

GUY G. STROUMSA

# The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity

*Studien und Texte zu  
Antike und Christentum*  
124

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Guy G. Stroumsa

# The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity

Selected Essays

Mohr Siebeck

*Guy G. Stroumsa*, born 1948; 1978 PhD; Martin Buber Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Professor Emeritus of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, and Emeritus Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford.

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*For Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann,  
Hildegard Cancik-Lindemaier, Hubert Cancik*

»Die Sage versucht das  
Unerklärliche zu erklären.  
Da sie aus einem Wahr-  
heitsgrund kommt, muß  
sie wieder im Unerklär-  
lichen enden.«

Franz Kafka, *Prometheus*



## Preface

Like its twin volume, *Religion as Intellectual Challenge in the Long Twentieth Century: Selected Essays* (Tübingen, 2021), this volume includes a number of texts written over a number of decades. I am grateful to Dr. Henning Ziebritzki, Director of Mohr Siebeck, for his kind offer to publish these two volumes, as well as to Christoph Markschies, Martin Wallraff and Christian Wildberg for agreeing to publish this volume in *Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum*. I am deeply indebted to David L. Dusenbury, who has closely collaborated with me on the preparation of these two volumes, throughout the long and difficult period of various limitations and lockdowns in Jerusalem, during the coronavirus pandemic, and, at Mohr Siebeck, to Elena Müller, who skillfully accompanied the project.

There is no point in attempting here to summarize the twenty essays of this volume, written over a number of decades, mostly as contributions to workshops and conferences, and for the most part independently from one another. Most of them have been published in the past, and follow the style of various journals and publishers, in a number of countries. While most essays were written in English, a few were composed in French, my mother tongue. After some hesitation, I decided not to translate these into English, and to keep their original linguistic garb. I am pleased to retain in these two volumes of *Selected Essays* certain tangible marks of my intellectual biography. All essays have been lightly edited, also in order to follow the publisher's editorial policy, but it would have been futile to seek to update them.

I do not claim, of course, to deal with all, or even most of the key problems of late antique religious history. What I have sought to do, rather, is to adumbrate some of the major themes linking these problems together, as I perceived them at the time of writing. While these essays in no way amount to a search for a grand theory, I do hope they reflect my wish to search relentlessly for the new religious ethos emerging from the interface of religions in the long late antiquity.

Chapter 8 was written jointly with Ronnie Goldstein, and chapter 19 with Sarah Stroumsa. I wish to thank them both for having agreed to their new publication here. In the Conclusion, I briefly reflect on perceptions of time in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In this way, I hope to emphasize the sacred character of history at the very core of the Abrahamic religions and of their ideas of salvation.

It remains for the reader, and not me, to judge the extent to which these essays point to a solution of historical riddles, and to decide whether they help us appreciate the almost infinite complexity and riches of late antique religious history. As I look at the traces of my own idiosyncratic trajectory, at least, I can detect in my



quest more serendipity than a clearly preconceived plan. In the words of the Sinologist Marcel Granet: »la méthode, c'est le chemin une fois qu'on l'a parcouru.« In any case, I feel a profound gratitude for the intellectual effort and pleasure throughout the years spent on this interminable journey, across centuries and continents. I have been lucky to acquire many friends, in many places, on this journey, which I have accomplished together with the most demanding and most rewarding of companions: Sarah Stroumsa.

This book is dedicated to four brilliant scholars, my first friends in Germany.

Jerusalem, May 2021

Guy G. Stroumsa

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## Introduction: A New Religious Ethos

Late antiquity may be defined in a number of ways, some more restrictive and some broader, in terms of both space and time. According to all definitions, however, the focus is on the Christianizing Roman Empire, at a time when pagan cults were still present in mental as well as in physical landscapes. The religious dimension in the meeting of worlds, indeed, constitutes an essential character of late antiquity. For the historian of religion focusing on the interface between systems of belief and religious communities and its transformations, it makes sense to embrace the centuries from early Christianity to early Islam, and the Near East as well as the Mediterranean. It is only through both *la longue durée* and *les vastes espaces* that one may fully identify the new religious ethos blossoming in late antiquity, an ethos in which religious belief and religious praxis interact in new, previously unknown ways.<sup>1</sup>

Two main paradigms seem to compete for the understanding of the deep transformations of religion in the Mediterranean and the Near East through those centuries. The classical paradigm emphasizes the essentially revolutionary character of the new forms of religion during that period. This character is epitomized in the passage from paganism to Christianity (and later to Islam), or from polytheistic to monotheistic systems.

In the last generation, this paradigm has been seriously challenged, mainly by new approaches to late antique religious history. One often argues, in particular, for an essentially benign and gradual change, through the identification of a number of passages between the worldview of traditional religions and that of Christianity, as well as between the latter and the worldview of the early Islamic world.<sup>2</sup>

The contradistinction between the revolutionary paradigm and the evolutionary one informs much of contemporary research. This rather artificial dichotomy, however, unduly blurs our understanding of intertwined religious history. While there is no serious doubt about the momentous transformation of religion in late antiquity, identifying it with the Christianization of the Roman Empire may be misleading. The religious revolution of late antiquity seems, rather, to be reflected in a broader array of new forms of religious belief and practice, of which Christianity is only the

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<sup>1</sup> On this trajectory, leading to the emergence of Islam, see G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2015). On the question of the transformation of an ethos, see in particular chapter 12, below.

<sup>2</sup> See A. Cameron, »What Exit from Antiquity?« in S. H. Nasser and N. al-Baghdadi, eds., *The Arab Muslim World in Universal History: Forms of Authority, Power and Transformation* (Leiden, forthcoming). Cameron singles out Peter Brown as a leading voice for this approach.

most perceptible one.<sup>3</sup> One might then speak of revolution, but only as the final consequence of an incremental evolution – or re-elaboration – of ritual as well as the theological transformations in a highly complex society.

The theological dynamism of the period is represented by the passage from polytheistic systems to monotheistic and dualist ones, while the ritual dynamism may be followed in the move from rituals centered upon sacrifices in temples to rituals established upon scriptures, in churches, synagogues, or mosques. This double dynamism of beliefs and rituals sheds light on the transformations of religious ethos.<sup>4</sup> In a sense, the two parts of this book reflect this double argument. The essays in Part I mostly deal with mental aspects of religion in the Roman Empire, as expressed in early Christian texts and traditions. Those in Part II, on their side, deal with religious communication across cultures and communities in the Empire.

The classical paradigm, focusing on the passage from paganism to Christianity, is misleading in a number of ways. In implicitly ignoring other religious systems such as Manichaeism, or Zoroastrianism, as well as Gnostic trends, it misses the crucial importance of dualist theologies. Moreover, its implicit identification of monotheism with Christianity (not something self-evident) all but erases the monotheism professed by Jews, as well as that professed by some Hellenic philosophers, such as Plotinus. Finally, by subsuming all traditional religions under »paganism,« it distorts to the extreme a highly complex reality.<sup>5</sup> It may well be that the passage to monotheism should not be identified with the rise of Christianity.

