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“I Turned away from the Temple”: Sethian Counterculture in the Apocryphon of John

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Abstract

In the myth as well as the frame story of the Apocryphon of John, Sethian conflict with others is narrativized. For instance, Adam and Eve withdraw from the biblical creator just as John turns away from the temple in Jerusalem after an altercation with a Jewish antagonist. The gnostic authors of the text portrayed the creator so negatively that he is incomparable with most demiurgic figures in Platonism, Judaism, and Christianity. Their ignorant, boastful, jealous and apostate Ialdabaoth was shocking to their ancient opponents. And for modern scholars, this countercultural vilification of the creator makes it difficult to categorize the authors of the apocryphon in Platonic, Jewish, or Christian terms.

Keywords

creator – Sethians – Ophites – classic gnostics

The Johannine Frame Story

The authors of the Apocryphon of John and its related Sethian texts were often involved in conflict with others.¹ This definitely included Christians such as

1 Sethians, Ophites, classic gnostics: e.g. Schenke 1974; 1981; Stroumsa 1984; B. Layton 1995; Turner 2001; Logan 2006; Rasimus 2009; Brakke 2010; Burns 2014. For a history of the Sethians and their literature in “six phases” and “three distinct but not necessarily mutually exclusive socio-historical religious contexts,” namely Judaism, Christianity, and Middle- and Neo-Platonism, see Turner 2001, 255–301. These can be supplemented with a Greco-Egyptian and Hermetic context of early Sethianism: Adamson 2013a; 2013b. Ap. John is the principal

Irenaeus and Origen as well as pagans such as Celsus and Plotinus in the second and third centuries: we have their exposés and critiques of Sethianism.² We also likely have a critique of Sethian demiurgic myth in the Valentinian Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora*.³ Furthermore the conflict must have included Jews despite the lack of any exposé in Jewish literature.⁴

It is with a pseudepigraphical narrativization of such strife that the apocryphon opens. The setting is not the second or third century but the first. John is at the temple in Jerusalem where one of his fellow Jews tells him that his dead master led him into apostasy:

NHC III	BG	NHC II/IV
... did ...	With deception	[With deception
deceive you ...	did this Nazarene	did this
	deceive you,	Nazarene]
		deceive you,
your ...	and he filled your	and he filled
he closed [your	ears with [lies],	[your ears with
hearts],	and closed [your	lies], and closed
	hearts and]	[your hearts and
he turned you	turned you [away	turned you] away
away from the	from] the	from the
[trad]itions of	traditions of your	traditions [of
your fathers	[fathers] (ΑΥΚΤΕ	your fathers]
(ΑΥΚΤΕΤΗΟΥΤῆ	ΤΗΥΤῆ ΕΒ[ΟΛ ΖΝ]	([ΑΥΚΤΩΤΝ Ε]ΒΟΛ
ΕΒΟΛ ἡ[ΜΠΑΡΑ]ΔΟCIC	ΜΠΑΡΑΔΟCIC	ἡἸΠΑΡΑΔ[ΟCIC
ἡἸΕΤῆΙΟΤΕ).	ἡἸΕΤῆΙ[ΟΤ]Ε).	ἡἸΕΤῆΙΟΤΕ)]. ⁵

treatise in Sethian literature and in the so-called Coptic gnostic codices as a whole, there being one manuscript each in Nag Hammadi codex II, III, and IV, and another in the Berlin codex—that is more than any other text in the codices. Synoptic edition of the four manuscripts: Waldstein and Wisse 1995. Major published studies of the apocryphon: Giversen 1963; Tardieu 1984; Logan 1996; Pleše 2006; King 2006; Luttikhuisen 2006; Barc and Funk 2012.

2 The go-to passages and texts are Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.29–31; Origen, *Cels.* 6.21–40; and Plotinus, *Enn.* 11.9.

3 *Apud* Epiphanius, *Pan.* 33.3–7.

4 E.g. Pleše 2006, 219–221. For the larger issue of early rabbinic reports about ‘two powers’ in heaven, see Segal 2002/1977. Among Segal’s conclusions (2002/1977, 262): “the key factor in separating radical gnosticism from earlier exegesis is the negative portrayal of the demiurge.” See also Dahl 1981.

5 Ap. John NHC III,1 1.12–15 / BG 2 19.17–20.3 / NHC II,1 1.13–17 (Waldstein and Wisse 1995, 12–15; translation modified). Passage not extant in NHC IV,1.

John's Jewish antagonist here could easily represent multiple groups of Sethian opponents.⁶ What is more important than the precise identity of the opponents is that the authors of the apocryphon did not deny that they turned away from the traditions of their fathers. Instead their response to the charge of apostasy was that those traditions were wrong to begin with, going all the way back to the Genesis creation accounts.

