

# Gnostic Libertinism Revisited\*

Emmanouela Grypeou

## *The conflict of asceticism vs. libertinism*

These often quoted verses from the writing, entitled as *The Thunder-Perfect Intellect (Bronté)*, from the *Nag Hammadi Library*, reflect in a way the controversial image that we have about the ethical ideas and life of the dualistic movement of Late Antiquity, known under the generic name of Gnosticism.<sup>1</sup> A polarity of ethical stances was attested primarily in the heresiological literature. According to the Church Fathers, Gnostic ethics were expressed either as extreme asceticism or as libertinism.<sup>2</sup>

A main issue in the analysis of Gnostic ethics was their association with an antinomian exegetical approach to the Bible directed against the creator God and his legislation. Gnostic antinomianism reveals the Gnostic preoccupation with the biblical commandments.

According to Hans Jonas both asceticism and libertinism served the same axiomatic principles: ‘aber als Verachtung des Stoffes im Libertinismus oder Ertötung desselben in Askese – immer ist die streitbare Verweigerung eines Weltanspruches, also Revolution gegen den göttlichen Autor desselben, der Sinn der Entscheidung’.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, asceticism and libertinism would present the effort of the Gnostics to demonstrate physically their spiritual superiority against a hostile world. Libertinism would be a sort of ‘nihilistic anarchism’, which would stress the superiority of the Gnostics towards the rest of mankind and more

---

\* The present article draws largely on my book, “*Das vollkommene Pascha*”. *Gnostische Bibelexegese und Ethik*, Wiesbaden 2005, which is based on my doctoral dissertation, written under the guidance of Prof. Stephen Gero.

<sup>1</sup> I am using here the term ‘Gnosticism’, ‘Gnostics’, etc. in an ‘idealtypical’ way following the definition by HANS JONAS: ‘The emphasis on *knowledge* as the means for the attainment of salvation, or even as the form of salvation itself and the claim to the possession of this knowledge in one’s own articulate doctrine, are common features of the numerous sects in which the Gnostic movement expressed itself (...). In this case we can speak of Gnostic schools, sects and cults, of Gnostic writings and teachings, of Gnostic myths and speculations, even of Gnostic religion in general’ (*The Gnostic religion. The Message of an Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Boston 2001<sup>3</sup>, p. 32).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Clement of Alexandria, Strom. III.40.2.

<sup>3</sup> H. JONAS, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, I, Göttingen 1988<sup>4</sup>, p. 236

importantly towards the hostile powers in the world. It would challenge, moreover, the laws that were imposed by those powers. Accordingly, Gnostic ethics would be based on a fundamental antinomianism, which would express a revolutionary attitude against the material creation and the creator. The concept of the body as belonging to the material world and to its creator was pivotal for the development of Gnostic ethics.<sup>4</sup>

The antinomian approach to Scripture evolved according to B. Pearson into a 'new exegetical method' that expressed a radical religious protest against the orthodox normative Judaism. B. Pearson argues that this exegetical approach resulted in a new 'Jewish-Gnostic' literature, a synthesis of several Jewish exegetical traditions and literary forms.<sup>5</sup> This new literature could have been the work of estranged Jewish intellectuals, who while not rejecting fully their own tradition, interpreted it in a new, radical way.<sup>6</sup> The familiarity of the Gnostics with Jewish canonical and extra-canonical sources was accentuated with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library has challenged, however, the established ideas of a polarised model of Gnostic ethics. As G. Filoramo noted: "Not a single Nag Hammadi text contains any hint of immoral behaviour or, even worse, of any incitement to immoral behaviour. There could not be a more radical contrast between external sources and direct communication".<sup>7</sup>

The perception of Gnosticism as a movement of ascetic and encratite character dominated the study of Gnosticism henceforth.<sup>8</sup> The argument that the

---

<sup>4</sup> H. JONAS, *Gnosis*, p. 204f; 216f. H. JONAS, *Gnosis*, p. 216f.

<sup>5</sup> B. PEARSON, *The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature*, in CH. HEDRICK-R. HODGSON JR., *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, Peabody Mass. 1986, p. 15-35.

<sup>6</sup> B. PEARSON, *Jewish Sources in Gnostic Literature*, in M.E. STONE, (ed.), *Jewish Writings in the Second Temple Period*, Philadelphia 1984, p. 433-481; B. PEARSON, *Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature*, in M.E. STONE, *Armenian and Biblical Studies*, Jerusalem 1976, p. 70-80; cf. ITH. GRUENWALD, who argues as well that this level of familiarity with Jewish material and with Jewish exegetical traditions points out to Jews or former Jews, see ITH. GRUENWALD, *Aspects of Jewish-Gnostic controversy*, in ITH. GRUENWALD, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, Frankfurt 1988, p. 221-232; ITH. GRUENWALD, *Jewish sources for the Gnostic texts*, in ITH. GRUENWALD, *From Apocalypticism*, p. 207-220; see also G. STROUMSA, *Mythos und Erinnerung, Jüdische Dimensionen der gnostischen Revolte gegen die Zeit*, in *Judaica* 44 (1988) p. 15-29; K. RUDOLPH, *Bibel und Gnosis. Zum Verständnis jüdisch-biblicher Texte in der gnostischen Literatur vornehmlich aus Nag Hammadi*, in K. RUDOLPH, *Gnosis und spätantike Religionsgeschichte*, Leiden 1996, p. 190-209; K. RUDOLPH, *Randerscheinungen des Judentums und das Problem der Entstehung des Gnostizismus*, in *Kairos* 9 (1967) p. 105-122.