The presence of a number of different dualistic and monotheistic religious systems in the late antique Eastern Mediterranean and Near East points to the core importance of dualism in the religious history of the period. In its various forms, religious dualism expresses a tension within both the heavenly and the earthly world, both of which are perceived, in some way or other, as battlefields. Zoroastrian dualism, in which the good and the evil gods confront one another throughout cosmic and human history, is essentially ethical.<sup>6</sup> In Second Temple Judaism, and then in early Christianity, Satan, who had been a rather pale figure in the Bible, grew in importance, becoming the main opponent to God within the divine world. Gnostic dualism represents a radicalization of this trend, sometimes mixed with Platonic dualism. Manichaeism, on its side, reflects the combination of Judeo-Christian and Zoroastrian dualisms. As the different dualist theologies clearly show, religious

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<sup>3</sup> I have sought to interpret the development of Christianity in the first centuries as a clear expression of this revolution in the *longue durée*; see G. G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity* (Tübingen, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> On the question of the ethos and the conditions of its transformation, see chapter 12, below.

<sup>5</sup> Aspects of the transformation of Hellenic and Jewish traditions in early Christianity are studied in chapters 1 to 6, below.

<sup>6</sup> See S. Shaked, »The *Bundahišn* Account of Creation: Myth, Speculation, and Paradox,« Foreword to Domenico Agostini and Samuel Thrope, *The Bundahišn: The Zoroastrian Book of Creation, a New Translation* (Oxford, New York, 2020), XI–XXVI.

structures, even those seemingly as simple and clearly defined as monotheism, are far from stable. Their fluidity, their constant evolution, even their transformation through new arrangements of their elements, may evoke a kaleidoscope. In any case, the growth of dualist trends represents a major trait of late antique religion. One may argue that the confrontation between biblical monotheisms and dualist religions replaced, to a great extent, the previous clash between polytheism and monotheism. In both cases, the core of the conflict seems to lie less in the number of the divinities involved than in the religious status of history, as expressed in the Hebrew Bible, an idea which was accepted by the Fathers of the Church but replaced by mythological ways of thought in Gnosis and in Manichaeism.

The scholar of Islamic philosophy Henri Corbin has discussed what he calls »the paradox of monotheism.«<sup>7</sup> For him, monotheistic systems are condemned to remain unstable structures, regularly morphing into systems close to polytheism. This happens, Corbin says, because the transcendence of the one God is not really sustainable for humans, who need intermediary figures in the divine world, the angels.<sup>8</sup> A similar remark, it seems to me, could be made about polytheistic systems in late antiquity. They show constant attempts to represent the divine world as hierarchies, on the top of which reigns a supreme god, who alone can rightly claim the name of god. One may therefore say that polytheistic systems, too, suffer from some structural instability, and this permits us to speak of the paradox of polytheism, which often tends to morph into some kind of monotheism. Rather than a passage from polytheism to monotheism, the virtual ubiquity of dualist structures of thought seems to represent a typical character of late antique thought patterns. In a sense, dualism represents an equilibrium between simplicity and complexity, retaining both closeness to monotheism and the recognition of complexity in the world of divine powers.

The prominence of esoteric trends in most religious (and philosophical) traditions in the ancient world is a reflection of the tensions inherent to dualistic perceptions of reality.<sup>9</sup> For the esotericists, what is visible to all does not represent the highest level of reality. The testimony of the senses is misleading. True reality remains invisible to human eyes. In that sense, it remains purely spiritual, and can be grasped only through the spiritual senses.

Under such conditions, truth is not available to all, but only to an elite within the community. Where most imagine visible forms of the divine, the elect know that God is invisible. As is clear already in Plato's *Second Letter*, the idea of esotericism is related to the ambivalent status of writing in the ancient world, a written text being

<sup>7</sup> See H. Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Although originally Jewish, and then Christian, there were also pagan angels, as shown by G. W. Bowersock, »Les anges païens de l'antiquité tardive,« *Cahiers du Centre G. Glotz* 24 (2013), 91–104.

<sup>9</sup> I have dealt with late antique esotericism in G. G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Studies in the History of Religions 70; Leiden, 1996; Revised and augmented paperback edition, 2005). See chapters 4 and 5, below.

always susceptible to fall into unworthy hands. The most important truths, which should not be made available to all, must be transmitted only orally. Higher reality is often revealed in visions. As we know from the prophetic movement, visions always remained the privilege of religious virtuosi. In scriptural religions, moreover, esoteric doctrines often took the form of hermeneutical traditions: different levels of interpretation of the revealed scripture fit different publics. Only the elect, those usually called mystics in scriptural religions, have access to the highest, spiritual level of textual interpretation.

It is within the framework of such a fundamental skepticism toward the testimony of the senses that one must read the development, in the earliest stages of Christianity, of Docetism. According to this heresy, Jesus did not die on the cross, but only *seemed* to suffer. For the Docetists, then, the true Jesus had escaped, ascending to heaven, while someone else, taking his appearance, was crucified.

One of the most radical attitudes to be found among the early Christians, Docetism soon became a generic term for some of the most troubling heresies fought by the Church Fathers. Oddly enough, the puzzling phenomenon of Docetism does not seem to have elicited enough scholarly attention. Moreover, there is no general agreement upon a convincing definition of Docetism, and one is at a loss as to the focal point of the Docetistic world-view. The two main approaches seem to relate either to Christ's Incarnation or to his Passion. Either Christ was not really incarnated, as the Divine and matter could not have a common ground, and Christ would be totally spiritual in nature; or Christ was indeed incarnated, but did not really suffer on the cross. These two approaches are not identical. The first approach is broader, and is inclusive of the second. Many scholars seem to support the first approach, and to find the roots of Docetism in Platonic thought, or in what is sometimes called, rather nebulously, »Graeco-Oriental Dualism.«<sup>10</sup> For those scholars, Docetism argues that the human nature of Jesus is only a semblance. For those who support the second approach, which focuses on the crucifixion, it is Jesus's death, rather than his corporeal existence as such, which represented the scandal that the first Docetists sought to avoid.

It comes as no surprise that one of the major points of discord among the first Christians lay, precisely, in the question of the suffering, or the lack thereof, of Jesus Christ – a figure at the very intersection between humanity and divinity.

The central feature of the salutary mission of Jesus Christ, precisely, focuses on his passion, on his suffering. A man turned God, or a God turned man, in any case this passion was felt to be both powerful and shocking enough by both Jews and Greeks, as noted by Paul, who called him »a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles« (I Cor. 1:23–24).