So in the frame story, John abandons the house of 'God' to hear the Savior repeatedly say that Moses was mistaken:

NHC III	BG	NHC II/IV
And [when] I heard these things, I turned away from the temple (ἀϵἶκωτ εἴβολ [μἰτῆ]ερον) to a mountain . . . place . . .	When I heard these things, I turned away from the temple (ἀἶκωτ εἴβολ ῥἠ φἰερον) to the mountain, a desert place.	[When] I, [John], heard these things, [I turned] away from the temple ([ἀἶκωτῆ] εἴβ[ο]λ ῥἠ περῖ[ε]) [to a mountainous and desert place]. ⁷

The Savior appearing next in the Johannine frame story is not the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark who says that Moses was necessarily lenient in legislation.⁸ Nor is this the Jesus of the Gospel of Matthew who says that as a new Moses he has come to fulfill the law by intensifying its ethical demands.⁹ Much less is

6 In Tardieu's commentary 1984, 31, 38, the design of the apocryphon is "fondamentalement antijuif," and the opponents are "à la fois les judéo-chrétiens et les chrétiens." John's Jewish antagonist is supposed to be a Pharisee. His name, Arimanius, could also have pagan significance: the 'evil spirit' in Greco-Roman conceptions of Zoroastrianism; see e.g. Giverson 1963, 152–153. This seems more likely to me than the idea in Barc and Funk 2012, 184, that the name refers to Joseph of Arimathea.

7 Ap. John NHC III,1 1.16–17 / BG 2 20.4–6 / NHC II,1 1.17–19 (Waldstein and Wisse 1995, 14–15). Passage not extant in NHC IV,1.

8 Mark 10.2–9.

9 Matt 5.17–20. King 2006, 239–240, argues: "In its revisionary mode, the *Secret Revelation of John* fits solidly within the Christian hermeneutical project. . . . If we moderns should feel the audacity of this sweeping cultural project more fiercely in the pages of the *Secret Revelation of John* than we do with Paul or the *Gospel of Matthew*, that is only because the latter's historical success has domesticated their boldness." But neither Paul nor Matthew ever vilified

this the Jesus of the Gospel of Luke or the Gospel of John who says that Moses wrote about him.¹⁰ Rather the Savior contradicts Moses over and over.¹¹

If John’s Jewish antagonist in the opening scene represents Sethian opponents, John is assumed to be the latest human founder of the true religion of Adam, Eve, and their son Seth, the first gnostics.¹² John further represents potential Sethian converts and neophytes, while the Savior speaks for those who have already been initiated and hence know that much of Jewish and Christian scripture is a demonic version of sacred history calculated to oppress them from the beginning.

the biblical creator. And King 2006, 241 goes on to recognize: “Certainly its ridicule of the God of *Genesis* as an arrogant and ignorant pretender strikes at the core of Jewish piety. . . . [I]t is impossible to gainsay the willingness, even gleefulness, of the *Secret Revelation of John’s* ridicule of the most cherished beliefs of Jews. Surely this must be evidence of some kind of real animosity.” I think the bitterness would have been towards most Christians also given that they too believed in and worshipped the God of *Genesis*.

- 10 Luke 24.27, 44; John 1.44; 5.39–47. Pleše 2006, 8–9, 17, highlights Luke 24.13–53 as the “ultimate source” or “model for the Gnostic type of paradosis. . . . Christ’s hermeneutical strategy, as described in Luke, is therefore not much different from the Savior’s exegesis of *Genesis* and Wisdom literature in the ‘core document,’ or ‘Ur-text,’ of the *Apocryphon of John*.” With respect to form, I agree. The substance of the tradition that the Sethian Jesus hands down is not at all what the Lukan Jesus teaches, though; cf. Luttikhuisen 2006, 27: “Just like other early Christians, Ap. John’s mythopoeists were convinced that the true significance of the Jewish Scriptures was disclosed when they were read in the light of the Christian revelation. The agreement is, however, purely formal because early Christians had very divergent ideas about the actual content and meaning of the revelation brought by Christ.”
- 11 Ap. John BG 2 45.8–13 / NHC II,1 13.18–23; NHC III 29.4–7 / BG 2 58.16–59.1 / NHC II,1 22.22–25 / NHC IV,1 34.31–35.3; NHC III,1 29.21–22 / BG 2 59.17–18 / NHC II,1 23.3 / NHC IV 35.22–24; NHC III,1 37.22–23 / BG 2 73.4–5 / NHC II,1 29.6; NHC IV,1 45.1–2. These occasional contradictions of Moses by name are hardly the only or even the most vigorous contradictions of the Torah and Judeo-Christian scripture in the apocryphon; they are merely the most explicit ones.
- 12 The authors of the texts in the Coptic gnostic codices (Askew, Berlin, Bruce, Nag Hammadi) do not refer to themselves as gnostics in those texts—a longstanding challenge to definitions of gnosticism, narrow and broad. This remains the case, even after the publication of the Tchacos codex. There is, however, an oblique reference to a Sethian author’s possession of divine gnosis in Gos. Jud. TC3 54.8–12 (Kasser et al. 2007, 227; translation modified): “But God [i.e. the transcendent far above the biblical creators] caused knowledge (ΓΝΩΣΙΣ) to be brought to Adam and those with him, in order that the kings of Chaos and Hades might not rule over them.” Note also Ap. John NHC II,1 4.5, 23.26. Furthermore there is good second-hand evidence that Sethians and others called themselves gnostics; see e.g. DeConick 2013a, 295–296.

