

FRAGMENTS OF A FORGOTTEN AIŌN AN OUTLINE ON A Gnostic MYTH

di Ezio Albrile

Gnostics regard the cosmos as the result of an «error» or of a *hybris* begotten in the transcendent world. Reality is perceived as a great dream intentionally moulded by the Demiurge in order to forget the Light concealed in the creations. By consequence, the power of the Demiurge consists precisely in being the creator and keeper of a level of existence limited in space and time. Gnostic imagination plastically depicts the homicide and ignorant Demiurge with the features of an abnormous creature with the head of a lion and wings, enveloped in the coils of a snake. Thus, Gnostics reinterpreted a key figure in the syncretic pantheon of late Hellenism, i. e. Aiōn, the god of endless eternity, the *Saeculum*, the Iranic Zurwān, the Jewish 'Olām. This means that Aiōn involved contacts with two different visions: the Aiōnes are the creations that populate the gnostic *plērōma*, immortal and eternal entities, and outside the *plērōma* the demiurgic Aiōn arises as the result of a divine «fault», a monstrous being whose somatic features can be found in the Orphic and Mithriac iconography.

The central idea of Gnosticism, as of all the mystery religions, is that of salvation; a γνῶσις or inner knowledge was offered to the elect, through which the soul might be delivered from its condition of bondage. Salvation, as understood by Christianity is fundamentally ethical or «religious» in its meaning (Gnoli 1967: 290), but in Gnosticism the ethical aspect of redemption falls almost completely into the background of a ritual *praxis*.

Many ideas are involved in the Gnostic doctrine of salvation (Rudolph 2000: 99 ss.). They are closely associated, or even identified, in all the systems, but they were different in their origin, and need to be considered separately. The salvation is a deliverance from the material world, which is regarded as intrinsically evil. Gnosticism based itself on Iranian dualistic conceptions (Gnoli 1969: 274-292; 1984b: 45); but, while in Iranian religion Light and Darkness appear as two coeternal principles in an endless conflict, the Gnostics transformed the cosmic dualism into a metaphysical one. Under the influence of Greek philosophy the contrast of Light and Darkness became that of πνεῦμα and ὕλη or the higher world of pure being and the lower world of bodily senses. Although these two principles are viewed as irreconcilable opposites, it is recognized that they have come to be mingled together. All the evil and misery in the world are set down to this forbidden intermixture of the antagonistic principles. This is the biggest failure which has made necessary a work of salvation.

In most of the Gnostic systems the Iranian dualism is frankly accepted although we constantly meet with efforts to overcome it. The Naassenes conceived the cosmic Soul as poured forth from a Chaos better known as Αὐτογενής (Hipp. Ref. V,7,9). The later Valentinian school regarded the fall of Sophia as taking place within the Πλήρωμα. Basilides, according to Hippolytus, resolved the story of all beings into a spermatogony process taking place within a cosmic Egg (Hipp. Ref. 7, 21, 1 ss.; Gnoli 1962: 124-126), the so-called πανσπερμία. Moreover, in a number of systems a mediating power is placed or posited between the Light and the Darkness (it's the case of the Sethian thriadic conception where πνεῦμα is a mediating fragrance diffused everywhere).

In fact, these references and affiliations do not help us very much to discern the real issue of Gnostic cosmogony, that is the concept of the suffering God, the fallen God (Quispel 1965: 74). Yet the Gnostic sources are quite explicit in this respect. God suffers detriment to His soul (*Ev. Ver.* I, 3, 41,36); Iao, the

secret name of the Redeemer Christ, saves His soul (Iren. *Adv. haer.* 1,21,3); Christ too redeems His soul (*Ev. Phil.* Logion 9 [NHC II, 3, 53, 8-15]). In a way this is also the central idea of Manichaeism: Πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος, the Self of God, is overwhelmed by the powers of Darkness and vanquished, until the call from above redeems him. God, by redeeming man, redeems Himself (Reitzenstein 1921: 116).