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<sup>10</sup> J.G. Davies, »The Origins of Docetism,« *Studia Patristica* VI (TU 81; Berlin, 1962), 13–35. Similar expression in N. Brox, »Doketismus: Eine Problemanzeige,« *ZKG* 95 (1984), 301–314.

In the words of Cyril of Alexandria (*floruit* in the early fifth century):

Yet being God by nature, he is considered to be out of reach from suffering (*pathous*) ... he accepted birth in the flesh, by a woman; he gave himself, I repeat, a body able to taste death, but also to be raised again, so that, while he remains impassible (*hina menōn autos apathēs*) one may say that he suffered in his own flesh.<sup>11</sup>

For Cyril, both Greeks and Jews are unable to recognize that Jesus's suffering on the cross is neither madness (the Greeks, in their ignorance, did not recognize his human nature) nor a cause for shame (the Jews, in their derangement, could not believe he was the Son of God). The truth is that he at once suffered (in his own flesh) and did not suffer (in the nature of Divinity). It is, indeed, only within the double Jewish and Greek matrix of Christianity that Docetism can be fully understood.<sup>12</sup>

Martyrdom, which reflects the agreement, or even the will to suffer in one's body in order to imitate Jesus, is thus established on the opposite presupposition: the Christian should suffer in his or her body, just as Jesus had suffered. The new religious ethos reflected in Christian martyrdom also represented a major transformation of emotions and their representation.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that the truest, highest reality, does not always appear to the senses, but must be deciphered through its traces, was of course fundamental in early Christian discourse. But it came from a long tradition, in Greek as well as Hebrew literature. Docetism, one of the earliest Christian heresies, eventually disappeared, but not without leaving in Christian thought, as a deep scar, a sense of fundamental hesitation about sensory reality.

The double perception of reality was replicated also at the anthropological level. Here, the double level of perception entails a fundamental distinction between body and soul, as well as one between two kinds of humans, those who are essentially spiritual, able to receive true knowledge of the divinity, and those who remain irremediably enchained by their body to the world of matter. Direct consequences of such anthropology include esoteric traditions, which are available only to the »spirituals,« while they are denied to simpler, lower believers.

Duality, then, represents a major principle of the new religious ethos emerging in our period. At the theological level, one finds it in dualist trends, such as Gnostic Christian groups, and especially in Manichaeism, the opposition between the ultimate Good God of the spiritual world (and of the elite among humans), versus the evil, or at least inept, Demiurge, creator of the material world. Gnosis, or true, secret knowledge, is usually acquired through ecstasy, an altered state of consciousness, so that the person itself is split between a lower, material body, and a spiritual double, which is heavenly.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Deux traités christologiques*, ed. and trans. by G.-M. de Durand (SC 97; Paris, 1964), 498–499 (773d).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 775 a-e. On Docetism, see chapters 7 and 8, below.

<sup>13</sup> I deal with aspects of martyrdom in chapters 9 and 10, below.

<sup>14</sup> On the interface between Manichaeism and Christianity, see chapters 18 to 20.



The same dual principle regulates both vision of spiritual reality (whence mysticism) and the two-tiered organization of religious communities. This principle rules religious society, differentiating these two groups of practitioners, the *electi*, privy to esoteric knowledge, and the *auditores*, whose belief is not based on the deep understanding of the former (to use Augustine's terms for the two classes of Manichaeans). Just like in Buddhism, those »fellow travellers« support the core community, which the Buddhists call the *Sangha*, without really belonging to it. The God-fearers (*yirei-shamaym*, or *phoboumenoi* of Judaism), represent an important category of monotheists without a clear revelation of their own.<sup>15</sup>

In the world of late antiquity, religious communities, even when established on highly different principles, existed together, learning to live side-by-side, usually in awkward coexistence, more often than not pitted one against the other, in various styles of competition or conflict. Religious history, then, is the history of intertwined religious communities. It makes little sense, for instance, to depict the trajectory of, say, Christianity in its first centuries independently of the religious life of both Jews and pagans in the same period.<sup>16</sup> Heresies are a special case of the conflicting attitude between religious phenomena so characteristic of our period. Within the broad spectrum of the monotheistic (and dualistic) religious pattern, conflicting attitudes were expressed in different ways of hermeneutics, of reading the scriptures. Such a hermeneutical web of communities obviously highlights their polemical competitions. At the same time, it reflects the uneasy *convivencia* between them, as well as the religious common language, or *koinē*, in which they all somehow partook.

The existence of a religious *koinē* of sorts underlines the global character of the world of late antiquity. It is within communities that religion is lived in our period. These communities, in their turn, function within webs of communication, where ideas, stories and practices circulate, ceaselessly undergoing transformations, some of which are radical enough to be considered real mutations. In a sense, such a world of communities is a globalized world, in which all religions have become diaspora religions.<sup>17</sup>

The constant movement of beliefs and rituals within the web of religious communities, however, resembles in no way to the free and untraceable movement of electrons. There is a clear vector in late antique religious history, towards structural simplification, i. e., a clear diminution of the margins of religious legitimacy, and a drive towards what has been called *la pensée unique*.<sup>18</sup> This vector leads to a simpli-

<sup>15</sup> On the existence of those »God-fearers« until the seventh century, see P. Crone, »Pagan Arabs as God-Fearers,« in C. Bakhos and M. Cook, eds., *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic religions; Oxford, 2017), 140–164.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Rüpke, »Early Christianity out of, and in, Context,« *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009), 182–193.

<sup>17</sup> On webs of communication of religions, see chapter 16, below.

<sup>18</sup> P. Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique: La montée de l'intolérance dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 2010). See chapter 15, below.

fied reality, in which one speaks of religious dissent rather than of hermeneutical richness. In the new world that is emerging in late antiquity, identity becomes essentially defined by religion rather than by ethnicity or culture.