<sup>7</sup> *A History of Gnosticism*, Oxford 1990, p. 186.

<sup>8</sup> According to KL. KOSCHORKE: 'kann die Forderung nach strikter Enthaltbarkeit als ein dominierendes Merkmal der gnostischen Bewegung gelten' (*Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum*, Leiden 1978, p. 186); cf. A. BÖHLIG, *Einheit und Zweifelt als metaphysische Voraussetzung für das Enkratieverständnis der Gnostiker*, in U. BIANCHI, *La tradizione dell' enkratieia*, Rome 1985, p. 110. G. STROUMSA, *Die Gnosis und die christlichen*

renouncement of the creator God and of the material world would lead to libertinism was questioned and the reports on the so-called libertinistic groups were attributed to slanderous strategies of heresiological polemics.<sup>9</sup>

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library does not confirm categorically, however, the ascetic character of the entire movement of Gnosticism. A possible ascetic orientation of the library could also depend on the intention of the collector(s), as H. Kippenberg notes: ‘Das Argument mit Nag Hammadi ist nicht so stark wie man denkt. Es könnten Enkratiten sein die die Bibliothek zusammengestellt haben’.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the discovery place of the library in Upper Egypt close to the stronghold of the Pachomian monastic community might have determined the selection of the texts.<sup>11</sup>

### *Libertinism: a product of imagination of the heresiologists?*

Gnostic libertinism, according to the reports of the Church Fathers, manifested itself in various forms, such as moral indifference or orgiastic rituals. I will focus the discussion in this paper on the ritual life of Gnostic groups that contained alleged orgiastic features. I intend to demonstrate that the heresiological reports might not have been merely figments of the imagination of celibate writers of the Great Church.

Reading closely the heresiological reports, one observes a common narrative pattern that justifies certain religious beliefs and dictates a specific ritual life, common to several Gnostic groups.

---

>Entzauberung der Welt<, in W. SCHLUCHTER (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des antiken Christentums*, Frankfurt a.M. 1985, p. 501.

<sup>9</sup> H. CHADWICK notes that: ‘The dominant ethical position of these texts (NHC) is strenuously ascetic and encratite. The Gnostic way in these documents is to learn to suppress the evil appetites that the maleficent Creator of this material world has inserted into or attached to the bodies of the elect’ (*The Domestication of Gnosticism*, in B. LAYTON (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II, Leiden 1981, p. 4); he adds, however: “there were occasional groups which mingled erotic elements in their cult; but they were neither typical nor representative” (ibid., p. 11) see also J.-P. MAHÉ, *Gnostic and Hermetic Ethics*, in R. VAN DEN BROEK-W.J. WANEGRAAF, *Gnosis and Hermeticism, from Antiquity to Modern Times*, N.Y. 1998, p. 34f.; R.MC L. WILSON *Ethics and the Gnostics*, in D. SCHOLER (ed.), *Gnosticism in the Early Church*, N.Y. 1993, p. 443;448, see, however, also R.MC L. WILSON, *Alimentary and social encratism*, in U. BIANCHI, *La tradizione dell’ enkrateia*, p. 331, where the possibility of a libertinistic stream is not ruled out.

<sup>10</sup> *Gnostiker zweiten Ranges: Zur Institutionalisierung gnostischer Ideen als Anthropolatrie*, in *Numen*, 30 (1983), p. 171, n. 16.

<sup>11</sup> A. VEULLIEUX, *Monasticism and Gnosis in Egypt*, in B. PEARSON – J.E. GOEHRING, *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, Pihladelphia 1986, p. 306; CH. HENDRICK, *Gnostic Proclivities in the Greek Life of Pachomius and the Sitz im Leben of the Nag Hammadi Library*, in *Novum Testamentum*, 22 (1980), p. 78-94.

The so-called ‘Gnostics’ mentioned by Epiphanius of Salamis, in his heresiological collection, *Panarion*, are all described as libertine groups.<sup>12</sup> Epiphanius has collected obviously information on various groups that shared a similar ritual life. They are named as the Phibionites, the people of Epiphane, the Levites, the Borborites, the worshippers of Barbelo, et al. (Pan.25.2.1).

The accounts regarding these libertine groups refer to a fundamental mythological motif. The core story narrates the creation of the material world as a lapse of a female heavenly figure, called Barbelo (alternatively Barbero, Prunikos or Sophia), which falls into the material world. Barbelo is often identified with an emanation of the true God. She bears also traits of a mother-figure and appears as the ‘mother’ of the evil god Jaldabaoth or Sabaoth. She regrets the formation of Jaldabaoth and wants to correct her error. Mainly, she tries to regain her power that is scattered into the matter, in order to ascend back to the heavenly realm. This is described in a sexual figurative language:

‘But Barbelo (...) continually appears to the archons in some beautiful form and, through their climax and ejaculation, takes their seed – to recover her power, if you please, which has been sown in various of them.’ (Pan. 25.2.4; Williams, p. 78).