We must remove the Hellenistic accretions and rigorously examine the Gnostic conception against its Aramaean-Iranian background (Albrile 2001: 27-54) to understand what this means and what was happening in the transition from syncretistic Judaism to Gnosticism (Scholem 1960: 31-35). The female counterpart of the godhead in Gnosticism is the Wisdom of Judaism, the more or less personified Ḥokmah of *Proverbs* 9, 1 and of the *Sapientia Salomonis*, who according to Jewish teaching was instrumental in creating the world; and who, according to some versions of the story, descended from heaven to dwell among man, but was not accepted and so returned to her abode in heaven, but that for some aspects recall the Iranian «liquid» goddess Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā, the lady of the *x^varənah-*, the *aura glorie*, the blazing brightness that in Mazdean traditions flows concealed in the water of the Vouru.kaša, the oneiric sea (Gnoli 1962: 101-102).

It seems that in the Gnosis of Simon Magus, Wisdom herself falls, that is to say the Fall causes a split within the deity. It is true that, according to one report, Wisdom herself remained completely unknown to the Rulers of this world, and only her image was overpowered by the lower powers (Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 2, 12). This then would mean that already at a very early date there existed among Samaritans (syncretistic Jews) the concept of a double Wisdom. In any case, that is what we find in the *Apokryphon Johannis*. There Barbelo, the female counterpart of God, is called the Πρόνοια, a Stoic expression (Onuki 1989: 148 [not *Paranoia!*]) equally attributed to Simon's Helen, and understandable as a title of Wisdom; but the last of the Aeons (Casadio 1997: 52-53), who falls because of her «lasciviousness», προύνκος, is called Sophia. A myth that became a ritual behaviour (Benko 1967: 103-119; Mantovani 1981: 143-145; Tommasi 2005: 6867a-6868b). This seems to be a complication of the more simple concept that Wisdom herself falls. The Valentinian system, as conceived by Ptolemaeus, is still further differentiated. There Σιγή, the mother of the Πλήρωμα, is distinguished from the thirtieth Aeon Sophia, who falls because of her desire to embrace God and then brings forth a lower Wisdom who is expelled from the Πλήρωμα. But that we have here a remote echo of Jewish Wisdom speculations is proved by the fact that this female is called Ἀχαμῶθ, the *interpretatio græca* of the Hebrew Ḥokmah (Iren. *Adv. haer.* 1, 4, 1).

Once again we must turn to syncretism and astrology to find some explanation for the Gnostic Demiurge. In the *Apokryphon Johannis*, available in its three Coptic versions (Mantovani 1990: 227a-231b; Waldstein-Wisse 1995) we read that this strange awkward Demiurge, Yaldabaoth, has the aspect of a lion and a serpent. Evidently he is a monstrous figure with the head of a lion and the body of a serpent, like Chnoubis or Abrasax on magical amulets (Bonner 1950: 128; Nilsson 1951: 61-64; Delatte-Derchain 1964: 38). More helpful is the information that Yaldabaoth has been borrowed from magic and represents the planet *Saturnus* (Origenes, *Contra Celsum* 6, 33). Yaldabaoth, says the *Apokryphon Johannis*, had eyes like burning lightning that flashed. He is the god who brings about Εἰμορμένη. All this fits in very well with astrological lore. Saturn, the highest planet with the most harmful influence, is represented in Palestine as Baal Hammon with the head of a lion, and Arnobius speaks about him as the lion-headed Frugifer (*Adv. Gentes* 6, 10). Saturnus as Kronos and therefore Chronos = «Time» is described by Plutarch (*de Iside et Osiride* 44) as the creator of the world, because Time in its course brings forth everything.