At least for students of religion, then, late antiquity represents a new axial age of sorts. As is well known, the concept of Axial Age, launched (or rather, re-launched) by Karl Jaspers in the aftermath of the Second World War, describes a striking series of (allegedly) similar transformations in thought and religion which occurred in societies as different as those of Greece, Israel, Iran, India, and China, more or less around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E.<sup>19</sup>

To some extent, late antiquity represents, at least for Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies, a turning point for religion and culture no less significant than that of the *Achsenzeit*. In two monographs, I have sought to show how two main characteristics of religion in the long late antiquity reflect such a transformation. In *The End of Sacrifice*, focusing on ritual, I discussed the long-range consequences of the disappearance, or at least the weakening, of sacrificial cults, mainly thanks to the combined efforts of Jews and Christians.<sup>20</sup> In *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity*, I dealt with the status and roles of books in the world of early Christians, as well as with the idea of book religion and its implications, both cultural and religious.<sup>21</sup> I approached the question at hand as a historian of religions rather than as a church historian, setting it within the broader perspective of what can be called the scriptural movement of late antiquity. Like Max Müller, I believe that in order to be fully understood, religious phenomena should be studied within a broad historical, cultural and social context. Thus, I emphasized the double paradigm shift, cultural as well as religious, which can be detected in late antiquity. At the core of the religious paradigm shift lies what I have called »the end of sacrifice,« i. e., the broad abandonment of public blood-sacrifice as a core religious ritual, in many religious systems of the Mediterranean and Near East, starting with Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. As my argument there is presented in chapter 11 in this collec-

<sup>19</sup> On the Axial Age, see R. Bellah and H. Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2012); as well as, for Jaspers' precursors, J. Assmann, *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (Munich, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> G. G. Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice: Mutations religieuses de l'antiquité tardive* (Collège de France; Paris, 2005). English translation by S. Emanuel: *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2009). On contemporary research on sacrifice, see D. Ullucci, »Sacrifice in the Ancient Mediterranean: Recent and Current Research,« *Currents in Biblical Research* 13 (2015), 388–439, as well as C. Hutt, »A Threefold Heresy: Reassessing Jewish, Christian and Islamic Animal Sacrifice in Late Antiquity,« *History of Religions* 58 (2019), 251–276, where the author convincingly argues for continuing sacrificial practices throughout late antiquity.

<sup>21</sup> G. G. Stroumsa, *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2017). On the formation of a Christian culture, see chapters 13 and 14, below. The following paragraphs owe much to G. G. Stroumsa, »The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Intertwined Religious Histories,« postface to E. Grypeou, ed., *The Scriptural Universe of Late Antiquity*, forthcoming.

tion, I do not need to discuss it here. I only wish to note, at least, that our period underwent some kind of what we call now »globalization,« in which the clash of the Sasanian and the Roman Empires did not prevent the spread of cultural patterns (in particular, Aramaic as a *lingua franca*) across political borders. The most striking consequence of such a globalization may be the spread of Manichaeism across Asia, as well as in various provinces of the Western Roman Empire. We should remind ourselves, here, that Manichaeism is the first religion established by its founder as universal, or world religion.

I wish instead to reflect briefly on the core of the cultural paradigm shift, which may be identified with the passage from scroll to codex, as the common physical support of books. From the first to the fourth century, these parallel transformations of the status and function of books would be accomplished, highlighting the dialectical relationship between culture and religion. More precisely, one may speak of intertwined religious and cultural histories. Born within the monotheistic climate of Judaism, Christianity grew up in »a world full of gods,« to use Keith Hopkins' pregnant expression. This was a world, moreover, in which Greek, Latin, and Aramaic were vying for the transmission of cultural traditions. *Cultura christiana*, when it eventually appeared, represented the ultimate result of a complex process, and would provide the backbone of European culture throughout the Middle Ages, until the Renaissance at least. As a religion of the book, then, early Christianity reflects a particularly intricate mixture of religious and cultural transformation. It is the task of the historian to search for the rules of such transformations, for their grammar.<sup>22</sup>

A religion of the book, as should by now be clear, is not only a religion established upon a »sacred book,« which is held to be divinely revealed. The very idea of a revealed book entails a cascade of consequences. The community, or the network of communities, carrying this book and revering its origin, must endlessly protect, copy, translate, and interpret it. Those communities, then, live in nothing else than a scriptural universe, and its members, or at least its religiously active members, soon develop an intimacy of sorts with the holy text. In ancient societies, in which literacy was dramatically more limited than what has become common in the modern world, memory was much more developed than today, and oral traditions played a role that we find difficult to imagine. In many ways, we have now lost the »scriptural intimacy« that was common in pre-modern societies.

In a recent book, Karen Armstrong, one of the most persistent and powerful voices in the eminently respectable task of popularizing religious scholarship in the Anglophone world, deals at length with precisely this predicament of ours.<sup>23</sup> For the

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<sup>22</sup> On aspects of the formation of a Christian culture and cultural memory, see chapters 14 and 15, below.

<sup>23</sup> K. Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts* (London, 2019). See my review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, »Do as you'd be done by: Religious literacy and practical ethics,« *TLS* 6104 (26 March 2020), 32.

explanation of our predicament, Armstrong turns to the cognitive sciences. More precisely, she refers to the two hemispheres of the brain: the right hemisphere, essential to imagination, and hence to the creation of poetry, music, and religion; and the left hemisphere, identified with logical reasoning, responsible for science and technology. The predominance of science in the modern world, she says, has brought with it an imbalance between the two hemispheres, a hypertrophy of the left and an atrophy of the right. One of the most dramatic consequences of this new human condition is the loss of our former familiarity with the language of religion – in other words, our present religious illiteracy. We no longer know how to read religious texts. We have lost the hermeneutical key, says Armstrong, which is needed to open them. These texts do not simply carry knowledge, but sustain a way of life, and are a means of self-transformation. As such, they must be read according to traditional rules of interpretation. Hermeneutics, in such a scheme, reflects both epistemic contents and behavioral patterns.

Some scriptures, however, were composed as oral literature, and meant to be recited, or sung, in ritual. Such scriptures were redacted only later. For the Qur'an, this process seems to have lasted a few decades. The Zoroastrian Gathas, on the other hand, remained oral for more than a millennium. It is amazing that such texts could stay quite stable for so long, even when their language, Avestan, had long ceased to be understood, even by the priests. One should however remember that in religious history, texts do not only evolve from an oral to a written form. In the »scriptural universe« of a religion, there is also room for the reverse movement, for the oral interpretation of written texts. Actually, hermeneutics is infinitely complex: texts are sung, memorized, commented upon, translated, and enacted in ritual. In order to grasp the life of sacred texts in the historical development of a given religion, one has to postulate a meta-textuality of sorts. Armstrong argues that in a globalized world, we should consider ourselves as the heirs of all the various scriptures and religious traditions. Only such an approach, she says, can permit us to move from toleration of the other to a new symbiosis. It is hard to disagree with such a generous vision, although this is a cultural task rather than a religious challenge.

Developing a deep understanding of other people's religious scriptures and of their religious history necessitates, to use anthropological vocabulary, an etic approach, not an emic one. Hence, it represents primarily a broadening of one's cultural memory, rather than a transformation of one's religious tradition. Translating the religious traditions of others into the terms of one's own is a very old habit, well known in the ancient world. The most dramatic such attempt is probably that of Mani, who in the third century C.E. designed the first consciously universal religion. Manichaeism sought to integrate into a world system the gods and prophets of all nations – Zarathustra, Jesus, Buddha – all, that is to say, except the god and prophets of the Jews, whom Mani perceived as evil. This last trait of Manichaean religious *mythopoiesis* underlines the late antique failure to imagine a genuinely universal religion.