The Myth

Sethian conflict with others is not just narrativized in the frame story, which may be a secondary textual component after all; it is fundamental to the myth itself.¹³ The authors of the Apocryphon of John interpreted and rewrote the Genesis creation accounts by rearranging and combining them into alternate sequences and structures. They read certain passages more than once and at more than one cosmological level. They paid attention to divine plurals and double entendre. They grappled with interpretive problems such as descriptions of God that were all too human. No doubt they participated in the same overarching exegetical conversations as Greek-speaking Jews like Philo of Alexandria, and Aramaic-speaking Jews like those whose interpretations and rewritings of Genesis were recorded in the targums, as well as Christians.¹⁴ But they went much further.

The authors of the apocryphon claimed that Moses was wrong, chiefly about God and creation. God was not the anthropomorphic biblical creator worshipped by Jews in the temple in Jerusalem and later by Christians. God was far above the biblical creator, who came into being by mistake and who was initially ignorant of God, then led a rebellion against his mother Sophia and ultimately against God as he obscured their existence so that he could enslave humanity to his own worship. The creation of heaven and earth, humans, and ultimately Judeo-Christian tradition was all part of this original apostasy.¹⁵

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- 13 Pleše 2006, 18, and Luttikhuisen 2006, 19, stress the continuity between the frame story and the myth, and they tend to understand the authors of both as Christians. Logan 1996 argues for a Christian understanding of the myth in the apocryphon and its related texts too. I am stressing a general continuity of Sethian conflict with others, although I think it's possible that the myth was written against Jewish tradition first, then Christian tradition also, with the added Johannine frame story; cf. Barc and Funk 2012, 34.
- 14 For the apocryphon as a rewriting of Genesis, and for its overall Jewish component, whether mediated through Christianity or not, see King 2006, 95–110, 215–234; also Luttikhuisen, 2006, 44–107; Barc and Funk 2012, 30–32; King 2013.
- 15 M. Williams 2013 argues that despite their negative view of the creator, the authors of texts such as the apocryphon did not have a negative view of creation and life on Earth but lived lives 'full of meaning and purpose.' To be sure, according to the apocryphon the creation of humans was providential enough, and the molded psychic body was created in the divine image before it was remolded and clothed in darkness. There is also some correspondence, however weak, between the cosmos and the realm of the transcendent God. I don't think this or Pronoia's continued mundane activity, though, establishes that the world and its inhabitants—much less the birth of their creator—were intended to be. If the authors of the apocryphon did believe their lives were full of meaning and purpose, apparently this kind of life was only a recent possibility for them. Human history from the time after the Flood to the narrative present is described dimly in the longer

Thus the Sethians were not the apostates; to their minds, the apostates were the biblical creator and by extension his worshippers.¹⁶

It was not just that the authors of the apocryphon exploited the divine plurals in Genesis in order to exalt God above the biblical creator or insulate God from the undesirable results of creation and from the advent of evil. They did that along with other Jewish and Christian interpreters.¹⁷ But what is more, they vilified and mocked the biblical creator, which was also to vilify and mock the deity of their opponents. Not only did they portray him as an embarrassingly ill-begotten apostate, they called him Saklas and Samael (“fool” and “blind god” in Aramaic) as well as Ialdabaoth, which perhaps derives from divine names in Hebrew scripture: $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$ Elohim Adonai Sabaoth, the Lord God of Hosts.¹⁸ According to the myth in the apocryphon, he was ignorant and boastful. When he and his angels created Adam, and when the biblical creator was subsequently tricked into animating that molded psychic body with the light-power/spirit he had stolen from his mother and the transcendent God’s domain, Adam turned out to be their superior. Adam was luminous, intelligent, and wise. Jealous, they stripped him of his perfection, entombing him and enchaining him in a remolded elemental body. Not wanting Adam to realize what they had done to him, next the biblical creator and his angels deceived Adam about the trees in the garden from which he should and should not eat, and they anaesthetized him in order to remove the spirit inside. After Eve woke Adam up, Ialdabaoth ignorantly put him in charge of her and clothed them both in gloomy darkness. The chief archon even raped Eve, thereby fathering Cain and Abel.¹⁹

Again it was not just that the authors of the apocryphon speculated on Adam’s lost garment of light. They did that along with other Jewish and Christian interpreters.²⁰ But what is more, they blamed the loss of it on

manuscripts (Ap. John NHC II 30.2–7 / IV 46.10–15 [Waldstein and Wisse 166–167]): “They (the people) became old without having enjoyment. They died, not having found truth and without knowing the God of truth. And thus the whole creation became enslaved forever, from the foundation of the world until now.”

