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Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition

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John Turner (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) is no stranger to students of ancient Gnosticism. Indeed, he has been one of the leading scholars in this field for almost three decades, perhaps best known for his translation work of Nag Hammadi Codices as well as his work on Sethian Gnosticism. In this monumental and exhaustive work, Turner continues to add to our understanding of Sethianism, especially as discernable in the Nag Hammadi material. As indicated by the title, Turner sets out to explore the relationship between Sethianism and Platonism. Turner is not the first to see a strong connection between Gnosticism and Platonism. In the first chapter he lays out three explanations of such a connection posited by earlier scholars: Gnosticism as a form of Platonism (i.e., Platonism “run wild”); Platonism as incipient Gnosticism; and Gnosticism and Platonism as interdependent, indices of the social and conceptual development of each tradition (e.g., Sethianism as an index for the reemergence of a Speusippian four-level metaphysic). Turner’s work would fall under this third alternative.

After the introductory chapter, the book falls into three major parts. Part 1 offers a delimitation of the Sethian tradition. Part 2 lays out the development of Platonism from Plato to Plotinus. Part 3 explicitly compares the Sethian tradition with Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism. Following H. M. Schenke’s lead,

Turner claims that the presence of key *mythologumena*, along with the witness of the church fathers and Plotinian material collected by Porphyry, indicates that Sethianism actually existed in the second to fourth centuries as a viable alternative to Christianity. The features identifying Sethianism, as Schenke had suggested, are: (1) a pneumatic seed of Seth; (2) Seth as heavenly redeemer; (3) the trinity of Father (Invisible Spirit), Mother (Barbelo), and Son (Autogenes); (4) Barbelo as triadic Kalyptos, Protophanes, and Autogenes; (5) the Four Luminaries (Harmozel, Oroiael, Daveithai, and Eleleth); (6) the demiurge Yaldaboath as opponent of the seed of Seth; (7) the three ages of history with the appearance of a savior figure in each; (8) a special prayer; (9) a negative theology; (10) a specific philosophical terminology; (11) a secondary Christianization; (12) a triad or tetrad of “ministers” of the Four Luminaries (Gamaliel, Gabriel, Samblo, Abrasax); (13) the Coptic designation of “Pigeradamas” for Adamas; and, added to Schenke’s list, (14) the baptismal rite of the Five Seals (63–64). Turner’s own historical analysis, however, explicates this religious tradition in more depth. He begins by establishing the literary evidence for Sethianism, placing a strong emphasis upon the sources underlying and interconnecting the Nag Hammadi material, including the following texts: *The Apocryphon of John* (longer and shorter versions); *The Hypostasis of the Archons*; *Gospel of the Egyptians*; *The Apocalypse of Adam*; *The Three Steles of Seth*; *Zostrianos*; *Marsanes*; *Melchizedek*; *The Thought of Norea*; *Allogenes*; and *The Trimorphic Protennoia*. (Other possible candidates for a Sethian corpus might also include *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, *On the Origin of the World*, *Hypsiphron*, and the *Untitled Treatise* of the Bruce Codex.)

Turner divides the Sethian material into two broad categories: those of the ascent pattern and those of the descent pattern. Those of the descent pattern place emphasis upon the descent of a revelatory figure, such as Pronoia/Barbelo in the Providence Monologue, in three divine epiphanies (during the molding of the earthly Adam; spiritual light to Eve initially hidden in Adam, birth of Seth, Noah escaping the flood; resurrected Christ who reveals the entirety of Sethian history). A strong emphasis is placed on the historical origins and development of the Sethian sacred history, including cosmogony and anthropogony. The ascent pattern, however, is nontemporal in focus. Rather than mythical history and a descending savior figure, those texts following the ascent pattern place emphasis upon the adherents’ visionary ascent and purification to higher realms, moving through ritual performance from the world of multiplicity to that of unity or simplicity, that is, toward the supreme divinity. Four texts fit into this ascent pattern: *Allogenes*, *The Three Steles of Seth*, *Zostrianos*, and *Marsanes*.