Part I

Christ's Laughter:  
Visions, Docetism, Martyrdom



## 1. Myth into Metaphor: The Case of Prometheus

Do myths die? Like religions, and more than religions, myths show a rare capacity to evolve, adapt and transform themselves, even when the social and cultural context which first nurtured them is long gone. Were we to accept Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous dictum, according to which a myth is defined by the sum of all its versions, even contemporary interpretations of archaic myths would constitute an integral part of these myths.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the nature of a myth would include its own history; this would make it difficult to argue that myths can die at all. Yet, although myths are in a large measure resistant to the erosion of time, they are not quite immune from it. The following pages deal with some avatars of one Greek mythological figure after the emergence of Christianity, thus following the diachronical transformation of a myth by culture.

A corollary question of importance, which however will only be alluded to, here, deals with the ways in which the historical consciousness of a human group is marked and modeled over time by its myths.

The myth of Prometheus, chosen here to exemplify this complex dialectic, is a very peculiar one. It appears already in two different versions in Hesiod, both in *Works and Days* and in the *Theogony*. The myth proposes nothing less than an interpretation of civilization and its origins, together with an etiology of sacrifice and of the existence of evil in the world.<sup>2</sup> Through the gift of fire it is work, civilization and culture that Prometheus offered mankind. This was indeed the main interpretation of the myth in classical Greece, as Plato's *Protagoras* makes clear. Prometheus himself, the titan who first opposed his kin then to revolt against Zeus, is a complex and peculiar figure, an *unicum* in the Greek pantheon.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout Western history, Prometheus has remained a major figure of reference for cultural self-consciousness and self-understanding. Indeed, the history of

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<sup>1</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, »La structure des mythes,« in *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris, 1968), 227–255.

<sup>2</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 42–105 and *Theogony*, 507–616, in *Hesiod*, text with trans. by H. G. Evelyn-White (Loeb Classical Library [hereafter LCL]; London, New York, 1920), 4–9, 116–125. On the second text, see the commentary of M. L. West, *Hesiod, Theogony* (Oxford, 1966), esp. 305–308.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough analysis of Prometheus, according to the main Greek texts, see U. Bianchi, »Prometheus, der titanische Trickster,« in his *Selected Essays on Gnosticism; Dualism and Mysticism* (Suppl. *Numen* 38; Leiden, 1978), 126–150. One can still consult with great profit K. Bapp's article in W. H. Roscher's *Ausführliches Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, III, cols. 3032–3110.



Western self-consciousness might be particularly well illustrated by the transformations of Prometheus.<sup>4</sup> Such a history, or rather meta-history, has been recently attempted by the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg.<sup>5</sup> Ambiguous, very learned and difficult, *Arbeit am Mythos* is an impressive achievement. Yet, it seems somehow to miss the mark. One of the reasons for the reader's frustration lies in the fact that Blumenberg does not elucidate well enough how a major chasm in Western history, the advent of Christianity, came to alter radically the conception of culture, and hence to transform, in a drastic way, the status of Prometheus and his myth in cultural self-perception. The first Christian centuries did not only witness the radical transformation of Greek culture by an alien *Weltanschauung*, but also the last full-fledged attempt in antiquity to revive mythological patterns of thought. At the dawn of the Christian era, Gnosticism, this »acute Hellenization of Christianity,« as Harnack called it, offers the most radical rejection of culture and civilization to be found in Western history. It is to a great extent as a reaction to the gnostic challenge that Christian consciousness asserted itself and crystallized. Hence, the bearing of Gnosticism upon perceptions of Prometheus. In *Prometheus and Lucifer*, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky noticed the »interesting ambivalence« of Prometheus, a figure »capable of developing in two directions,« close sometimes to Christ, and sometimes to Satan.<sup>6</sup> It is on this ambivalence and on the radically new status of Prometheus in the *interpretatio christiana* that these pages seek to reflect.

The ambiguity from which Prometheus seems never to depart is that of a trickster. Despite recent attacks, the category of the trickster remains of considerable use for analyzing mythical figures who revolt by cunning against higher deities, often to the direct or indirect benefit of humans.<sup>7</sup> Tricksters are by definition liminal and intermediate figures, who seem to be crossing freely the borderline between good and evil. Sometimes they even appear as belonging to the »other« power. They are daring, and they are cunning.<sup>8</sup> Cunning intelligence, or *mētis*, belongs to Prometheus already in Hesiod, who applied to him the epithet *ankylomētēs*, »crooked of counsel.«<sup>9</sup> *Mētis*

<sup>4</sup> For a survey of the place of Prometheus in the history of Western thought, see H. Levin, »Prometheus,« *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, III, col. 235 ff. Levin refers to various studies which I was unable to consult, such as R. Trousson, *Le thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne* (2 vols., Genève, 1964); J. Duchemin, *Prométhée, histoire du mythe, de ses origines orientales à ses incarnations modernes* (Paris, 1974); or L. Sechan, *Le mythe de Prométhée* (Paris, 1951).

<sup>5</sup> H. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt, 1979), now also in a good English translation, *Work on Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

<sup>6</sup> R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Lucifer and Prometheus: A Study of Milton's Satan* (London, 1952), 63.

<sup>7</sup> See C. Grottanelli, »Tricksters, Scapegoats, Champions, Saviors,« *History of Religions* 23 (1984), 117–139, a remarkable study which could be subtitled »Apology for the Trickster,« on Prometheus, see p. 135. On tricksters see also V. Turner, »Myth and Symbol,« in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 10, 576–581.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, ch. 11, and *Myth and Meaning* (Toronto, 1978), ch. 3; cf. Grottanelli, art. cit., 136.

<sup>9</sup> Hesiod, *Theog.* 546.

was a major quality in early Greek thought, as Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant have shown.<sup>10</sup> Together with mythical patterns of thought, however, *mētis* was almost blurred by the success of philosophy – a fact which accounts for its neglect by modern scholars. Characterized by ambivalence, *mētis* is an integral part of mythological thinking, which could not be integrated in thought patterns established on the rule *tertium non datur*.

Ambivalence characterizes the Greek Prometheus, as it does any mythical hero. From Hesiod to Lucian of Samosata, Prometheus is described at once as positive and negative, both *in bonam* and *in malam partem*.

The most original aspect of the *Theogony* lies in Hesiod's attempt to introduce moral order into the complex world of myths which he inherits. Hence Zeus' victory, and the justification of his punishment of Prometheus. At the other end of the Greek spectrum, in Lucian's *Dialogue between Prometheus and Zeus*, Zeus summarizes the chief points of accusation against the rebellious titan in the following way. He is guilty of having brought evil on three accounts: through his cunning with the parts of sacrifice, through his responsibility for the creation of man and woman, and finally by stealing fire.<sup>11</sup> The revolt motif is thus not always viewed quite favorably in Greek texts, although no malice is attributed to Prometheus.