Saturnus is also the god of lightning. He is related to the monstrous figure of the Mithraic mysteries with the head of a lion and covered by snakes, which symbolizes Time and Fate. An image that is an evocation of Zurwān akanārag, the «endless Time» in Iranian cosmogony (Widengren 1965: 225 ss.; Gnoli 1984a: 115-138). Certainly, to abhor and reject time and history is characteristic of Gnosticism. «This Archon who was weak had three names: the first name is Yaldabaoth; the second is Saklas; the third is Sammael. But he was ungodly in his ignorance which is in him for he said: I am God and there is no other God but me» (*Apocr. Joh.* II, 1, 11, 15-22).

Yaldabaoth is Aramaic for «Father of Chaos», an etymology which has been demonstrated by G. G. Scholem, and one which does not shed much light on our problem (Scholem 1974: 419). Sammael means

«the blind one» but in another older etymology means «Poison of God» from the Hebrew *samm*, «poison» (Albrile 2003: 17), and is a name of the Devil in Jewish sources. This shows that the Demiurge in the *Apokryphon Johannis* was identified with the Devil who in certain passages of the New Testament is conceived of as the Ruler of this world, or even the God of this world, the ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου of the Gospel of John 16, 30 (for the Iranian links see Gnoli 1984a: 135).

Even more illuminating is the etymology of Saklas. *Sakla* is Aramaic for «fool». This gives an Aramaic colour to the story and reveals the basic idea of the writing. The *Apokryphon Johannis* dramatically describes the persistent struggle between Yaldabaoth and Barbelo, or some related female figure, whom he does not know. But if *sakla* means «fool», this means (in less mythological and more abstract terms) that the conflict between hidden wisdom and worldly folly is a persistent theme in history (Quispel 1965: 76).

The Ruler of this world according to the Gnostic Basilides is not described as a hostile monster: he serves the hidden purpose of God and is instrumental in its fulfilment. But he originates from Chaos and thus reminds us of Yaldabaoth, which seems to mean «Father of Chaos». He is called Abrasax and so recalls the well-known figure of the magic gems with the head of a cock, the tail of a serpent and a whip in his hand. Most characteristically, this highest Ruler of the world does not know that there is a God above him. This theme seems to have been taken from an already existing Gnostic system (Burkitt 1924-1925: 391-399).

Further, as we find in a Valentinian document that the Demiurge is called μωρός, «foolish» (Hipp. Ref. 6, 33, 1; 6, 34, 8), like *Sakla* in the *Apokryphon Johannis*, we must assume that it is a traditional motif taken from an earlier Gnosis. For in the *Apokryphon* «fool» has a very special, Jewish meaning. A fool is a man who says in his heart that there is no God. But that is exactly what the Ruler of this world is thought to say. Therefore he is «foolish»; God and his Wisdom are hidden from him (Quispel 1965: 77).

This concept, that the Wisdom of God is a hidden Wisdom, seems to be of Jewish origin. It is found already in *Job*. 28, 12 ff. An adherent of Simon Magus seems to have taught that divine Wisdom was completely unknown to the Rulers of this world: *ipsam vero ut est penitus ignorarunt* (Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones* 2, 12). The theme of the madman Ruler of the world seems to be traditional in Gnosticism and seems to be derived from a Jewish milieu.

With regard to the syncretistic relief at Modena (Quispel 1978: 504), first published by Mr Cavedoni in 1863 and republished by Franz Cumont in 1902, the Belgian historian of religions describes it in the following terms: «In an oval frame containing the twelve signs of the zodiac a naked youth is standing, holding a sceptre in his left hand and a thunderbolt in his right. His feet are hoof-shaped, like the goat-legs of the Greek god Pan. His body is encircled by the spirals of a snake whose head is seen above his head. Behind his shoulders with two wings the horns of a crescent are visible. On his breast the mask of a lion's head, while from his sides the heads of a ram and a buck are budding forth. The feet rest upon an upturned cone, which is without any doubt a half egg, from which flames are pouring forth. Above the curly head with five shining rays is the other half of the egg, also aflame» (Cumont 1902: 2).