Epiphanius describes, further, a cult that focuses on Barbelo, here called Prunikos. The name *prunikos* ‘προυνικός’ (=lewd) is according to Epiphanius characteristic for the moral of this group. In the context of this cult, her worshippers claim to collect Prunikos’ power, when they collect their own fluids (such as semen and menses). In that way, they transform themselves to Prunikos.

So, according to Epiphanius:

‘But others honor a Prunicus; and in turn, to gratify their own passions, they too say in mythological language of this attitude toward disgusting behaviour, ‘We gathered the power of Prunicus from our bodies, and through their emissions’. That is, [they think they gather] the power of semen and menses.’ (Pan. 25.3.4; Williams, p. 79)

The essential principle of this teaching is the understanding of the sperm and menses as power, because they contain soul.<sup>13</sup> Origen, characteristically, mentions that, according to the Gnostic group of the Valentinians, Prunikos’

---

<sup>12</sup> See FR. WILLIAMS, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Leiden 1987.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle believed that men were contributing the sperm to the foetus and the women the menses. In antiquity, it was also widely believed that the women were producing their own sperm, see H.J. CADBURY, *The Ancient Physiological Notions Undelying John I,13 and Hebrews XI,11*, in *The Expositor* 2 (1924), p. 430-439, and P.W. VAN DEN HORST, *Sarah’s Seminal Emissions*, in D.L. BALCH ET AL. (eds), *Greeks, Romans and Christians*, Minneapolis 1990, p. 342. Semen and menses were used, incidentally, in magical practices in the ancient world, s. PGM XII 416; PDM XIV 431.

menses represent a 'liquid power' (Contr.Cels. 6.35). Additionally, the perception of semen as a powerful substance is a common notion in various religious systems.<sup>14</sup>

Epiphanius stresses that these ideas are attested in their writings. So, in a book in the name of 'Noria', it is being taught that what the demons took away from the Mother, needs to be collected again from the power in the bodies through the male and the female emissions (Pan. 26.1.9).

Further, they use a 'gospel', where it says:

'I stood upon a lofty mount, and saw a man who was tall, and another, little of stature. And I heard as it were the sound of thunder and drew nigh to hear, and he spake to me and said, I am thou and thou art I, and whereoever thou art, there am I; and I am sown in all things. And from wheresoever thou wilt gatherest thou me, but in gathering me, thou gatherest thyself' (Pan. 26.3.1, Williams, p. 84).

The dispersion of the light particles in matter and the necessity of their collection for the redemption is expressed here in a liturgical language. M. Tardieu recognizes here a piece of Gnostic hymnology, which is repeated in a personified form in the writing 'Bronté': "D'autre part, ce fragment d'hymne présente de façon extrêmement dense texte la dialectique liée au moit gnostique et qui constitue le fond des formules déclaratoires, du même et de l'autre, de la dispersion (διασπορά) et du rassemblement (σύλλεξις). A qui correspondent pour les Gnostiques de Pan. XXVI les pratiques rituelles de l'offrande et de la communion spermatiques ...".<sup>15</sup>

Concretely, in *Bronté* we read:

'I am the one, that you have pursued and you have captured me.

I am the one you have scattered and you have collected me.'

(NHC VI.2.16.11-25)

Characteristically, in the *First Book of Jeû*, a fragment of a Gnostic hymn with a similar content is preserved:

'redeem all my limbs, that have been scattered in all archons and decans and servants of the fifth light since the creation of the world, collect them all and bring them to the light' (Cod.Bruc. 36.15-20).

---

<sup>14</sup> On the identification of the *semen virile* with the cosmic and divine light in Manicheism, see M. ELIADE, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*, Chicago 1976, p. 100 and M.ELIADE, *Spirit, Light, Seed*, in *History of Religions*, 11 (1971/72), p. 1-30; see also G. GNOLI, *Un particolare aspetto del simbolismo della luce nel Mazdeismo e nel Manicheismo*, in *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 12 (1962), p. 95-128.

<sup>15</sup> *Épiphane contre les gnostiques*, in *TelQuel* 88 (1981), p. 110, n. 176.

These perceptions lead, according to Epiphanius these people to ‘promiscuity’ and to ‘filthy and cannibalistic meals’ (Pan. 26.3.3). An often quoted passage from Epiphanius reports in a graphic way a ritual ceremony, where bodily fluids are treated as a sacred offering before they are actually consumed. The ceremony is described almost as a parody of a Christian eucharist.<sup>16</sup> The main goal of the rite is the avoidance of procreation. The consumption of sperm has a theological significance in the Gnostic system and fulfils a soteriological purpose. Procreation and reincarnation are avoided through the physical assimilation of soul elements. St. Benko thinks here of a ‘unio mystica’ with the godhead, because the sperm is regarded as an element of the divine. The soteriological aspect of the rite lies in the collection and consumption of the power of Barbelo. Benko calls this a ‘theology of syllexis’.<sup>17</sup> As R. Smith also observes, ‘salvation is described as a result from the secretion of the male genital organ, the semen. The language frequently used to describe the state of salvation is a language that is invariably used by the medical writers to describe the male semen: power, form, perfection’.<sup>18</sup>

These practices seem to take place against ‘the archon of the lust’, not through a struggle against the lust but through the direct confrontation with the consequences of lust.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, if a conception occurs accidentally, the foetus is aborted and consumed ritually by the gathered community. As J.J. Buckley rightly observes: ‘the foetus is not classified as a human being, but as “strayed semen”’.<sup>20</sup>

