and then disappeared from the history of philosophy until the 1945 discovery, at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, of codices containing Gnostic literature, including versions of the books circulated by Plotinus's Christian opponents. Blending state-of-the-art Greek metaphysics and ecstatic Jewish mysticism, these texts describe techniques for entering celestial realms, participating in the angelic liturgy, confronting the transcendent God, and even becoming a divine being oneself. They also describe the revelation of an alien God to his elect, a race of "foreigners" under the protection of the patriarch Seth, whose interventions will ultimately culminate in the end of the world. *Apocalypse of the Alien God* proposes a radical interpretation of these long-lost apocalypses, placing them firmly in the context of Judeo-Christian authorship rather than ascribing them to a pagan offshoot of Gnosticism. According to Burns, this Sethian literature emerged along the fault lines between Judaism and Christianity, drew on traditions known to scholars from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Enochic texts, and ultimately catalyzed the rivalry of Platonism with Christianity. Plunging the reader into the culture wars and classrooms of the high Empire, *Apocalypse of the Alien God* offers the most concrete social and historical description available of any group of Gnostic Christians as it explores the intersections of ancient Judaism, Christianity, Hellenism, myth, and philosophy.

"An original contribution to scholarship on the nature of the four Platonizing Sethian treatises from Nag Hammadi, challenging the consensus concerning their relationship to the academic Greek philosophy of Middle Platonism and the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and his early successors. Clearly and compellingly written, *Apocalypse of the Alien God* is a must for scholars in the field of Gnosticism and later Greek philosophy." John D. Turner, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
About the Author Dylan M. Burns is Research Associate at Leipzig University. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.
Introduction The terms "Christianity" and "Judaism" are difficult for students of these ancient religions. Church historians remain unable to pinpoint once and for all the emergence of "Christianity" from "Judaism"; scholars of Judaic studies debate when Judaism was "invented." "Christianity" and "Judaism" can feel like vacuous terms that house a great diversity of groups, practices, and ideas whose differences seem to outweigh their resemblances. Consequently, some scholars feel more comfortable discussing Christianities and Judaisms, and nobody is comfortable with the term used for groups that exist on the borderlines between them: "Jewish-Christian" (!). Even more problematic is the term "paganism," which is essentially a wastebasket for the religious life of every ancient person who did not identify with a cult of the God of Abraham. Yet we persist in using these terms, despite our misgivings, and not just as a heuristic sleight-of-hand. Sometimes there are significant differences between various groups and their ideas, differences that do correspond somewhat to the way that we moderns might use the terms "Jewish" or "Christian" or "Hellenic" ("pagan" I renounce in this book). These differences did not fall from the sky. They were manufactured, in words, art, and ritual, by cultural warriors who believed that such differences mattered and used them to legitimize their own interests. This book is about some of those real differences and the development of the ideologies that crafted them in this case, the competing worldviews of "Christian" and "Hellenic" (i.e., Greek) philosophers. It argues that one can identify when and where these worldviews split for good: in the 260s CE, in Rome, in the reading group of the great Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus. The master had a falling out with some of the Christian interlocutors of the group, sparked by the texts they read. After this controversy at the onset of late antiquity, it becomes very difficult to find academic, Hellenic philosophers with cordial relationships with their Christian counterparts. Instead, they regularly wrote polemical treatises denouncing each other's philosophy (even while still exchanging ideas). Here it becomes meaningful to talk of a Christian philosophy distinct from Hellenic philosophy as a matter of cultural identity as well as intellectual enterprise and a closed Platonic tradition, unfriendly to Jewish and Christian sources. Unfortunately, this story gets (very) complicated when we try to learn about the Christian interlocutors of Plotinus and their controversial texts, and it is largely occupied as is the bulk of this book, really with what we know about them and, in turn, what these details tell us about the situation in Plotinus's circle. Fortunately, these details are not uninteresting: in fact, they furnish valuable evidence for deepening our understanding of an obscure Judeo-Christian literary tradition, Sethianism (so called due to its focus on the figure of Adam and Eve's third son, Seth, as savior and revealer). This book explains the contribution of Sethianism to Greek philosophy, and the reasons for its subsequent exile from the Hellenic schools; its relationship to Judaism, Christianity, and the "Jewish-Christian" groups that existed in the cracks between them; and the development of Jewish mystical traditions we know from the apocalypses and Qumran. This same tradition provides the most valuable evidence modern scholars possess