- 16 In Gos. Jud. TC 51.12–15 (Kasser et al. 2007, 221), Nebro a.k.a. Ialdabaoth is even said to be $\alpha\pi[\text{OC}]\text{T}\alpha\text{T}\text{H}\text{C}$.
- 17 E.g. M. Williams 1996, 64–75.
- 18 E.g. Pearson 2007, 107; Rasmus 2009, 105, 125–126; also Barc and Funk 2012, 246.
- 19 Ap. John NHC III 22.1–31.20 / BG 48.6–62.20 / NHC II 14.30–24.25 / NHC IV 23.9–38.12.
- 20 J. Smith 1978; DeConick and Fossum 1991; Lambden 1992; Anderson 2001. For the interpretation of the garment of skin in Genesis 3.21 as the physical body, a reading popularized by Origen and his followers along with the interpretation of the molded ‘body’ in Genesis 2.7 as the vehicle of the soul, see Simonetti 1962; Crouzel 1977; Beatrice 1985; Dechow 1988, 297–347; Bammel 1989; Clark 1992, 85–158; Schibli 1992; R. Layton 2004, 85–113; Reuling

the jealousy of the biblical creator and his angels, not any failing of Adam or Eve.²¹

Once again, it was not just that they believed an evil angel seduced Eve, and that the watchers did the same to subsequent women. They read Genesis that way along with other Jewish and Christian exegetes.²² But what is more, they identified that evil angel as the biblical creator worshipped by most all Jews and Christians!²³

2006, 72–77. The soul's vehicle, not to be confused with the light garment, is arguably a Middle- and Neo-Platonic invention; see e.g. Kissling 1922; Dodds 1992/1933; A. Smith 1974, 152–158; Finamore 1985. Alternatively Bos 2003 argues that it was invented already by Aristotle himself. Drawing on Bos' study, Luttikhuisen 2006, 64–65, understands the light-power in the apocryphon to be the nous, mind or intellect, and he understands the molded psychic body to be its temporary ethereal vehicle. Whether or not Bos is correct about Aristotle's psychology, the discourse on the fate of souls in the apocryphon is about the fate of *the soul*, the molded psychic body in other words, not the fate of the light-power as breath of life or spirit or mind. Hence in the pleromic aeon of Seth and his seed are found *the souls* of the saints, just as in the aeon below it are found *the souls* that were tardy in their repentance. It seems to me, then, that the molded psychic body is not the soul's vehicle; if anything in the apocryphon, that would be the remolded elemental body. I think one of the best comparanda for the apocryphon's psychology is Justin Martyr in his *Dial.*, esp. 6.1–2, where the human soul can die but is animated by God's spirit for as long as God wants it to live in or out of the body. The soul is also mortal according to Gos. Jud. TC3 43.11–44.7, 53.17–25.

21 Ap. John NHC III,1 28.6–15 / BG 2 57.8–19 / NHC II,1 22.3–8. Passage in NHC IV damaged. The light garment was maliciously taken from Adam; he did not lose it. And it was taken from him before he ever ate the fruit, not after. The double entendre of the garment of skin/light has not received the attention it deserves in major studies of the apocryphon; but see Rasimus 2009, 164–165. Tardieu 1984, 327, alone comments, “l'exégète gnostique inverse la valeur du jeu de mots rabbinique,” that is, the words for light (אור) in Genesis 1.3 and skin (עור) in Genesis 3.21. I think the word play is subverted though not inverted. In the apocryphon, the light garment is still good, as it is in other Jewish and Christian interpretations of Genesis, while the skin garment is much more negative. The subversion involves who's to blame for the loss of the garment of light—Adam and Eve, or the biblical creator—which in turn affects the value of the eating of the fruit. The light garment also appears in the myth that Irenaeus had access to; see *Haer.* 1.30.9.

22 For the watchers traditions, see e.g. Harkins, Coblenz Bautch, and Endres 2014.

23 As Tardieu 1984, 327, comments, “le diable traditionnel a été remplacé par le Dieu de la Genèse.” Luttikhuisen 2006, 58, is starker: “In his wickedness and ferocity he [Ialdabaoth] even surpasses the Satan of apocalyptic Jewish and (non-Gnostic) Christian traditions.” King 2006, 170–172, compares and contrasts the apocryphon with Justin Martyr's anti-pagan use of the watchers traditions, and with the cosmic struggle in the New Testament book of Revelation, stating: “However much other Christians might object, the framers of the *Secret Revelation of John* placed themselves within the Christian camp, not least by making the Savior the hero of their story.” But it seems to me that by having the

For their part, the gnostics who wrote the apocryphon worshipped a different God far above the biblical creator, even as they vilified the deity of their opponents. They were well aware of what they were doing and the hazards involved. According to the myth, once Adam and Eve ate the fruit and consequently knew they had already fallen into the chaos and darkness of the biblical creator’s realm, they “withdrew” from him and “were afraid to curse him and to reveal his ignorance:”

NHC III	BG	NHC II/IV
<p>Now Ialdabaoth noticed [that] they withdrew from him (ⲁⲉ) ⲁⲮϫⲁⲒⲬⲠⲟⲩ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲩ). He [cursed them]. In addition, he added about the woman, ‘Your husband will rule over you,’ [for he does] not know the mystery which [came to pass] through the holy decree from on high. And they were afraid to curse him, to reveal his ignorance to his angels.</p>	<p>Ialdabaoth noticed that they withdrew from him (ⲁⲉ ⲁⲮϫⲁⲒⲬⲠⲟⲩ ⲙ̅Ⲏϫⲁⲛⲃⲟⲗ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲩ). He cursed them. And in addition, he adds about the woman that the husband is to rule over her, for he does not know the mystery which came to pass through the holy decree from on high. And they were afraid to curse him and to reveal his ignorance.</p>	<p>And when Ialdabaoth noticed that they withdrew from him (ⲁⲉ ⲁⲮϫⲁⲒⲬⲠⲟⲩ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲩ), he cursed his earth. He found the woman as she was preparing herself for her husband. He was ruler over her though he did not know the mystery which had come to pass through the holy decree. And they were afraid to blame him. And he showed his angels his ignorance which is in him.²⁴</p>

Savior identify the leader of the fallen angels as the biblical creator, the gnostic authors of the apocryphon hoisted Christians like Justin Martyr with their own petard.