Epiphanius reports of several practical variations on this same theme, where sexuality is manipulated and functionalised in the context of a soteriological rite (Pan. 26.5.7; 26.11.1; 26.11.8). According to J. Turner “while many Gnostic groups of the second and third century advocated and practiced a

---

<sup>16</sup> J. TURNER observes to this passage: ‘Although Epiphanius does not say that they called this rather unrestrained ritual sex a ‘mystery’ or rite of the bridal chamber, it seems clear that its intent was the same, effecting a restoration of the lost primordial unity by physical coupling and attempting to revert the natural course of the propagation of the species’, *Ritual in Gnosticism*, in *Society of Biblical Literature-Seminar Papers*, 130 (1994) p. 166. Cf. also M. TARDIEU, *Épiphanie*, 84, who adds: Le puritanisme des gnosticismes actuels évacue a priori toute possibilité d’expression non symbolique du rituel’.

<sup>17</sup> *The Libertine Gnostic Sect of the Phibionites according to Epiphanius*, in *Vigiliae Christianae* 21 (1967), p. 115. H. JONAS understands the rite of the collection as ‘individuelles Gegenbild des Kollektivvorgangs’ (GNOSIS, p. 31), where each participant of the mystery imitates the Redeemer.

<sup>18</sup> *Sex Education in Gnostic Schools*, in K.L. KING, *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, Philadelphia 1988, p. 356.

<sup>19</sup> Similar ideas and practices among the Manichees are reported by Augustine, *Confessiones* 3.9; *De Natura Boni* 47; *De mor man.* 13.27. see also H.-CH. PUECH, *Sur le Manichéisme et autres essais*, Paris 1979, p. 241ff.; and also N. ADKIN, *Filthy Manichees*, in *Arctos* 26 (1992), p. 7-18.

<sup>20</sup> *Libertines or Not. Fruit, Bread, Semen and Other Body Fluids in Gnosticism*, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997), p. 19.

sexual and dietary encratism approaching a true demonization of sexuality, other groups rejected such a practice as ineffective and deceptive, transforming the moral indifference typical of its libertine opposite, free sexual exchange, into sacred ritual”<sup>21</sup>

The body becomes an important redemptive instrument and it is being treated with the appropriate care:

‘Man and woman, they pamper their bodies night and day, anointing themselves, bathing, feasting, spending their time in whoring and drunkenness. And they curse whoever fasts and say ‘Fasting is wrong; fasting belongs to this archon who made the world. We must take nourishment to make our bodies strong, and able to render their fruit in its season’ (Pan. 25.5.8; Williams, p. 87).

This strongly hedonistic life is based, however, on peculiar biblical interpretations on an antinomian exegetical basis (Pan. 26.5.1; 26.6.1; 26.7.5)

‘And by the words, “He shall be like a tree planted by the outgoings of water that will bring forth its fruit in due season,” (Ps 1:3) David means the man’s dirt. “By the outgoing of water”, and, “that will bring forth his fruit,” means the emission at climax. And “Its leaf shall not fall off” means, “We do not allow it to fall to the ground, but eat it ourselves.” (...) When it says that Rahab put a scarlet thread in her window (Jos 2:18), this was not scarlet thread, they tell us, but the female organs. And the scarlet thread means the menstrual blood, and “Drink water from your cisterns” (Prov. 5:15) means the same (Pan. 26.8.7-9.2; Williams, p. 89).

This cultic praxis is explicitly described in an apocryphal writing of this group, known as Phibionites. In this writing, called *The Great Questions of Mary*, Jesus performs this practice himself in front of a deeply shocked Mary (Pan.26.8.2). The Phibionites assert that the power in the sperm and the menses is soul that needs to be collected and consumed. So, they eat also all kinds of meat because they think that soul is everywhere in the nature and its products (flora, fauna, humans). Epiphanius reports that the Gnostics through the consumption of everything – meat, vegetables, bread – liberate the souls and take them with them to the heaven (Pan. 26.9.4-6).<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ritual in Gnosticism*, p. 165. see also ST. GERO: ‘The Borborite option was simply the other facet of the preoccupation with fasting and sexuality’ (*With Walter Bauer on the Tigris: Encratite Orthodoxy and Libertine Heresy in Syro-Mesopotamian Christianity*, in CH. HEDRICK- R. HODGSON JR., *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, p. 306. cf. P. BROWN, *The Body and Society. Men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity*, N.Y. 1988, p. 60f.

<sup>22</sup> This idea is similar to Manichaeism and is based on reincarnation convictions, see A. BOEHLIG, *Der Manichaeismus*, Zürich 1980, p. 141.293; F. WILLIAMS, *The Panarion*, p. 89. J.J. BUCKLEY notes: ‘This sounds like simplified Manichaeism (...). What it not Manichaeism about

According to Epiphanius the female members of these groups, called ‘proper virgins’, acted as personifications of Barbelo trying to collect sperm through multiple sexual intercourses (Pan. 26.11.20).<sup>23</sup> Epiphanius reports even of his own experience as a young man with women of this sect (Pan. 26.17.6).