Franz Cumont, always eager to find Mithraic monuments, identified this person with the monstrous figure of Time in Mithraism with the head of a lion and wings (Hinnells 1975: 333 ss.), the trunk being enveloped in the coils of a snake, who is often related to the Iranian god Zurwān akanārag, Endless Time, and usually is called Chronos (Kronos) and Aiōn (Duchesne-Guillemin 1955: 190-195; 1958-1960: 1-8).

Robert Eisler in 1910 contradicted these views and identified the youth of Modena with the Orphic god Phanes (or Eros), the Lightning one, who was born from the world-egg and created heaven and earth by splitting it in two halves, very much as in Genesis heaven and earth are severed from chaos so that light can be born (Eisler 1910: 400 ss.; Nilsson 1945: 1-7). By retrospection, according to Gilles Quispel (Quispel 1978: 504-505), it is possible to tell all sorts of things about Robert Eisler, and in fact Gershom Scholem in his biography of Walter Benjamin makes some caustic remarks about his footnotes (Scholem 1975: 164). But there can be no doubt that in this controversy Eisler was right and Cumont was wrong: there are the half-eggs, the goat-legs, the shining rays, and above all this beautiful youngster is no monster at all.

On the other hand, more monuments have been found of the same kind, which are generally considered to be Mithraic: a marble statue, found in 1902 and 1903 at Merida in Spain, represents a naked youth in rigid attitude with a curly head (Vermaseren 1975: 450), entwined by a serpent, who is to be identified with the new Aiōn, born every year again and again in an ever repeated cycle, and with Mithras *iuvenis*.

It has been shown that both the monstrous figure of time in Mithraism and the young Aiōn bear Egyptian features (Pettazzoni 1954: 164-192) and could easily have originated in the Egypt of Hellenistic syncretistic times: Macrobius (*Sat.* I, 20, 13-15) describes for us an Egyptian image of Aiōn with the head of a lion (present), the head of a raving wolf (past) and the head of a fawning dog (future). With regard to this motif, an image of Zurwān akanārag or whatsoever has been discovered in Iran (D'Erme 1999: 22-24), probably joined with the Ahrimanic cult of *xrafstars*, the offspring of beasts and reptiles of which speaks Plutarch (*De Isid. et Osir.* 46: 369 E) when he refers to the Iranian narcotic ritual of ὄμωμι (< Avestic *haoma*) celebrated for Hades and Darkness (Benveniste 1929: 290; Zaehner 1955: 237-243).

The problem arises to what extent the old and primitive Orphic concept of Endless Time (Chronos agēraos which produced Phanes: out of water and earth was born a serpent with the heads of a lion and of a bull and the face of a god between) influenced the concept of the Mithraic monster and the image of Abraxas, both equally originating in Alexandria (Damascius, *De princ.* 123 bis; see also Cumont 1934: 63-72; Dussaud 1950: 253-260).

About this question we want to make some observations.

It would seem rather obvious that at a certain date in Alexandria Phanes has been integrated into the Mithraic religion and has been identified there with Aiōn Plutonium, who assures the eternity of the city of Alexandria (Quispel 1978: 506). Every year, at the Koreion, the sanctuary of Korē, the daughter of Demeter, on New Year's day, the six of January = the day of Epiphany in the month of *Ianus*, the birth of Aiōn was celebrated. The faithful then say (Epiph. *Pan. haer.* 51, 22, 3-11; Norden 1931: 24-40): «On this day and at this hour the Virgin gave birth to Aiōn». Not everybody would agree that this cult is a combination of the Eleusinian mysteries (where Korē gave birth to Ploutos) and of the mysteries of Isis, which bore Horus the child (Zuntz 1988: 291-303 [but Aiōn Plutonium is Serapis!]). But there can be no doubt whatsoever that Aiōn is the new year, the time as an eternally recurrent, dying and resurrecting cycle (Bousset 1979 [but 1912-1919]: 192-230; Casadio 1997: 49-50; Scarcia 2000: 171 ss.). If we keep this in mind, we shall not be astonished if this image is interpreted by modern psychologists and authors as a symbol of psychical rebirth and individuation. On the other hand it must be observed that this view was inspired by an image of Phanes, that is Eros, not by the Christian symbolism of the birth of God in the heart of man as proclaimed by Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius.