24 Ap. John NHC III,1 30.23–31.3 / BG 2 61.8–18 / NHC II,1 23.35–24.6 / NHC IV,1 37.4–14 (Waldstein and Wisse 1995, 136–137; translation modified).

Adam and Eve withdraw from (COOZE, CAZΩZ EBOL N-; ZINE, ZNTZ CABOL N-) the biblical creator just as John turns away from (KOTTE, KOTZ EBOL ZN-) the temple in Jerusalem.²⁵ Adam and Eve's fear of cursing/blaming Ialdabaoth and exposing his ignorance probably expresses the authors' own sentiment and has to do with their use of mythopoesis and pseudepigraphy; they did not write under their own names because, among other reasons, they were wary of calling the biblical creator a fool in the open in the company of other Jews and Christians. In a Christian context, it was safer and more authoritative, not to mention more shocking, to have the Savior and John reveal his ignorance for them.²⁶ But even if the frame story is a postscript to the myth, Sethian conflict with others must have started sooner than later—as hard as it is to document before the mid second century.

Irenaeus, Celsus, Origen, Plotinus and Porphyry

Their opponents were also fairly well aware of what the authors of the Apocryphon of John and its related Sethian texts were doing. Irenaeus wrote against them, referring to them as gnostics. He had access to a version of the rewritten creation accounts in the apocryphon. Besides the rape of Eve he went on to add in his exposé of gnostic myth that the biblical creator made a covenant with Abraham, gave the law to Moses, and had Jesus killed.²⁷ This was beyond the pale for the Christian bishop. Irenaeus tentatively hoped that a few of the gnostics and those influenced by them “might be saved (*saluari possint*) as they do penance (*paenitentiam agentes*) and convert to the one sole creator God and maker of the universe (*et conuertentes ad unum solum*

25 Notably Crum 1962/1939, 125b, 380a, 689b, lists ἀφιστάναι among the Greek equivalents for all three Coptic verbs. Even if other Greek verbs stand behind the Coptic, there is a conceptual link here. This important point of continuity between the frame story and the myth has not received the attention it deserves in major studies of the apocryphon.

26 Tardieu 1984, 327, comments: “Ce qui sous-entend que cette timidité du couple promordial ne doit plus avoir cours aujourd’hui car la révélation écrite de la gnose proclame l’ignorance et la malédiction du démiurge.” The authors of the apocryphon did proclaim the ignorance and cursedness of the demiurge. If it were the case that Adam and Eve's timidity no longer ought to apply, though, I think the authors would have written under their own names without fear.

27 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.29–30. In 1.30.7, it is not Ialdabaoth himself but his lackeys that rape Eve. For the biblical creator's remote-control execution of Jesus, compare 1.30.13 with Gos. Jud. TC, where the betrayal is astrologically determined; see e.g. Adamson 2009.

conditorem deum et factorem uniuersitatis).²⁸ Naturally we do not have to side with Irenaeus in considering the Sethians and those influenced by them to be sinful heretics in need of repentance, but he is not off the mark when he writes that he and they worshipped different deities.

Sethian theology was itself influenced by Greek philosophy, mostly Platonizing but also some Aristotelian and Stoic. This does not account for the difference, however. Several Greek philosophers and other Jews and Christians influenced by Greek philosophy posited a more or less transcendent God, without vilifying the creator. In Platonic thought in particular, to hold a thoroughly negative view of the creator and creation was unspeakable, as Plato put it in the *Timaeus*:

Hence to discover the maker and father of this universe (τὸν . . . ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντός) is a task indeed; and having discovered him, to declare him to all people is impossible. However, let us return and inquire further concerning the cosmos—After which of the models did its architect (ὁ τεκταινόμενος) construct it? Was it after that which is self-identical and uniform, or after that which has come into existence? Now if this cosmos is beautiful and its craftsman is good (εἰ μὲν δὴ καλὸς ἐστὶν ὁδε ὁ κόσμος ὃ τε δημιουργὸς ἀγαθός), then it is plain that he was looking at the eternal; but if otherwise (εἰ δέ), which is not right for anyone even to say (ὃ μὴ δ’ εἰπεῖν τινὶ θέμις), then he was looking at that which has come into existence. To everyone in fact it is obvious (παντὶ δὴ σαφές) that he was looking at the eternal; for the cosmos is the most beautiful (κάλλιστος) of all that has come into existence, and the craftsman is the best (ἄριστος) of all causes.²⁹

The authors of the apocryphon rewrote the *Timaeus* alongside the Genesis creation accounts, and in the process they did the unspeakable.³⁰ Holding a thoroughly negative view of the creator, they fused their ignorant, boastful, jealous and apostate Ialdabaoth with the demiurge. The situation in the apocryphon is far more ghastly than Plato’s worst case scenario because, as Samael, the

28 *Haer.* 1.31.3 (Rousseau and Doutreleau 1979, 388; Unger and Dillon 1992, 103; translation modified).