The narrative of the fallen female figure can be found, furthermore, in the teachings of Simon Magus, the prototypical heretic according to the Patristic literature. The ethics of the Simonian Gnosticism was founded on the antinomian teaching of Simon. Simon’s antinomianism was directed against the angels that created and dominated the world and was connected with a moralistic relativism. The main principle of Simon’s teachings was to resist to the worldly laws of those angels. The Simonians were regarded to be free towards these laws. (Irenaeus of Lyon, Adv.Haer. I.23.3). The Simonian teaching combined an attitude of moral indifference with a mythology about a female prototypical figure, which was represented by Simon’s partner Helena. Helena was according to the Church Fathers, a harlot, which was ‘saved’ by the redeemer Simon (Pan 21.2.3). She was the symbol of Gnostic Sophia and was also called ‘mother of all’ (Adv.haer. I.23.3). The figure of the Simonian Helena personified elements of a female deity, which as a fallen soul in the material world becomes a symbol and a medium for redemption.<sup>24</sup> Epiphanius identified Helena explicitly with the Barbelo-figure of other groups:

‘Simon told a fairy tale about this, and said that the power kept transforming her appearance on her way down from on high, but that the poets had spoken of this in allegories. For these angels went to war over the power from on high – they called her Prunikus, but she is called Barbero or Barbelo by other sects – because she displayed her beauty [and] drove them wild, and was sent for this purpose, to despoil the archons who had made this world. She has suffered no harm, but she brought them to the point of slaughtering each other from the lust for her that she aroused in them. And detaining her so that she should not go back up, they all had relations with her, (...) so that, by the deeds they were doing in killing and being killed, they would cause their own diminution through the shedding of blood. Then, by gathering the power again, she would be able to ascend to heaven once more’ (Pan. 21.2.5; Williams, p. 58f.)

The female figure in this story fights the archons with their ‘own weapons’, collecting the power, which is implicitly in their sperm and explicitly in

---

this are the indiscriminate food habits (*Libertines or Not*, 20) and further: Pale, book-carrying Manichean Elect impressed their audiences in the Roman empire, but would have found scant tolerance among the body-building Phibionites’ (ibid, p. 24).

<sup>23</sup> See J.E. GOHRING, *Libertine or Liberated. Women in the so-called libertine Gnostic communities*, in K.L. KING, *Images of the Feminine*, p. 344.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the sufferings of the soul in this world in the writing: *Explanation On the Soul* (NHC II,6).



their blood. This mythological narrative could have been a basis for libertine cults. Barbelo's reincarnation in various bodies is a symbol for the Gnostic, who needs to collect his light-power again so that he will be able to ascend to heavens. According to Epiphanius Simon initiated orgiastic rites ('filthy mysteries') on the basis of sexual fluids that he calls 'mysteries of life' and the 'perfect gnosis'. Furthermore, Simon preached the 'death of flesh' and the purification of the souls (Pan. 21.4.3). The Simonian sect is reported to have developed a '*hieros-gamos*' ceremony based on Simon's teachings on his own union with Helena (Hippolytus of Rome, Ref. VI.19.5).

Consequently, variations of a mythological narrative reflecting the struggle of the soul with the powers of the world might have served as a foundation for libertine cults.

The importance of the collection for the redemption is narrated, further, in a paradigmatic way in a story according to which the prophet Elijah was not able to ascend to the heaven because he has produced unknowingly children with a female demon through his nocturnal emissions (Pan.26.13.5). This story exemplifies the idea that the sensitive realm of sexuality needs to be under strict control, so that the demonic influence in the world can be overcome. Asceticism does not offer, accordingly, sufficient protection, as it cannot prevent, for example, nocturnal emissions. To the contrary, the libertine answer is far more efficient in this respect.<sup>25</sup>

### *Libertinism in the Coptic-Gnostic texts?*

The myth of Barbelo/Sophia as recounted by the Church Fathers can be found in several variations also in the Gnostic texts, albeit without libertine connotations. Certain Gnostic texts focus on a mythological account about a female figure, representative for the Gnostic in this world, with a soteriological message. The story of her persecution through the archons is described in an erotic imagery.

'When they saw Eve, who was talking to him (Adam), they said to each other: Who is this luminous woman? She looks, namely, like the image, that was revealed to us in the light. Come, let us seize her and throw our semen into her, so that, when she is defiled, she would not be able to ascend to her light, rather the

---

<sup>25</sup> On the issue of the *emissiones nocturnae* in Christian literature see D. BRAKKE, *The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt and Gaul*, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995), p. 419-460.

ones that she will engender, will become our subjects. (On the Origin of the World, NHC II.5.116.12-20).<sup>26</sup>

This passage from the text ‘On the Origin of the World’ conveys the same basic ideas as the mythological narrations about Barbelo that we know from the Church Fathers. Eve’s defilement through the semen of the archons symbolises the captivity of the luminous soul in matter that prevents her from ascending back to her light. This text identifies the (heavenly) light with blood and the blood with soul (NHC II.5.108.15-25). Furthermore, mythological elements used in these texts remind of enochic traditions about the mixing of the ‘sons of God’ with the ‘daughters of men’. As Ph. Perkins notes: ‘Gnostic adaptation of such Jewish traditions often surfaces motifs that go back to an archaic level of goddess mythology. Seduction by, or of, the powers is necessary for the fertility and emergence of life forms on earth’<sup>27</sup>.