This distinction between descent and ascent patterns of salvation is central for Turner's reconstruction of the historical development of Sethianism. For Turner there are six phases that constitute the history of Sethianism. Antecedents for Sethian thought are apparent in five sources: Hellenistic Jewish wisdom speculations (now a central point of study among scholars of Gnosticism); midrashic interpretations of Genesis; baptismal practices; Christology in the early church; and Neopythagorean and Middle Platonic metaphysical and epistemological thought. Although all five building blocks are dealt with in this book and are reflective of the historical development of Sethianism, most of the comparative analysis is placed on the fifth element. The first of the six phases of Sethian history consists of two distinct early second-century groups, the Barbeloites referred to in Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.29) and the Sethites (perhaps reflected as the Ophites in Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30). The former have an emphasis on priestly traditions and baptismal practices, specifically the Five Seals of Sethianism, and are likely active in the Johannine debates reflected in the Johannine Epistles, with the production of the Providence Monologue and the aretologies of the *Trimorphic Protennoia*. The latter Sethites developed a sacred history as a "seed of Seth." The second phase, in the mid-second century, finds the Barbeloites identifying with Christian baptismal traditions, resulting in a christological development of Christ as the Autogenes and an overall Christianization of the Sethian tradition. The third phase has the Barbeloites and Sethites amalgamate into Sethianism in the late second century. It is at this stage that the final versions of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* and the *Apocryphon of John* are produced. The fourth phase, running from the late second into the early third century, finds the Sethian movement under attack from Christians, resulting in a gradual movement away from Christianity. The fifth and sixth phases are the most important for Turner, where we find Sethianism first becoming attracted to and accepted by third-century Platonists, but then estranged from Platonism by Plotinus and other Neoplatonists, while finally resulting in Sethianism by the mid-fourth century and dwindling into diverse fragments that eventually died out (Archontics, Audians, Borborites, Phibionites, etc.). During the fifth phase, Sethianism left behind much of the descent-pattern ideas to embrace a more full-scale Platonic tradition of the ascent pattern. Technical Platonic terminology and concepts become the norm at this stage. Turner claims that during the fifth phase, the Sethians produced the *Three Steles of Seth*, *Zostrianos*, and *Allogenes*. Debate over Middle Platonic commentaries on Plato's *Parmenides*, including the Turin commentary (Turner follows K. Corrigan's argument for a pre-Plotinian date), and for Plotinus (who seems to be reacting specifically to *Zostrianos*) the nature of the Intellect, matter, demiurge, and ritual incantations, all lead to conflict

between Sethians and Platonists. On the Sethian side, *Marsanes* and the Bruce Codex's *Untitled Treatise* were produced in response, offering a reworking of some of aspects of the other Sethian platonizing treatises. On the Platonist side, Plotinus seems to have "tightened up on his own interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus* (esp. 39E), for example, in *Ennead* III, 9 [13] where he toys with a tripartition of the divine Intellect very similar to that of Numenius and the Sethian Barbelo Aeon (but which he explicitly rejects in *Ennead* II, 9 [33] 6)" (718–19). Similar adjustments in Plotinus's thought are evident in his discussion of the Soul or Sophia and her image in matter (*Ennead* V, 8 [31] 3,1–3), which contradicts *Ennead* III, 9 [13] 3) (712). Cross-fertilization between Platonists and Sethians occurs, albeit within the context of social affiliation and social estrangement. Most of parts 2 and 3 of this book explicate, at great length and in intense detail, the systemic parallels and nuances of both Platonic and Sethian systems. Most of the analysis is placed on the Sethian platonizing treatise of the fifth and sixth historical phases, and there is, in regard to most of the Sethian corpus, serious attention given to the various redactional layers within the treatises (linking these layers to differing points along the historical development of the Sethian tradition).