The tragedians view Prometheus' stealing of fire as his main achievement. Sophocles calls him *ho pyrophoros theos titan*, while Aeschylus, in his *Prometheus Bound*, insists on his audacity, his over-daring. He also describes Prometheus giving men »blind hopes,« *typhas elpidas*, taking away their foreknowledge in order to make human life bearable.<sup>12</sup>

From the fourth century B.C.E. on, as a new, pessimistic attitude towards culture becomes pervading, more clearly expressed condemnations of Prometheus appear. For Menander, Prometheus is justly condemned since he molded women, »an abominable cast, hated of all the gods, methinks. Is some man bent on marrying? on marrying?«<sup>13</sup> Even more radically, Diogenes of Sinope describes Prometheus as the author of men's corruption. From now on, the formation of human beings is more

<sup>10</sup> M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *Les ruses de l'intelligence: la mētis des grecs* (Paris, 1974), esp. 62–66, 84–103.

<sup>11</sup> Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, in *Works*, VII, ed., trans. M. D. Macleod, (LCL; Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1961), 259.

<sup>12</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 55; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 148–150; see 237–238, on Prometheus' daring. Cf. E. Meron, »Une lecture socratique du Prométhée d'Eschyle ou: Prométhée, fondateur de la religion,« *Revue des Etudes Anciennes* 85 (1983), 199–213, who describes Prometheus as a »quasi-Christic mediator.« For the »blind hopes« given to mankind, see C. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 241, and W. C. Greene, *Moirai: Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 120. An analysis of the dialectical relationship between bodily and inner blindness and vision (cf. Tiresias and Oedipus) in Greek texts would be worthwhile.

<sup>13</sup> Menander, *The Principal Fragments*, text with trans. by F. G. Allinson (LCL; London, New York, 1921), 483.

and more attributed to Prometheus.<sup>14</sup> Nonnus of Panopolis (fifth century C.E.) is a late witness to the dubious heritage which Prometheus left mankind:

Nay – Prometheus himself is the cause of man's misery – Prometheus who cares for poor mortals! Instead of fire which is the beginning of all evil he ought rather to have stolen sweet nectar, which rejoices the heart of the gods, and given that to men, that he might have scattered the sorrows of the world with your own drink.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most revealing discussions of Prometheus in the Greek realm is found in Lucian. This skeptical and ferocious writer of Syrian origin (second century C.E.) wrote both a mock-play called *Prometheus* and the *Dialogue* already mentioned. In this *Dialogue*, Prometheus is presented as a trickster: »You'll deceive me again,« fears Zeus. Prometheus is eventually released from his punishment as a reward for his advice to Zeus not to make love to the Nereid Thetis, since the child born of this union would eventually dethrone his father.<sup>16</sup> The Prometheus begins with a dialogue between Hephaestus and Hermes, who are charged with carrying out Zeus' sentence. Hephaestus tells Hermes:

Yes, let's look about, Hermes: we mustn't crucify (*estaurōsthai*) him low and close to the ground for fear that man, his own handiwork, may come to his aid, or yet on the summit either, for he would be out of sight from below ...<sup>17</sup>

This text is noticeable on two accounts. First, as far as I know, Lucian is the only author – the Church Fathers included – to describe the punishment inflicted upon Prometheus as a *crucifixion* (although there does not seem to be any Christian influence on him). Secondly, Prometheus appears in this text as a mediator, a *mesitēs*, of a very special kind: he should remain crucified between heaven and earth, between gods and men, at last perfect instance of his kin the titans, the intermediary race. His crucifixion is not presented as a link between the human and the divine worlds. On the contrary, it is a perpetual reminder of the boundaries that cannot be trespassed with impunity. No picture could express more poignantly Prometheus' status as a savior himself in need of salvation, a *salvator salvandus* to use the term coined by Augustine in his anti-Manichaean polemics.<sup>18</sup>

Lucian's play presents in a nutshell the legacy of Prometheus for classical antiquity. In his dialogue with Hermes, Prometheus attempts to justify himself: his acts have done no wrong to the gods, while they have given so much to mankind:

<sup>14</sup> See Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 325 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 7. 58–63; text with trans. by W.H.D. Rouse (LCL; London, Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 249.

<sup>16</sup> See note 11, above. The whole dialogue is short: op. cit., 256–261.

<sup>17</sup> Lucian, *Works*, second ed., trans. A. M. Harmon (LCL; London, New York, 1916), 242.

<sup>18</sup> On the mythological conception of the *erlöste Erlöser* in gnostic contexts, see C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (FRLANT 78: Göttingen, 1961). Colpe does not refer to Prometheus in this study.

The whole world is no longer barren and unbeautiful, but adorned with cities and tilled lands and cultivated plants, the sea is sailed and the islands are inhabited, and everywhere there are altars and sacrifices, temples and festivals ...<sup>19</sup>

Despite this plea for human culture – and for his own sake – Prometheus remains the author of »that reprehensible theft« (elsewhere, Lucian calls him the god of theft, *kleptikēs ho theos*),<sup>20</sup> who deserved his punishment and who owes his eventual release only to his deal with Zeus.

The ambivalence of Prometheus, his cunning with the gods and his gift to mankind, is thus particularly striking in the image of the crucified titan, half Christ, half thief. This icon, as it were, illustrates the radical difference between Christianity and the classical world.

Yet, this is the penultimate, not the last representation of Prometheus in Greek pagan literature. In his *Oration VI to the Uneducated Cynics*, Julian the Apostate refers to Prometheus in these terms:

The gift of the gods sent down to mankind with the glowing flame of fire from the sun through the agency of Prometheus, along with the blessings that we owe to Hermes, is no other than the bestowal of reason and mind ...<sup>21</sup>

What is striking in this text is not so much the total spiritualization of the civilizing mission of Prometheus, as the fact that he is only the gods' envoy. The revolt motif has totally disappeared and with it the ambiguity which we have seen to be a constitutive quality of Prometheus throughout Greek culture. We are left with an abstract figure, quite disconnected from any mythical context. In the fourth century C.E., indeed, the times had changed. And even Julian, the last herald of paganism, was influenced by the abhorred Galilean faith of his youth in deeper and more subtle ways than he realized: for him, myth had become metaphor.<sup>22</sup> This transformation through which the dying myth reappears is directly connected with the emergence of the new faith, as we shall presently see. The *myth* of Prometheus has faded out, but the *figure* of Prometheus himself survives, however univalent. Prometheus now represents a clearly defined quality, though he has lost the autonomous life which was his when the myth was still alive.