An important element in the mythological system of these texts is the concept that the human body is created by demons, which control the human passions. It is the evil archon, the archon of the desire, who orders the procreation.<sup>28</sup>

The Gnostic texts betray a familiarity with the symbolism or even practices that were associated with libertine groups. Apart from the symbolic language used in the above mentioned texts, we find a reference to similar cults in the NHC text: *Testimony of Truth*:

‘They receive with ... (ignorance) the pleasures that defile and they (the pleasures) dominate them. They use to say: God created the limbs for our use, so that we become stronger in defilement and so that we enjoy ourselves’ (NHC IX,3.38.27-39.5).

Libertine practices are condemned explicitly in *Pistis Sophia* (Cod.Ask.):

‘Thomas said: ‘We have heard that there some people on earth, that take the male semen and the female menses and they prepare with these a lentil dish and they eat it, und say: ‘We believe in Esau and in Jacob’. Is this proper or not?’’ (IV.147).

Similarly, we read in the *Second Book of Jeû* (Cod.Bruc. II).

---

<sup>26</sup> Variations of this story can be found also in *Apocryphon of John*, NHC II,1.24.15-16; 28.6-29; Hypostasis of the Archons, NHC II,4.89.17-30; 92.18-93.1

<sup>27</sup> *Sophia as Goddess in the Nag Hammadi Codices*, in K.L. KING, *Images of the Feminine*, p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> See *Apocryphon of John*, NHC II,1.15.24-17.28; 24.15-16; 24.26-32; 28.6-29; 29.26-30; *On the Origin of the World*, NHC II,5.114.17-27; *Apocalypse of Adam*, NHC V,5.67ff.

‘These mysteries that I shall give to you, you should preserve and do not give them to any man, except if he is worthy (...). Do not give them to those, who serve the eight powers of the archon. Those are who consume the blood of the menses of their impurity and the fluids of man, while they pronounce: ‘we have known the knowledge of truth and we worship the God of truth’. But their God is evil.’ (43.1)

The description of these practices appears almost as a summary of Epiphanius’ report of libertine rituals. Even if ‘these people’ are not named, or described more precisely, the liturgical confession formula with the typical Gnostic terminology referring to ‘knowledge’ and the ‘God of Truth’ indicates to a group of libertine Gnostics. These texts reflect thus an internal polemic between Gnostic groups and confirm the model of Gnostic polarised ethics.

### *The plausibility of libertine Gnosticism*

According to G. Filoramo, the Gnostic orgiastic cults are a proof for the lack of ritual control of sexuality<sup>29</sup>. The heresiological reports, however, prove to the contrary, a soteriologically purposeful, ritually controlled sexuality. The sexual intercourse becomes a sacrificial offering to the God of Truth.

The body as a symbolic universe played a special role in religious systems, such as Gnosticism that demonised matter. The Gnostics were experiencing in their own physical existence the dualistic struggle between matter and spirit. The Gnostic systems developed, accordingly, practices that involved their own body, in order to demonstrate practically their theological concepts. The body was instrumentalised in the service of the Gnostic redemption message. Their efforts were focused on the ascent to the heavenly realm through the collection of the luminous soul power and the liberation of all material bonds, such as the parenting of offspring. The control of all passions connected to material pleasures was, thus, an effective instrument for the fighting of the demonic powers.

For the Gnostics, the conflict with the demonic forces involved a conflict with their own body. The conflict with the body culminated in the realm of sexuality. For certain Gnostic groups, the best response to the demonic threat of the material world was the effective manipulation of sexuality. Procreation was condemned radically but not necessarily sexuality, as well. Ph. Perkins argues similarly that: “the radical break with the rules evident in Gnostic hermeneutics might find expression in either libertine or ascetic practice. The former appears to have been constrained with cultic practices that depict the destruction of the

---

<sup>29</sup> *A History*, p. 183.

powers. The latter appears in a variety of ascetic forms that were shared with other philosophical and religious groups ...”<sup>30</sup>.

It was thus argued that Gnostic Libertinism emerged as a reaction to early Christian extreme asceticism. As St.Gero maintained on the Borborites: ‘The movement drew its sustenance from, and owed this astonishing persistence to, the same religious and psychological factors which led many Christians from early on to regard the restraining or entire suppression of sexual appetites as absolutely central to salvation’. Gero argues that the Borborites emerged in Syro-Mesopotamia, where celibacy was a requirement for the full participation into the Christian community. Gero thought, further, that the Borborites addressed an internal Gnostic conflict: ‘the Borborites (...) were, it seems also dissatisfied with the general libertine notion of regarding the free exercise of sexual appetites as simply a symbolic expression of moral indifference or ethical nihilism’.<sup>31</sup>

The Patristic literature attests, however, that libertinism was an inherent characteristic of Gnostic religion, which developed in diverse ways in the various Gnostic schools. Accordingly, different forms of libertinism developed parallel to each other in Gnosticism in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere.