for understanding the thought, background, and historical importance of any group of Gnostic early Christians who were associated by their opponents with a myth of the creation of the world by a demiurge ("craftsman") of ambivalent ability and mores. It appears that these sects referred to themselves as *gnostikoi* ("knowers"). Plotinus's student Porphyry provides our only record of a personal encounter with ancient Gnostics that does not come from one of their bitter opponents among the church fathers: There were in his (Plotinus's) time many others, Christians, in particular heretics who had set out from the ancient philosophy, men belonging to the schools of Adelpheus and Aculeus who possessed many texts of Alexander the Libyan and Philocomus and Demostrius of Lydia, and who produced revelations of Zoroaster and Zostrianos and Nicotheus and Allogenes and Messos and others of this sort who deceived many, just as they had been deceived, actually alleging that Plato really had not penetrated to the depth of intelligible substance. Wherefore, Plotinus often attacked their position in his seminars, and wrote the book which we have entitled "Against the Gnostics." He left it to us to judge what he had passed over. Amelius went up to forty volumes, writing against the book of Zostrianos, and I, Porphyry, wrote a considerable number of arguments against the book of Zoroaster, showing the book to be entirely spurious and contemporary, contrived by the founders of the heresy to fabricate the idea that the doctrines which they had chosen to honor were in fact those of the ancient Zoroaster. The translation of this passage will be discussed in detail below, but it is immediately clear that Porphyry gives us evidence more specific and reliable than what we have about any other Gnostics. First, he says that, in Plotinus's time, there were Christian heretics, Plotinus's refutation of whom he entitled *Against the Gnostics*; therefore, "Gnostics" were present in Rome and known to Plotinus and his group. Second, Plotinus discussed philosophical questions with these Gnostics, which means that they were sufficiently educated to participate in a sort of ancient postgraduate seminar. Third, these discussions led to disagreement, much of whose substance is extant in Plotinus's treatise *Against the Gnostics*. Finally, Porphyry mentions the books the Gnostics considered authoritative: "revelations" (*apokalypseis*, i.e., "apocalypses"). Luckily for us, titles identical to several of the apocalypses mentioned by Porphyry were unearthed at Nag Hammadi (Upper Egypt) in 1945. Thus the especial importance of Porphyry's evidence; when read in concert with Porphyry and Plotinus, these apocalypses, and other texts (mostly apocalypses as well) from Nag Hammadi that belong to the same literary tradition, enable us to pose and answer significant questions about the social background, literary preferences, theological proclivities, and ritual life of a particular group of Gnostics, who came into serious conflict with the great Platonic academics of their time. One of these titles, *Allogenes*, means "foreigner," or "alien." As we will see, the concept of alienation figures strongly in the Sethian apocalypses, texts that describe a god so utterly transcendent and divorced from creation that he can only be revealed by an avatar who bridges a chasm between human and divine, descending from heaven to preach to the elect, who reside as "aliens" on this strange planet. Conversely, to Plotinus, everything about this message from its vigorous use of Judeo-Christian language and literary traditions to its treatment of specific philosophical problems (such as divine providence or the afterlife of the soul) seemed wrong, wrongheaded, and decidedly foreign: that is, alien. For both parties, albeit in entirely different senses, the Sethian literature offered a revelation (apocalypse) of the alien god to his alien worshippers. One might then ask how it is that the Sethian literature and its Christian Gnostic readers wound up in Plotinus's circle in the first place. The Nag Hammadi discovery answers this question: some of the now extant Sethian literature in particular, a group known as the "Platonizing" texts (*Zostrianos* [NHC VIII,1], *Allogenes* [NHC XI,3], *Marsanes* [NHC X,1] and the *Three Steles of Seth* [NHC VII,5]) appears to have been deeply conversant with advanced Platonic metaphysics and does not mention the figure of Jesus. The question of dating the copies that were known to Plotinus and others, and thus the possibility of mutual philosophical influence between them, remains controversial; however, there is a scholarly consensus that some version of this literature was present at a crucial period in the development of Platonic metaphysics, and may have even contributed to the thought of Plotinus himself. Yet the importance of the Sethian literature is not limited to our understanding of the history of later Greek philosophy or even Gnosticism. Its indebtedness to the literary traditions and genre of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature merits their inclusion in the study of Jewish and Christian pseudepigrapha of the second and third centuries, a period for which our evidence is otherwise scarce. Some of these traditions deal with themes of self-transformation that we know not just from these apocalypses but from the Dead Sea Scrolls, again, furnishing valuable evidence for an obscure field of study: the development of Jewish mysticism between Qumran and the late antique ascent literature known as the "Hekhaloth" ("palaces") corpus, a field the great scholar of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem, termed "Jewish Gnosticism." Finally, these texts also occupy a liminal position along the notoriously permeable boundaries of Judaism and Christianity, and some of their doctrines are most recognizable in the context of the Syrian groups scholars label "Jewish-Christian," particularly the Elchasaites. The Sethian evidence from Nag Hammadi is thus indispensable for scholars trying to understand the negotiation and mutual permeation of the boundaries between emerging Christianity and Judaism. The evidence for these conclusions is set out in the first six chapters of this book. Chapter 1 addresses an overlooked but significant implication of Porphyry's evidence: the physical presence of these Gnostics in the social context of a philosophical study group. The chapter thus explores the context of such 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 and was countered by a spike of interest in "Oriental" sages like those invoked by Plotinus's Christian