This book stands on par with such seminal and foundational works on Sethian Gnosticism as those by Schenke, Stroumsa, and Servin. Although the basic thesis of Turner's book can be found in his earlier works on Sethianism (specifically his classic essay, "Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity* [ed. C. W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986], 55–86), *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* offers a full-scale analysis of both the historical/literary development of Sethianism and of the Sethian sources themselves (primarily those from Nag Hammadi). The explication of the Platonic tradition, tracing its development from Plato and his early Academy through Middle Platonic speculations and finally to Neoplatonic reworkings or interpretations of the Neopythagorean and Middle Platonic systems, is so extensive and valuable that it could easily have been a separate book. Indeed, students of early Christianity will likely find this part very useful even beyond the study of Gnosticism. Turner should also be commended for his proposal for the development of Sethianism. Not only has he effectively noted strong parallels between the Platonic and Sethian traditions; he has helped to make sense of how they might fit into the broader developments of the second to fourth centuries. The interconnected literary relations between the Sethian material is sensitive and challenging, offering plausible dates and stages for Sethianism. I especially appreciated his willingness to see both continuity and

diversity within these sources, allowing them to serve as indicators of shifts and changes within the Sethian movement. The cross-fertilization he has noted is a more viable model for noting how religious “innovations” (building on M. A. Williams’s now classic treatment of the category Gnosticism) might emerge and develop through social and intellectual engagement. Sethianism is not rendered a static tradition but rather a dynamic and engaging one.

Turner’s proposal, however, is not without difficulties. The first lies in the very nature of the sources themselves. Many of the Nag Hammadi tractates most emphasized in this study (e.g., *Marsanes* and *Zostrianos*) are so fragmentary and full of reconstructions that one may question the confidence with which Turner reads them. Second, there are other possible historical reconstructions that could be offered in place of Turner’s six phases. For example, rather than seeing a shift in the tradition from a predominately descent pattern to an ascent pattern in the third century, perhaps we have two contemporaneous Sethian traditions, one emphasizing ascent and the other descent (with the *Apocryphon of John*’s longer version indicative of overlap between the two wings of the movement). Third, the hypothetical Sethites and Barbeloites, and especially their relation to the Johannine community, needs further substantiation and explication in order to move this first historical phase out of the realm of speculation. Indeed, we could even ask if the Christianization of the Sethian material could not have emerged out of Barbeloite debates with Johannine Christians. (This, of course, returns us to the perennial debate over the origins of Gnosticism: Jewish, Christian, or an innovation from within both?) Fourth, it might have been insightful to explore the interaction of Platonism with Christianity. Origen, for example, develops a platonizing theology (e.g., in *De Principiis*, which is perhaps his most systematic presentation of a Platonic Christian theology) and even opposes “Gnostics” on similar grounds as Plotinus. Exploring other instances of cross-fertilization may not negate Turner’s thesis, but it might add a complexity to what seems like a very linear shift in Sethianism. Fifth, although ritual is addressed, the focus tends to be on conceptual (metaphysical and epistemological) points of connection and development. I would have welcomed the application of more in-depth social analysis (e.g., did the Sethian movement alter its social structure, perhaps to that of a philosophical school, with the estrangement from Christianity and attraction toward Platonism). Sixth, and finally, we might question the very size of this book. Could parts 2 and 3 (the presentation of the Platonic tradition and then the comparison of those traditions to Sethianism) have been handled together in a more concise section?

These six difficulties or questions do not detract from the importance of this book. Rather, they offer challenges for Turner to continue pushing his research and thereby our insights into Sethianism. A further caveat relates to the production of the book. Throughout, there are typographical errors, gender-exclusive language crops up, repeated words, phrases, and occasionally even sentences appear, and the press has reprinted pages 413–20 between pages 420 and 421. A careful, final copy edit just prior to production should have caught most of these problems, whose number is shocking for such a prestigious series. These problems tarnish an otherwise monumental and invaluable book, which is likely the most important work to have appeared on Sethianism in the past decade, written by one of the leading academic voices in this field, and published within one of the most prestigious series in the study of Gnosticism. *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* offers a coherent, challenging picture of Sethianism and its literary sources. Our knowledge of Sethianism, as well as the importance of Platonism in the development of early Christianity, has been greatly enhanced by Turner's efforts.