As mentioned above, the existence of libertinistic groups with orgiastic elements among Gnostics has been met with serious scepticism and often waved off as hostile propaganda of the Great Church. There is no doubt that accusations regarding secret orgiastic rites against heretics, opponent groups, ‘witches’ etc. present a cliché. Mircea Eliade has demonstrated that ‘such clichés (...) belong to the imaginary universa’<sup>32</sup>. M. Eliade stresses, however, at the same time the significance of ritual orgies in various cultural environments. In this context, sexuality is perceived and manipulated as a magic-religious power performed along with a ritual nakedness and specifically along with ceremonial free intercourse. This phenomenon is a topos in the history of religions. Beyond that, sexual orgies can manifest a radical protest against contemporary religious and social circumstances.<sup>33</sup> Extreme ethic views and practices are not surprising, in particular, for religious groups with a radical world-view.

Ecstatic religious cults with orgiastic features, such as, for example, sacred prostitution were widely spread in the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity. Characteristically, Augustine reports shocked in the 5<sup>th</sup> century of obscene cults in

---

<sup>30</sup> *Gnosticism and New Testament*, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 162. M.A. WILLIAMS has criticised sharply the dualistic model of Gnostic ethics: ‘the popular notion of a “Gnostic” two-pronged ethic is not merely an exaggeration, not merely a caricature, but actually a completely false construct’ (*Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’. An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton 1996, p. 165).

<sup>31</sup> *With Walter Bauer*, p. 306.

<sup>32</sup> *Occultism*, p. 88.

<sup>33</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 86ff.

honour of a 'virgin' goddess<sup>34</sup>. Against this background the Gnostic cults would not have been especially unusual.

Already in the early study of Gnosticism, we encounter suggestions that the Gnostic libertinistic cult emerged under the influence of the cult of the Mother-Goddess.<sup>35</sup> As we saw, the Church Father described cults with orgiastic features based on a female figure.

The influence of the mystery religions and of other similar contemporary cults on Gnostic rituals cannot be ruled out. The question would be though, how can we justify a libertinistic ethic among Gnostic groups that document explicit antinomian elements in their teaching? A plausible answer is delivered by Moritz Friedlaender, who traced the origin in Gnosticism in radical antinomistic sects among Hellenised Jews in Alexandria.<sup>36</sup> Philo polemicises against extreme allegorical exegesis of Scripture that results into disrespect and finally to a renunciation of the ceremonial law (Conf.Ling. II). M. Friedlaender maintains that indications of an antinomistic Gnosis can be found already among Philo's contemporaries. He points out that Philo attacks so-called 'Cainites', who taught that the bodily nature can only be destroyed through the full participation in the fleshly lusts (Post Cain 52-53; Migr Abr 89ff.). According to Friedlaender also the *minim* of the rabbinic literature were antinomian Gnostics. He points out a characteristic episode in the Midrash Kohelet (I.8. § 4) that portrays antinomian and libertinistic behaviour among the *minim*.<sup>37</sup>

Medieval Jewish mysticism presented also elements of a sacralisation of sexuality that demonstrate similarities with the Gnostic systems.<sup>38</sup> L.Ginzberg has argued that the Gnostic concept of the 'syzygies' was introduced into the Talmud and more specifically, in a passage saying: 'the Shekhinah dwells between man

---

<sup>34</sup> De civitate Dei 226, CCL 48, 812f. On orgiastic rites in honour of ancient and Hellenistic mother-goddesses, see STEPHEN BENKO, *The Virgin Goddess. Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*, Leiden 1993. On the popularity of ecstatic worship of the Magna Mater in the Greek-Roman world, s. E.O. JAMES, *The Cult of the Mother-Goddess*, London 1959.

<sup>35</sup> See W. BOUSSET, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Göttingen 1907, p. 322, cf. ST. GERO, *With Walter Bauer: 'The crucial difference of course is that the Astarte rites were part of a fertility cult – though, it is precisely the Gnostic who can be expected to reverse the original purpose!'* (p. 295, n. 44).

<sup>36</sup> *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus*, Göttingen 1898, p. 45 and passim.

<sup>37</sup> In this passage it is significant that a certain moral licentiousness is documented among Jewish 'sectarians', who similar to the Gnostics they justify their behaviour with the use of biblical passages and they even attribute to it a soteriological meaning. A similar episode can be found also in Clement of Alexandria's report about the Gnostic heretics (Strom. III.27.3). see the groundbreaking article by B.PEARSON, *Friedländer revisited. Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins*, in *Studia Philonica* 2 (1973), p. 23-39.

<sup>38</sup> On sexual intercourse as a sacred ritual in Kabbalah, see M. IDEL, *Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah*, in D. KRAEMER (ed.), *The Jewish Family*, N.Y.-Oxford 1989, p. 197-224.

and wife'. This idea was developed later in the cabbalistic idea of the so-called 'mystery of the intercourse'.<sup>39</sup>

The most striking Jewish stream of thought, which demonstrated an antinomianism, similar to Gnosticism was the messianic movement of Sabbatai Zwi. The Sabbatians maintained that 'evil' has to be fought through 'evil'.<sup>40</sup> The sabbatian antinomianism was based on the belief that nothing can be regarded as sin in this world. On that basis, everything is allowed. The Sabbatians believed in the redeeming power of sin according to a *sui generis* interpretation of Lev 16:16.<sup>41</sup>

### Gnostic Libertinism as a purity system

Considering the affinity of Gnosticism with Jewish traditions, the Gnostic libertinistic manipulation of the body originates, to my mind, in the Israelite purity system and in the fundamental commandment of procreation. According to this system, sexual intercourse is considered to be defiling.