Gnostic opponents. Chapter 2 takes a close look at Plotinus's own writing about these opponents, who, he says, were once his "friends." He viciously attacks their cosmology, anthropology, and soteriology, accusing them of developing a kind of deviant Platonism. His criticisms apply not only to the apocalypses his Gnostics read but also to contemporary Christian Platonism in general, serving as evidence of the Christian background of the group and the more generally Judeo-Christian valence of their texts. Chapters 3 through 6 introduce and discuss the Sethian Gnostic apocalypses themselves, alongside evidence from Plotinus that has been hitherto read in isolation from them. Chapter 3 examines the genre of the texts, grounding their rhetoric, motifs, and especially claims to authority in contemporary Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. Their approach to myth and revelation is sharply contrasted with contemporary Platonic models, which employed allegory to interpret myths; thus, to Plotinus, they appeared to be "another," alien "way of writing." 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 ethnic valence of their soteriological language, and Plotinus's complaints about these conceptions with respect to his philosophy of divine providence. Chapter 5 looks at Sethian eschatology, both personal (handling the postmortem fate of the soul) and cosmic (handling the fate of the cosmos). In both of these chapters, it is clear that the apocalypses' stances, from a philosophical perspective, resemble Christian Platonism, not its Hellenic counterpart. Chapter 6 studies the strategies for divinization in these Gnostic texts. A review of these practices shows that they drew not from Platonic but from Jewish and Christian sources, particularly those associated with ancient Jewish mysticism, as preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls, apocalypses, and Hekhalot literature. Moreover, recalling scholarly debate about vision and experience in Jewish literature helps us resolve obscurities in Sethian rituals themselves and theorize for what they could have been used in an ancient context. Chapter 7 summarizes the aforementioned conclusions, offering a clearer picture of the function of the Sethian apocalypses, the lives of their authors, and their relationship to the Gnostics in Plotinus's circle. Moreover, the chapter discusses the texts' relationship with Judaism, Manichaeism, and Christianity (or "Jewish Christianity"), emphasizing the important role that Jewish literature plays in understanding Sethianism, the ways that Sethian literature helps elucidate the thorny problem of "Jewish Gnosticism," and the significance of the Sethian literature for the history of Jewish mysticism. Similarly, significant parallels to Manichaeism emerge that invite a reevaluation of exactly what kind of baptismal groups Sethianism grew out of, and where they might have been. Finally, this book will defend a Judeo-Christian authorship of the Sethian treatises even the "Platonizing" texts that do not mention Jesus Christ or Scripture! thus rejecting the scholarly consensus that the texts represent a non-Christian or pagan development of Sethianism, or evidence of an outreach to paganism. Some have recognized already that "a lack of Christian features" does not necessarily indicate Jewish or pagan provenance. Yet the boundary between Judaism and Christianity seems impossible to divine in much of the Sethian literature, particularly the Platonizing texts, which are laden with Neoplatonic jargon instead of biblical references. Perhaps this is no accident, because many of their Jewish and Christian features are associated specifically with groups that flourished precisely along these borderlines, groups (such as the Elchasaites, Ebionites, and author[s] of the Pseudo-Clementine literature) that have duly been named "Jewish-Christian" by modern scholars. As I will argue in the concluding chapter, it is likely that Sethian traditions developed in a Jewish-Christian environment like that which produced Mani, who also drew widely on Jewish apocryphal traditions in formulating a religion that honored Jesus of Nazareth as one of many descending savior-revealers important, but not the object of every prayer or treatise. The apocalypses brandished in Plotinus's seminar were thus the products of intellectuals from a community that, like Manichaeans or the Elchasaites, dwelt on the boundaries of Judaism and Christianity. Drawing from the literary traditions of the Jewish pseudepigrapha, they wrote their apocalypses as manuals for eliciting an experience of visionary ascent, using Platonic metaphysics as a meditative tool. While such practices are best understood in the context of contemporary Jewish mysticism, the Platonism that informs them also permeated the cosmological and soteriological thought of their authors, producing a Platonism that was at the forefront of Christian theology hence their appeal to the Christian "heretics" mentioned by Porphyry. He and Plotinus recognized the Christian valence of this Platonism, and here drew a line in the sand between the Platonism of their Christian Gnostic interlocutors and their own thought. Hellenic Platonism thus began to be seen not just as a school interpreting Plato but a Hellenic philosophy distinct from and actively opposed to Jewish and Christian traditions, which the Platonists hoped to exile from their schools once and for all.