29 *Tim.* 28c–29a (Bury 1929, 50–53; translation modified).

30 For the apocryphon as a rewriting of *Tim.*, and for its overall Greek philosophical component, see Pleše 2006, esp. 49–66, 271–272; also Luttikhuisen 2006, 29–43; King 2006, 191–214; Barc and Funk 2012, 32–34; King 2013.

Sethian demiurge was not looking at any model when he created the world.³¹ According to the longer manuscripts, he depended on thieved memories from his mother Sophia.³²

So it is not surprising to find Celsus and Origen, both Platonists or at least strongly influenced by Platonism, agreeing with one another against the Sethians almost despite themselves. The pagan Celsus wrote against Christianity, which for him included Sethianism; the Christian Origen wrote against the Sethians and against Celsus in reply.

Celsus referred to the Sethians as Christians. He critiqued them for their belief “that the god of the Jews is an accursed god (θεὸν κατηραμένον τὸν Ἰουδαίων), the one who sends rain and thunder, and who is the craftsman of this cosmos (τοῦδε τοῦ κόσμου δημιουργὸν), and who is the god of Moses, described in his creation account.”³³ The cursedness (κατηραμένον) of the biblical creator here picks up on the cursedness (ἐπικατάρατος) of the serpent as well as the ground in Genesis.³⁴ There is a similar exchange in the passage from the apocryphon, where Ialdabaoth curses (καροϋ, κοροϋω, κροϋω) Adam and Eve, and where they in turn are afraid to curse (καροϋ, καρω) him and reveal his ignorance.³⁵

Addressing the Sethians in the singular, Celsus thought they were “most impious (ὡ δὺσσεβέστατε)” for believing the creator was an accursed god, and for “pouring abuse on him.” Interestingly Celsus seems to have had information about Sethians who were afraid to curse the biblical creator and reveal his ignorance in front of a Jewish audience, like Adam and Eve are afraid to do in the apocryphon: “But when you are put in difficulties by the Jews (ἀλλ’ ὅταν μὲν ὑπὸ τούτων βιάζῃ), you allow that you worship the same god (τὸν αὐτὸν θεὸν

31 Pleše 2006, 199: “Ialdabaoth is a ‘blind’ and incompetent pretender, moved by the impulses of his irrational soul and therefore capable of producing only deceptive semblances of ideal forms.”

32 Ap. John NHC II,1 13.1–5 / IV,1 20.15–18. For proto-Sethian and Sethian developments leading up to the apocryphon’s break in the chain of being, see Adamson 2013a, esp. 76–80. The creation of the first human is another matter. Ialdabaoth and his angels were looking at the eternal, but only indirectly as the eternal was reflected on water; see Ap. John NHC III,1 22.1–6 / BG 2 48.6–14 / NHC II,1 14.30–15.4 / NHC IV,1 23.9–20.

33 Origen, *Cels.* 6.27.16–19 (Borret 1969, 246; Chadwick 1965/1953, 343; translation modified); see also 6.28.7–10.

34 Genesis 3.14, 17.

35 Ap. John NHC III,1 30.23–31.3 / BG 2 61.8–18 / NHC II,1 23.35–24.6 / NHC IV,1 37.4–14 (Waldstein and Wisse 1995, 136–137). Crum 1962/1939, 387b lists *καταράσθαι* and *ἐπικαταράσθαι* among the Greek equivalents.

σέβειν ὁμολογεῖς).”³⁶ If so, and if Sethians dissembled in their conflict with Jews face to face when their Jewish opponents had the upper hand, it is nonetheless clear that behind the relative privacy and security of a pseudonym the authors of the apocryphon believed Moses was wrong about God, and that most all Jews as well as Christians worshipped a foolish apostate.

In his response to Celsus, Origen referred to the Sethians as Ophians or Ophites. He critiqued them much the way Celsus did, as he distanced himself and his Christianity from them. Charging Celsus with misrepresenting Christian belief, Origen agreed that it would be most impious to curse and pour abuse on the creator, something that Christians would never do, according to Origen, not in their debates with Jews, and not in their debates with each other. Only the heretical Ophians would do that, Origen wrote, and he did not regard them as Christians.³⁷

We do not have to side with Celsus and Origen in considering the Ophite-Sethians to be impious, any more than we do with Irenaeus in considering them to be heretics. Still Celsus himself is proof that their theology could be as shocking to pagans as it was to Jews and Christians—not just Christians like Irenaeus but even Christians like Origen who had been strongly influenced by Platonism.