In the Israelite purity system, as D. Biale stresses, the only fluids that pollute are the sperm, the menstrual blood and the discharge from the genital diseases. The sperm and the menses are also considered, however, to be powers of life, as they are associated above all with 'new life'. So, according to Biale: 'The priests seem to have believed that a man who has ejaculated temporarily loses his vital power; the impurity he acquires symbolizes a brief loss of fertility, which was the symbolic equivalent of death. The connection between loss of procreative fluids and death is equally clear with respect to menstruation. The priests evidently regarded menstrual blood as female seed, the equivalent of semen'.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the purity laws concentrated on procreation/fertility, which depended on a controlled sexual conduct.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman was condemned, because it was not procreative.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> *On Jewish Law and Lore*, N.Y. 1962, p. 190.

<sup>40</sup> On the connection of the Sabbatians with Gnostic 'orgiastic' sects, see K. SCHUBERT, *Die Religion des nachbiblischen Judentums*, Freiburg-Wien 1955, p. 181.

<sup>41</sup> *Redemption Through Sin*, in G. SCHOLEM, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, N.Y. 1971, p. 113; see also M. IDEL, *Sexual Metaphors*, p. 197ff. This movement continued its existence in Poland under the leadership of Jakob Frank. The main principle of the Frankists was that in order to ascend, one has first to descend, which means the rejection of all conventions and the accomplishments of extreme actions. Similarly to the Gnostics of Late Antiquity, the Frankists believed that they originate from life, while the rest of humanity comes from death.

<sup>42</sup> *Eros and the Jews. From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*, N.Y. 1992, p. 29; compare the Gnostic ideas on Sophia and the symbolism of her fluids above in the text.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, cf. G.J. WENHAM, *Why Does Sexual Intercourse Defile? (Lev 15,18)*, in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95 (1983), p. 432-435.

<sup>44</sup> see SH.J.D. COHEN, *Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity*, in S.B. POMEROY (ed.), *Women's History and Ancient History*, Chapel Hill and London 1988, p. 273-299; see also

Furthermore, reactions against these purity laws were not unknown to 'orthodox' Judaism. As D. Biale observes: 'The antinomian interpretation may have been a voice of protest raised against the legal strictures on sexuality and perhaps also against the rabbinic obsession with procreation'.<sup>45</sup>

These radical attitudes emerged, apparently, in the middle of Jewish apocalyptic and messianic circles. Accordingly, Gnosticism shared with these groups a similar biblical exegesis, and perhaps even more.

The Gnostic cults challenged above all the Israelite commandment regarding procreation (Gen 1:27) that symbolized God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 17). It would be consequent for Gnostic teachings to fight fertility through unconventional sexual practices. A non-reproductive sexual intercourse would even promote for some groups the restoration of their original pneumatic unity. According to J.D. Turner, these cults could have also been a parody of the common functional sexuality, which represented of course a commandment of the creator god with the purpose to enslave humanity.<sup>46</sup> While the Gnostics dismiss this model of conduct, they manifest openly their revolt against the Israelite system of thought. At the same time they betray, however, also their dependence on it. In contrast to biblical commandments, procreation is condemned and non-procreative sexual intercourse is hallowed. The purity laws are turned upside down in a demonstrative manner. Sperm and menses contain – just as in the Israelite system of thought – an enormous life force but – in contrast to the priestly attitude – they are considered to be pure, even purifying and divine.<sup>47</sup> This model of interpretation illuminates the practices of collection of sperm and menses in the Gnostic ritual system. In an exact 'reversal' of the Israelite system of thought, the collection of life force in the sperm and in the menses, followed by a loss of fertility, corresponds in the Gnostic context to a life-giving soteriological message. Moreover, the assimilation and manipulation of the power in these substances presents a necessity for the realisation of redemption.

As H. Eilberg-Schwartz observes: 'There is no escaping the cultural conflict that surrounds sexuality ... the body is the place where conflicting representations meet and clash'.<sup>48</sup>

The Gnostic libertinistic cults can be 'read' as an 'overthrow' of the Israelite purity system. The exegetical approach of the Gnostics to the Bible needs to be understood against the background of the canonical biblical text and its

---

H. EILBERG-SCHWARTZ, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism*, Bloomington 1990, p. 183.

<sup>45</sup> *Eros and the Jews*, p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> *Response to: 'Sophia and Christ in the Apocryphon of John' by K.L. King*, in K.L. KING, *The Image of the Feminine*, p. 186.

<sup>47</sup> Hippolytus, Ref. V.7.20-21, describes with the Naassenes, a group that regards the sperm, indeed, as a divine substance inside man.

<sup>48</sup> *The Savage in Judaism*, p. 194. On notions of the body in rabbinic Judaism as opposed to Hellenistic Judaism and Christianity, see D. BOYARIN, *Carnal Israel*, Berkeley 1993.

'mainstream' exegesis. Similarly, Gnostic ethics may be understood against the background of the biblical commandments. If the Israelite purity system is supposed to guarantee the fertility of Israel and Israel's covenant with God, and if the Gnostics ridicule this same God, a libertinistic attitude, in the form of a non-procreative sexuality would have made sense. Against the belief that creation and procreation are sacred, the Gnostics exerted themselves to prove exactly the contrary, and to demonstrate this in practice.