<sup>19</sup> Lucian, *Works*, II, 257.

<sup>20</sup> Lucian, *Works*, VI, text with trans. by K. Kilburn (LCL; Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1959), 426: »To one who said: »You're a Prometheus in words.«

<sup>21</sup> Julian, *Oratio VI*, C–D; *Works*, II, text with trans. by W.C. Wright (LCL; London, New York, 1913), 89.

<sup>22</sup> J. Bidez was the first to unveil the deep-reaching Christian influences on Julian, in his *La vie de l'Empereur Julien* (Paris, 1930). See also G.W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978). On the transformation of myth into metaphor with the passage from the mythology of archaic cultures into »cultural languages« of a non-mythological type, see an important paper of two Russian semiologists, J.M. Lotman and B. Uspenskij, which I could read only in Spanish translation, »Mito, nombre, cultura,« in J.M. Lotman, et al., *Semiotica de la cultura* (Madrid, 1979), 111–135, esp. 124–125, 133. The authors insist that metaphors cannot occur in mythological texts proper, but only as the conclusion of the »tumultuous processes which accompany the disintegration of mythical consciousness.«

In Lucian's *Prometheus*, men are said to have been created in the gods' shape, a fact which has fueled some speculation about possible Jewish influences.<sup>23</sup> Lucian, however, remains poles apart from the monotheistic conception. For him, it is rather the gods who seem to be made in the image of men and to behave like them, in highly dubious ways. The advent of Christianity implanted in the Greco-Roman world the ethical dualism inherited from Judaism. God was enthroned above, beyond any ethical ambiguity, and next to him was his Son, the Savior of mankind. The strong ethical bent in early Christian thought was often, although not always, combined with cosmological, anthropological, or even theological dualism (see, already, the Qumrān texts). Among pagan thinkers, this ethical earnestness was widely recognized as one of the more respectable sides of a religion seen as despicable on various other accounts.<sup>24</sup> It entailed a radical suppression of those elements of playfulness and ambiguity ubiquitous in Greek mythology. Hence, in a Christian *Weltanschauung*, the polarity between Satan and Christ as the perfect epitome of the fight between evil and good in its cosmic dimension. In Origen's words, for instance,

Every man who has chosen evil and to live an evil life so that he does everything contrary to virtue is a Satan, that is, an adversary of the Son of God, who is righteousness, truth, and wisdom<sup>25</sup>

This duality represents a radical departure from mythological thinking.<sup>26</sup> It creates, as it were, a split between the two sides of the titan who had both revolted against divine order and offered his salvific help to mankind. Moreover, early Christian soteriology was quite alien to the major trends of Greek thought. Prometheus' gift permitted mankind to build and rule the world; Jesus' sacrifice offered men salvation from »the ruler of this world.« Prometheus' ambiguity could often express Greek discontent with civilization. For the Christians, things were radically different: civilization, that is to say a pagan construct, was perceived as negative, at least in ethical and soteriological terms – the only terms which mattered.

The drastic paradigmatic change did not wipe out all traces of mythology from the new religion. Around 170 C.E., the pagan thinker Celsus notes that Christian views of the devil are in fact transformations of various Greek myths.<sup>27</sup> Celsus

<sup>23</sup> Blumenberg, op. cit., 347.

<sup>24</sup> See among many other instances, towards the end of the third century, the beginning of Alexander of Lycopolis, *Critique of the Doctrines of Manichaeus*, trans. P.W. van der Horst and J. Mansfeld (Leiden, 1974).

<sup>25</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.44, trans. H. Chadwick (Cambridge, Mass., 1980; third ed.), 361.

<sup>26</sup> The new thinking also offered an epistemology fundamentally different from that propounded by mythology: »Cet état de choses aurait pu durer mille ans; il s'est modifié parce que le champ du savoir a vu sa carte bouleversée par la formation de nouvelles puissances d'affirmation qui concurrençaient le mythe et, à la différence du mythe, posaient expressément l'alternative du vrai et du faux.« P. Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* (Paris, 1984), 35 and note 44.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., IV. 42 ff. (ed. Chadwick, 218 ff.). See J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie: les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes* (Paris, 1976; second ed.), 448–452; and compare 200–201 on Plotinus' interpretation of the myth.

explicitly refers here to the gigantomachy of old, the fight of titans and giants who had revolted against the gods. The persistent awareness of a deep similarity between the two systems, stemming from a common origin, was not exclusive to pagan writers. Some of the Church Fathers also refer to genetic links between Christian truth and Greek philosophy or mythology. For them, of course, divine revelation had also chronological primacy, and those elements of truth found in the pagan systems had been stolen. Thus Tertullian:

Now whence, I ask you, do the philosophers and poets find things so similar? Whence, indeed, unless it be from our mysteries?<sup>28</sup>

More precisely, Clement of Alexandria elaborates his famous theory of the theft:

Philosophy ... came to us stolen or given by a thief. Some power, some angel learned a bit of truth, without staying himself faithful to truth, and revealed this knowledge to men, taught them the fruit of his theft.<sup>29</sup>

Structurally, this story is quite similar to the myth of Prometheus. The implicit reference, however, is not to Prometheus but to the Watchers and their fall, that is to say to the Jewish version of the ancient Near Eastern culture hero myth.<sup>30</sup> According to this myth, transmitted by Enochic literature and the *Book of Jubilees*, the secrets of civilization were brought from heaven by the angels who revolted against God under their leaders Shemhazzai and Assa'el. In the Jewish pseudepigrapha a clear distinction is made between true wisdom received by Enoch and pagan culture deriving from the fallen angels. The trends of these writings represented a manifest process of re-mythologizing inside Judaism. Paradoxically, it developed in Palestine among Hassidim and Essenes, i. e., groups who stood for the purity of Jewish culture against Hellenistic influences. The myth of the fallen angels and the myth of Prometheus both represent different but parallel developments from the original Near Eastern mythical pattern.<sup>31</sup>

The mythical conception of the origins of culture developed in Jewish pseudepigraphical literature had a very significant *Fortleben* in early Christianity, where it formed the basis of esoteric teaching, or *doctrina arcani*, as it was later called.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find it also at the root of gnostic mythology, a baroque development of these esoteric traditions. Since the Nag Hammadi discovery, more-

<sup>28</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 47.14; text with trans. by T. R. Glover (LCL; Cambridge, Mass., London, 1977; fourth ed.), 211.

<sup>29</sup> Clement, *Strom.* I 17.81.4, in O. Stählin, ed., *Clemens Alexandrinus, Werke*, II (GCS 15: Leipzig, 1906), 53. Cf. *Strom.* V. 89 ff., where Clement dwells on the Greek borrowings from Scripture.

<sup>30</sup> See now R. Bauckham, »The Fall of the Angels as the Source of Philosophy in Hermias and Clement of Alexandria,« *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985), 313–330.