If Aiōn is originally Phanes, then he must also be a Demiurge. A golden plaque, discovered in Ciciliano (Latium) shows an oval outline containing a nude male figure in a stiff hieratic attitude, entwined by a large snake putting its head on the middle of his breast between a bundle of four poppies and a hooklike key, which he holds with both hands. The feet have the appearance of an animal's claw. Above the head figures the name ΙΑΩ, underneath the feet the name ΑΔΩΝΑΕΙ. Well known magical *nomina numina* elsewhere on the plaque make it clear, that this *lamella aurea* pictures Aiōn as a magical time god (Vermaseren 1975: 446). But the Hebrew name and its substitute indicate that this god had been identified with the God of the Bible (Scholem 1960: 66 ss.; Michelini Tocci 1984: 88). And that is not astonishing if we remember that Phanes-Eros was the creator of this world.

The influence of this image upon the ancient Gnosticism has been considerable. Also is related to *psychomachia*, because the Gnostic myth is an anthropogonic myth in which the Soul is the inner space where σῶμα and πνεῦμα are fighting their archetypal struggle. The *Apokryphon Johannis* includes this myth as a whole: it results from a sophisticated exegesis (Van den Broek 1981: 38-57) in which the ψυχή is wrapping the living πνεῦμα in a shape of Astral body. This envelope is moulded by the seven planetary powers: a Gnostic context that implies the formation of the Astral body during the catabasis of the Soul, ideas probably rising from a hybridization among Numenius of Apamea, the Chaldaean Oracles (Van den Broek 1981: 56-57; Kroll 1894: 70; see also Elsas 1975: 164 ss.) and the Iranian hierarchy of the Aməša Spənta.

Likewise, in a crucial Hermetic writing, the *Poimandres* (9, 12), the shining nakedness of Isis is covered by the seven planetary spheres of the cosmos, a shape of changing κτίσις (Foerster 1970: 1246-1247); a strange passage that must be treated in this context is a Valentinian Gnostic fragment from *Gospel of the Egyptians* known only in the evidence of Clemens Alexandrinus (*Strom.* 3, 91); according to this the Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciple Salome: «When you have trampled on the garment of shame and when the two become one and the male with the female [is] neither male nor female» (Smith 1966: 236; see also *Ev. Thom.* Logion 22 [NHC II, 2, 37, 25-35]).

The septenary sequence is also linked with the musical key (Helmer 1937: 58-65). We find this idea in the Gnostic soteriology of the Arab Monoimus (*Hipp. Ref.* 8, 12-15): according to Monoimus at the beginning of the whole universe and at the origin of the opposition ψυχή *versus* Anthrōpos there is the Greek letter *iota*, ineffable essence, that at the same time is sound, letter and number, height of the heptadic series and stigma of the reabsorption into the first primordial unity. So, the Gnostic praxis helps in the discovery of the «real» reality hidden in the worldly dream, as it happens in the more famous fiction tale by Philip K. Dick.

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Ezio Albrile (Torino 1962). Da diversi anni studia la storia religiosa del dualismo nel mondo antico (Gnostici, Mandeï, Manichei, etc.). Su questi argomenti ha scritto oltre cento fra articoli, contributi a Convegni e un paio di libri. È membro della Società Italiana di Storia delle Religioni ed ha rivestito un incarico presso la Cattedra di Antropologia Culturale del Politecnico di Torino.