

Sethianism

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The **Sethians** were a group of ancient Gnostics who date their existence to before Christianity.^[1] Their influence spread throughout the Mediterranean into the later systems of the Basilideans and the Valentinians^[*citation needed*]. Their thinking, though it is predominantly Judaic in foundation, is arguably strongly influenced by Platonism. Sethians are so called for their veneration of the biblical Seth, third son of Adam and Eve, who is depicted in their myths of creation as a divine incarnation; consequently, the offspring or 'posterity' of Seth are held to comprise a superior elect within human society.

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Sethian texts

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- The Apocalypse of Adam

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- The Trimorphic Protennoia
- The Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians
- The Gospel of Judas

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Gnosticism



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The Sethian or 'Classic' gnostic myth

Commonly, the Sethian cosmogonic myth describes an intended prologue to the events of Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch, which by its emendation brings about a radical reinterpretation of the typical orthodox Jewish conception of creation, and the divine's relation to reality. This myth is typically presupposed by Sethian manuscripts, and occasionally by those of later schools. Many of their concepts derived from a fusion of Hellenic philosophy, Platonic (c. 427–c. 347 BC), and later, Neoplatonic (ca. 253 AD) concepts with the Old Testament. This was also done by Hebrew scholar Philo (20 BC - 40 AD), who had engaged in a similar fusion.

The Sethian cosmogony was most famously contained in the Apocryphon of John, which describes an unknown God, the same as Paul had done in the Acts of the Apostles 17:23. The latter conception defines God through a series of explicit positive statements called cataphatic theology, themselves universal but in the divine taken to their superlative degrees: as well as being explicitly male, he is omniscient and omnipotent. The Sethian conception of God is, by contrast, defined through negative theology exclusively: he is immovable, invisible, intangible, ineffable.

This Apophatic Theology (Negative theology) mode of thinking about God is found throughout Gnosticism, Vedantic Hinduism, Platonic and Aristotelean theology, and Eastern Orthodox theology as well. It may be seen in some Judaic sources.

Sethianism posits a transcendent hidden invisible God that is beyond ordinary description, much as Plato (see Parmenides) and Philo had also stated earlier in history. It is only possible to say what God isn't, and the experience of it remains something, again, in defiance of rational description.

The emanation of the spiritual universe

This original God went through a series of emanations, during which its essence is seen as spontaneously expanding into many successive 'generations' of paired male and female beings, called 'aeons'. The first of these is Barbelo, a figure common throughout Sethianism, who is coactor in the emanations that follow. The aeons that result can be seen as representative of the various attributes of God, themselves indiscernible when not abstracted from their origin. In this sense, Barbelo and the emanations may be seen as poetic devices allowing an otherwise utterly unknowable God to be discussed in a meaningful way amongst initiates. Collectively, God and the aeons comprise the sum total of the spiritual universe, known as the *Pleroma*.

At this point the myth is still only dealing with a spiritual, non-material universe. In some versions of the myth, the Spiritual Aeon Sophia *imitates* God's actions in performing an emanation of her own, without the prior approval of the other aeons in the Pleroma. This results in a crisis within the Pleroma, leading to the appearance of the Yaldabaoth, a 'serpent with a lion's head'. This figure is commonly known as the demiurge, after the figure in Plato's *Timaeus*. (Gr. δημιουργός *dēmiourgós*, Latinized *demiurgus*, meaning "artisan" or "craftsman", lit.

"public or skilled worker", from δήμιος *demios* (belonging to the public) + ἔργον *ergon* (work).)^[2] This being is at first hidden by Sophia but subsequently escapes, stealing a portion of divine power from her in the process.

The creation of matter

Using this stolen power, Yaldabaoth creates a material world in imitation of the divine Pleroma. To complete this task, he spawns a group of entities known collectively as Archons, 'petty rulers' and craftsmen of the physical world. Like him, they are commonly depicted as theriomorphic, having the heads of animals. Some texts explicitly identify the Archons with the fallen angels described in the Enoch tradition in Judaic apocrypha. At this point the events of the Sethian narrative begin to cohere with the events of *Genesis*, with the demiurge and

his archontic cohorts fulfilling the role of the creator. As in *Genesis*, the demiurge declares himself to be the only god, and that none exist superior to him; however, the audience's knowledge of what has gone before casts this statement, and the nature of the creator itself, in a radically different light.

The demiurge creates Adam, during the process unwittingly transferring the portion of power stolen from Sophia into the first physical human body. He then creates Eve from Adam's rib, in an attempt to isolate and regain the power he has lost. By way of this he attempts to rape Eve who now contains Sophia's divine power; several texts depict him as failing when Sophia's spirit transplants itself into the Tree of Knowledge; thereafter, the pair are 'tempted' by the serpent, and eat of the forbidden fruit, thereby once more regaining the power that the demiurge had stolen.

As is evident, the addition of the prologue radically alters the significance of events in Eden; rather than emphasizing a fall of human weakness in breaking God's command, Sethians (and their inheritors) emphasize a crisis of the Divine Fullness as it encounters the ignorance of matter, as depicted in stories about Sophia. Adam and Eve's removal from the Archon's paradise is seen as a step towards freedom from the Archons, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden in some cases becomes a heroic, salvific figure rather than an adversary of humanity or a 'proto-Satan'. Eating the fruit of Knowledge is the first act of human salvation from cruel, oppressive powers.

Modern use

The classical Sethian doctrine of the 1st and 2nd centuries has exerted a pervasive inspirational influence upon certain contemporary mystics and esotericists. The British-German group the Knights of Seth were inspired by them.

In popular culture

A group of sailors belonging to a Sethian religious group in early nineteenth century Britain appears as characters in several of the Aubrey-Maturin series of novels by Patrick O'Brian.

See also

- Gnosis
- Gnosticism
- Nag Hammadi
- Plotinus
- Neoplatonism and Gnosticism
- Knights of Seth

References

- ↑ Sethian Gnosticism: (<http://jdt.unl.edu/lithist.html>)
 - ↑ Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=demiurge&searchmode=none>)
- *Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern, Volume 6*, Wallis & Bregman (Editors), SUNY Press, (1991), Chapter: *Negative Theology in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism* by Curtis L. Hancock p. 167 ISBN 0-7914-1337-3
 - *Gnosticism and Platonism: The Platonizing Sethian texts from Nag Hammadi in their Relation to Later*

Platonic Literature (<http://jdt.unl.edu/triadaft.htm>), John D Turner, ISBN 0-7914-1338-1.

External links

- Nøkkelen (<http://www.krystiana.com/krystiana-publishing/books/n%C3%B8kkelen-sethiansk-gnostisisme-i-praksis.html>)
- The Sethians (<http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/sethians.html>)
- John D Turner translations of the Sethian Nag Hammadi text and history (<http://jdt.unl.edu/>)

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