<sup>31</sup> On the influence of West Asian myths on the formation of Greek mythology, see for instance G. S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, 1974), ch. 11.

<sup>32</sup> See my »Paradosis: doctrines ésotériques dans le christianisme des premiers siècles,« in P. Geoltrain, J.-C. Picard, and A. Desreumaux, eds., *La fable apocryphe* (Turnhout, 1990), 133–153.

over, research has been focusing upon re-mythologizing trends in Second Commonwealth Judaism as the direct source of some of the core gnostic myths.<sup>33</sup> The leader of the fallen angels (*Nephilim*), for instance, was transformed through a major mutation into the figure of the evil demiurge.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, despite some random speculation and a few parallels, common elements between gnostic and Greek myths seem to remain very scarce. A better insight, perhaps, into the similarities and dissimilarities of both mythologies might be gained by comparing structures.

Expelled from philosophy, *mētis* returned to the fore with Gnosis, the last full-blown attempt in the ancient world to revive mythical patterns of thought. Karl Kérényi has referred to the Gnostic *Anthropos*, the divine Primal Man of gnostic myth, as the only figure comparable in many ways to Prometheus (although he also alluded in the same sentence to »important differences« between the two figures).<sup>35</sup> What primarily seems to have struck Kérényi in this context is the strong bond with mankind of a divine trickster. In gnostic context, however, it is not primarily the *Anthropos*, but rather the demiurge, and to a certain extent the Savior, who partake in some of the trickster's qualities.

A recent study devoted to the gnostic demiurge insists on his ability to cross boundaries and on his »lack of determination« as basic features qualifying him as a particular instance of a trickster.<sup>36</sup> Yet the gnostic demiurge, whether he is called Yaldabaoth (i.e., creator of chaos), Saklas (the fool), or Samael (the blind one), in no way partakes in the ambivalence inherent to the trickster. He does not have any redeeming features and can only be considered as anti-god, either threatening and dangerous or foolish and ridiculous. Actually, only a few features are common to Prometheus and Samael: both appear in myths of creation, of the origin of evil, and of salvation. Like Prometheus, Saklas is a bringer of civilization, but this civilization is regarded as wholly evil. Similarly, fire is always described in strongly negative terms in gnostic texts, where work plays no role whatsoever.<sup>37</sup> Prometheus brought blind hopes; Samael's very name reflects his innate blindness. The son of Iapetus had saved his son, Deucalion, from the flood by advising him to build an arch; in the

<sup>33</sup> For a bibliography, see my *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Nag Hammadi Studies 24; Leiden, 1984), 10, note 40.

<sup>34</sup> See for instance M. Scopello, »Le mythe de la »chute« des anges dans l'*Apocryphon de Jean* (II.I) de Nag Hammadi,« *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 54 (1980), 220–230; and B. Barc, ed. and trans., *L'Hypostase des archontes: traité gnostique sur l'origine de l'homme, du monde et des archontes* (Bibl. Copte de Nag Hammadi, Textes 4; Québec, Louvain, 1980), esp. 32 ff. See also F. T. Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth: Jewish Elements in Gnostic Creation Myths* (Nag Hammadi Studies 10; Leiden, 1978), 28–33.

<sup>35</sup> K. Kérényi, in P. Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York, 1956), 180–181; cf. K. Kérényi, *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence* (Bollingen Series 65.1; New York, 1963), 3, 53–55.

<sup>36</sup> I. S. Gilhus, »The Gnostic Demiurge – An Agnostic Trickster,« *Religion* 14 (1984), 301–311.

<sup>37</sup> See G. G. Stroumsa, »Ascèse et Gnose: aux origines de la spiritualité monastique,« *Revue Thomiste* 81 (1981), 557–573.



same manner, the demiurge saves Noah, his faithful servant.<sup>38</sup> Both Prometheus and Samael fight against the *neos theos*, the upstart who rules the world, in order to come to man's help; *boēthos*, helper, is an important epithet in some of the gnostic texts. Rather similarly to the bringer of fire, the gnostic savior is called the *phōstēr*, the illuminator. Finally, even more than Prometheus, the gnostic savior is the classical instance of the *erlöste Erlöser*.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, although Samael and Christ can each boast of certain Promethean traits, neither of them seems to fully integrate the fundamental quality through which Prometheus was what he was. In order to help men, Prometheus used cunning against Zeus, the higher god. But it is against men that Samael's cunning is oriented, while Christ's *mētis* is oriented towards the demiurge, a false god, essentially lower than himself. Thus the functions which were filled in the Greek myth by Prometheus seem to be divided in Gnosticism between the two major protagonists. Ambiguity was an essential feature of Prometheus in the Greek myth. The change of paradigms initiated by the emergence of Christianity and of Gnosticism, through the splitting of mythical functions and the establishment of a system in which good and evil are radical polarities, has suppressed his ambiguity.

From the meeting of early Christianity and the classical world a two-tiered culture emerged. The Greek legacy, even through a radical *interpretatio christiana*, could not hope for more than an honorable second place as a culture of reference. The first rank was reserved to Christian mysteries, *historia sacra*, theology. Moreover, the Greek legacy of early Christianity was not equally composed of all fields of Greek culture. Philosophy was high-ranking in the eyes of the Church Fathers, or at least of some of the more intellectually minded among them, while they could find no positive value whatsoever in pagan religion. Mythology hung somewhere in-between, closer to religion than to philosophy. It was usually referred to as exemplifying the errors and the nonsense of paganism. The theologians, who succeeded rather quickly in integrating whole chapters of Greek philosophy into Christian thought, proved much more recalcitrant with mythology.

His radical rejection of Zeus permitted at least a partial rehabilitation of Prometheus. For Tertullian, for instance, God the creator is the true Prometheus: *verus Prometheus Deus omnipotens*.<sup>40</sup> Lactantius offers a criticism of the myth of Prometheus in his *Divine Institutions*.<sup>41</sup> Both Origen and Augustine know the myth and

<sup>38</sup> For instance in the *Apocalypse of Adam*, 69–72, where Noah is explicitly identified with Deucalion. English text in J. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York, 1977; second ed.), 258.

<sup>39</sup> See note 18, above.

<sup>40</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* I.1; ed. and trans. E. Evans (Oxford, 1972), 4–5. The phrase comes immediately after the mention of the Caucasus. See also *Apologeticus* XVIII.2 (LCL), 88–89: »... He alone is God, who made the universe, who fashioned man of mud – for He is the true Prometheus.«

<sup>41</sup> See especially Lactantius, *Divine Institutions* II.11, in Migne's *Patrologia Latina* (PL) 6, cols. 311–316, esp. 313B: »Apparet ergo falsum esse quod de opificio Promethei narrat.«