Further proof comes from the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus and his student Porphyry. Porphyry referred to the Sethians as Christians and philosophical heretics. He was Plotinus’ literary executor and editor, and he gave a short title to part of his teacher’s writings against them. It was “Against the Gnostics.” But the extended title strikes at the heart of the issue: “Against those who say that the craftsman of the cosmos and the cosmos are evil (Πρὸς τοὺς κακὸν τὸν δημιουργὸν τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὸν κόσμον κακὸν εἶναι λέγοντας).”³⁸ In other words, Plotinus was writing against the Sethians for doing what was unspeakable per the *Timaeus*. Plotinus wrote that they poured abuse on the cosmos as well as its craftsman, that they despised the lower deities, and that their characterization of the demiurge as rebellious (ἀποστάντα) was purposely very much abusive.³⁹ He also wrote that they would “recommend their own opinions to their audience by ridiculing and insulting the Greeks,” and that they

36 Origen, *Cels.* 6.29.4–17 (Borret 1969, 250; Chadwick 1965/1953, 345).

37 Origen, *Cels.* 6.24–40, esp. 6.29.

38 Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 16, 24 (Armstrong 1966, 1:44–45, 76–77; translation modified).

39 Plotinus, *Enn.* 11.9.8, 9, 10 (Armstrong 1966, 2:252–253, 258–261, 266–267; translation modified and paraphrased).

would “pull to pieces what godlike men of antiquity have said nobly and in accordance with the truth,” those godlike men being Plato in particular.⁴⁰

Plotinus even summed up the Sethians’ evangelizing strategy. He has them say to the potential convert and neophyte: “You are God’s offspring, and the other people whom you used to admire are not, and neither are the beings they venerate according to the tradition received from their fathers (οὐδ’ ἂ τιμῶσιν ἐκ πατέρων λαβόντες); but you are even better than the heaven, without having taken any trouble to become so.”⁴¹

The Sethians and especially the authors of the apocryphon would not have said it quite like that. For one thing, although they engaged in harsh polemic with others, their soteriological thinking was ultimately universalist, believing as they did that only apostates from Sethianism would not be saved; non-Sethians would be converted eventually, even if it was only after death.⁴²

But on the whole, Plotinus accurately summarized what the Savior tells John in the apocryphon. He tells him that he and his fellow spirits, the seed of Seth, have been created in the divine image above the biblical creator. He tells him that the spirit animating them is not the creator’s own spirit but one that Ialdabaoth had stolen from the transcendent God’s domain. Thus, like Adam, John is superior to his celestial though evil makers. And like Adam and Eve, John should withdraw from the biblical creator. He should turn away from the temple in Jerusalem, and turn away from the traditions of his fathers. The Savior tells John that Moses was wrong about God, and therefore so are Jews and Christians. Plotinus was not Jewish or Christian, and he may have never read the apocryphon itself. Even so he got the Sethian gospel message clear enough: his admired Plato was also wrong, and the demiurge was no good after all.

Sethian Counterculture

So how are we to understand this Sethian portrayal of the Platonic demiurge and the traditional biblical creator? To repeat, we do not have to side with the Sethians’ opponents in considering their vilification of him to be heresy or impiety. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t sociologically transgressive or

40 Plotinus, *Enn.* 11.9.6, 10 (Armstrong 1966, 2:247, 265).

41 Plotinus, *Enn.* 11.9.9 (Armstrong 1966, 2:260–261; translation modified).

42 See e.g. M.A. Williams 1996, 195–198.

countercultural. It was.⁴³ It clearly shocked Christians such as Irenaeus and Origen as well as pagans such as Celsus and Plotinus. It was no less shocking to the Valentinian Ptolemy.⁴⁴ We could hardly expect otherwise from the ignorant, boastful, jealous and apostate Ialdabaoth, Saklas, Samael, featured in the Apocryphon of John and its related Sethian texts. To vilify the creator also would have been shocking to most all Jews, even if we do not have any exposés or critiques of Sethianism as such from them.

By countercultural I am suggesting it was against previous tradition, both Judeo-Christian and Platonic.⁴⁵ Most Jews and Christians believed the biblical creator was good, not evil; this holds for those Jews and Christians who believed in a sort of transcendent God and attributed the work of creation to one or more demiurgic figures. In Platonic thought, following the *Timaeus*, it was forbidden to say the craftsman was not good. Even a general survey of Greek philosophy before the Common Era reveals that the notion of a bad creator was rare at best.⁴⁶

I don't want to suggest that because of Sethian counterculture the gnostic authors of the apocryphon were not thoroughly embedded in the very traditions they turned away from. I also don't want to suggest that they were not shaped by, and involved in the shaping of, those traditions. They were. Yet they vilified the biblical creator along with the Platonic demiurge. So we cannot

43 For transgressive and countercultural gnosis, see DeConick 2013a, 300–301; 2013b; 2016; plus her article in this volume.

44 In *Flor.*, Ptolemy critiqued unnamed ‘others’ who identified the Mosaic lawgiver as the devil and equated him with the craftsman. Ptolemy had Sethians in mind, not Marcionites, it seems. His shock is evident in his scorn. He concluded (apud Epiphanius, *Pan.* 33.7.1–5 [Holl, Begermann and Collatz 2013, 456; F. Williams 1987, 203; translation modified] that the law was given by a just demiurge rehabilitated from Sethian myth, “not by the perfect God himself, and surely not by the devil (μήτε μὴν ὑπ’ τοῦ διαβόλου), which is not even right to say (ὁ μὴδ’ θεμιτόν ἐστιν εἰπεῖν).” Note Ptolemy’s allusion to Plato, *Tim.* 29a (Bury 1929, 50): ὁ μὴδ’ εἰπεῖν τιθί θέμις.

