



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Savior et Salut: Gnoses de l'Antiquité Tardive by Gedaliahu Guy Stroumsa
Paula Fredriksen

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GEDALIAHU GUY STROUMSA. *Savior et Salut: Gnoses de l'Antiquité Tardive*. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1992. Pp. 404.

The best way to get a sense of the subject matter of this book is to glance at the index of primary sources. The Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament; Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; the Coptic Nag Hammadi library; Manichaean texts in Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Middle Persian; the gamut of Jewish literature: Talmud, midrash, mystical and magical writings, works from Qumran, Maimonides; patristica: Greek, Latin, and Syriac treatises and commentaries, letters and sermons; pagan and Islamic texts—Stroumsa weaves them all together to present a rich tapestry of religious life and thought in Mediterranean antiquity. And because he concentrates on 'minority' groups and theologies—Gnostics, Manichaeans, Jewish Christians—his overall pattern has the dreamlike quality of being at once both strange and familiar: strange, because these groups are history's losers; familiar, because together with their dominant cousins, Catholic Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, they share a common matrix: the narrative and hermeneutical conundrums of the Bible.

In a brief Foreword, which both recalls Hans Jonas and goes beyond him, Stroumsa establishes the themes contouring his study. Two essential components, he maintains, mark antiquity's various religions: *knowledge* and *salvation*. Knowledge implies both a social context within which tradition, whether spoken or written, is transmitted, and a soteriological orientation: esoterica which saves. Salvation too has a dual focus, embracing both the individual and the universe. "De façon lapidaire on pourrait dire qu'il n'y a pas . . . de savoir sans salut, ni de salut sans savoir. C'est la connaissance religieuse, avant tout, qui sauve" (p. 9).

Stroumsa seeks to trace and analyze the interaction of these ideas within and between various groups in the "mutating" religious environment of the ancient Mediterranean. At issue is the formation of identity—the primal parent (and thus, in a sense, the Oedipal target) of all, late Second Temple Judaism(s); the 'genetic material' of all, the Bible. Stroumsa underscores divine anthropomorphism as a particular problem inherent in biblical discussion of God. Does God have a body? In what sense? Of what sort? If not, in what way can God be 'seen'? What is revelation, and how does God reveal? And how do these questions, or their answers, in turn impact upon the problem of evil within a monotheist system? (See also pp. 98f.) Esoteric Jewish traditions, in response, develop theologies of different angels or powers in heaven; the rabbis speculate on God's cosmic body; different Christian groups evolve various Christologies linking the (embodied?) divine son to God.

Gnosticism represents a radical resolution to these problems of identity and divinity. It settles the ambivalence between *vetus Israel* and *verus Israel*, inherent in mainstream Christianity, by totally rejecting any connection between Israel and the (New or True) Elect; it settles the problem of God—and thus of evil—through its dualist cosmology and anthropology. But here Stroumsa makes a nicely nuanced observation: Gnostic dualism is mitigated at best, and it is ‘motivated’ by monotheism. “Il semble bien que l’attitude dualiste ne soit qu’un cas particulier, exacerbé, du monothéisme. Si donc le christianisme est si aisément tenté par le dualisme, la raison est peut-être dans l’ambiguïté même du monothéisme chrétien” (p. 11).

The body of the volume collects twenty-one essays, originally published in English, French, or German during the decade 1979–89. Stroumsa assembles them into four groupings, following no chronological order within each group. Part I, “Traditions Juives,” investigates and compares Christian, Gnostic, and Jewish traditions on certain themes: angels and hypostatic powers (they can be visible, thus embodied, in a way that God cannot); divine polymorphy; the status of ethics and history within these three traditions; views of soteriology. The final, and briefest, essay in this section was one of my favorites: “*Vetus Israel*: les juifs dans la littérature hiérosolymitaine d’époque byzantine.” Drawing on all sorts of evidence, from imperial legislation to ecclesiastical gossip, Stroumsa places Christian anti-Jewish invective in the social context of imperial Jerusalem to discern its true target: not Jews per se, but Jewish Christians. Anomaly undermines identity, and by the fourth century, these survivors of the earliest church were a living anachronism, and thus a threat.

Part II, “La Tentation Gnostique,” considers the similarities and differences between Gnostic and Christian *paradosis*, asceticism, and allegory, especially as these last touch on the problem of the incorporeality of God. Part III, “Origines Manichéennes,” ranges over the Cologne Mani Codex, heresiological reports, and Augustine for insights into Manichaeism, its founder, and the sources of its appeal and missionary effectiveness. And finally, Part IV, “Le Défi Manichéen,” gives a vivid sense of the convulsive rejection Manichaeism inspired on the part of its many (and wildly various) opponents—Christian bishops from North Africa to Edessa, Neoplatonic philosophers, Muslim critics. (The last essay, co-authored with Sarah Stroumsa, analyzes an Islamic theodicy couched as anti-Manichaean polemic.)

The essays, taken together, are a tour de force. While they do not build to any single conclusion (Stroumsa’s summary statement comes in his Foreword), they demonstrate the historical analytical value of the author’s interpretive themes: the continuing influence of Judaism—both ‘normative’ and esoteric—on all sorts of Christian movements, both mainstream and heretical; Christian consciousness of and anxiety about this influence; Christian assertion of its own Jewishness when challenged by pagans or other Chris-

tians (brilliantly characterized, in an analysis of Origen's *Contra Celsum*, as 'the Balaam syndrome', p. 101); the theological coherence and logic of dualism as a response to biblical monotheism. Also to be praised are the author's substantial notes, considerably given at the bottom of each page. Drawing together a vast range of primary and secondary bibliography, they present a valuable dossier of sources for the study of these movements.

Criticisms? Inevitably, a few. One tiny point: on p. 36, paraphrasing Augustine, the author might give the impression that he, too, thinks of Paul as the author of 1 Timothy. Later (p. 103), Stroumsa's Paul, oppressed by his sense of the omnipresence of sin, convinced that man, as a sinner, could not expiate sin but had to depend solely on God, seems more Augustinian (and Lutheran) than Pauline to me. I am suspicious, too, of the distinctions Stroumsa draws between Gnostic and Catholic asceticism ("Ascèse et gnose," essay no. 8): Gnostic asceticism, he holds, is a function of Gnostic hatred of the world; Catholic, of the fear of sin: its motivation is essentially ethical. A Catholic might agree (Augustine had said much the same in his two anti-Manichaean books *De moribus*). But would an ancient Gnostic? Was his or her ascetic sensibility not also ethically motivated? Can these two forms of asceticism—rather, the asceticism of these two different communities—be distinguished meaningfully in this way?

I closed the book wishing there were yet more of it: further exploration of the relation between the explosion of Christian asceticism in the fourth century, on the one hand, and the appeal of Manichaeism on the other; more said on angels and Christology; some consideration of Christian apocalyptic eschatology as another example of 'Jewishness' both repudiated and embraced. It is not the least of Professor Stroumsa's contributions here that he has marked out directions for future research for all of us who work in the religions of late antiquity.