45 Cahana 2014, 60, discusses Ap. John as an example of what he calls ‘gnostic antitraditionalism,’ which he understands to be the rejection of the Greco-Roman cultural premise that older is better and more reliable. About the Johannine frame story he states: “Christ seems to imply . . . that one should indeed turn away from tradition.” I concur that the authors of the apocryphon did not deny the charge of apostasy from Judaism and Christianity. But I don't think they were against tradition qua the old. They claimed that their beliefs—revealed again however lately by the Savior—were those of the first humans, before Moses, before Plato. For the classic gnostic appeal to Seth, see Rasimus 2009, 194–198.

46 See Mansfeld 1981.

treat them as any other variety of Christians, for one, unless we recognize that they venerated a different God.

Definitions and categorizations of gnosticism have been debated perennially and are not without their challenges. In the last few decades, scholarship has tended to avoid and even proscribe the term. We could dismantle gnosis, gnostic, and gnosticism altogether and instead experiment with other categories, such as a category of biblical traditions in which there is a demiurgic figure, as there is in Platonism.⁴⁷ But the Sethian creator is simply unlike most others. We could focus our study on individual texts within the hybridity of early Christian and ancient Mediterranean literature as a whole, apart from any definition and categorization of gnosticism.⁴⁸ But the central text in the so-called Coptic gnostic codices, the Apocryphon of John, resists categorization as Jewish or Christian, precisely because its authors vilified the traditional biblical creator. To lump the apocryphon and its gnostic authors in with their fellow Jews and Christians as well as their fellow Platonists might excuse us from having to define and categorize gnosticism any longer as something different from the rest. This would be to miss the Sethians' own point, however, which was not just rhetorical or discursive. It would be, from their perspective, to re-enslave them to the worship of a foolish apostate who raped Eve and had Jesus' killed.

Why Ialdabaoth

I have focused on the vilification of the creator in the Apocryphon of John as a primary example of Sethian counterculture. There is, of course, much more to the story of the Sethians, the Ophites, the classic gnostics, their myths and rituals. I will merely conclude with a brief speculative hypothesis about how and why the authors of the apocryphon and its related texts may have come to vilify the creator in the first place.⁴⁹

An evil creator is paramount among the features of Sethianism that distinguish classic gnostics from other Jews, Christians, and Platonists, as well as any proto-Sethians that we might reconstruct. Some of the proto-Sethians must

47 M.A. Williams 1996.

48 King 2003.

49 For scholarship on the vilification or demonization of the demiurge in the apocryphon and elsewhere, a topic that can be tantamount to the origin of gnosticism, see e.g. Fossum 1985, 2–24, 213–220, 332–338; M.A. Williams 1996, 213–234; Rasimus 2009, 171–188.

have been deeply invested in biblical tradition, it seems to me—so deeply that they could not write off the investment once the cost of maintaining their membership in the tradition outweighed any returns they had once enjoyed or could hope for in the future.⁵⁰ They had participated in the same overarching exegetical conversations as their fellow Jews and Christians, all of whom were Hellenized to one extent or another. Hellenization had made proto-Sethians painfully cognizant of interpretive problems such as the descriptions of an anthropomorphic creator. Influenced by Greek philosophy including Platonism, they had persisted in pointing out these problems to their fellows as they ventured preliminary solutions and sought partners in a bold project of theological renovation. Some, maybe most of their fellows turned them down, however. Talk of the problems, the solutions, was not welcome. Proto-Sethians were even vilified by their co-religionists. As relations deteriorated, they came to vilify the deity of their opponents, which had also been the God they themselves worshipped initially. Proto-Sethians became Sethians. They rewrote the Genesis creation accounts both in order to solve interpretive problems and in order to get back at their rivals.

Having vilified the biblical creator—in part due to the influence of Greek philosophical thought which is what had highlighted for them the interpretive problems in scripture from the get go—they did likewise to the Platonic demiurge. In the *Timaeus*, Plato himself acknowledged the notion of a bad creator, albeit unapprovingly and only as an elliptical ‘if on the other hand...’ After him, no pagan Middle- or Neo-Platonist vilified the demiurge. I do not think the gnostic authors of the apocryphon would have either except for their failed investment in biblical tradition.

50 King 2006, 162, applies the cross-cultural comparative work of social scientist James C. Scott to her study of the apocryphon: “Scott has argued that resistance is more likely to arise from among those who have bought heavily into a society’s dominant ideology and feel betrayed than from those who reject the values of their society. The myth of the *Secret Revelation of John* expresses this sensibility of betrayal.” For King 2006, 167, the apocryphon’s social critique is largely aimed at Rome, even though she admits that the text “doesn’t actually mention any local or imperial figure or office.” It seems to me too that the resistance arose from among insiders. But I think they were Jews and Christians invested in biblical tradition, and that the critique of the biblical creator and his angels is first and foremost a critique of Judaism and Christianity.

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