[Review of: J. Cahana-Blum (2019) Wrestling with Archons: Gnosticism as a Critical Theory of Culture]

Burns, D.M.

DOI
10.1086/715800

Publication date
2021

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
The Journal of Religion

CAHANA-BLUM, JONATHAN. *Wrestling with Archons.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018. xii+200 pp. $90.00 (cloth).

For over twenty years, the trend in Anglo-American studies of the sources formerly known as "Gnostic," above all the Coptic Gnostic books discovered in the vicinity of Nag Hammadi (Upper Egypt) in 1945, has been to normalize these recovered texts. We are asked to speak of "biblical demiurgicalism" and "Valentinian and Sethian Christianity" (Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": Arguments for Dismantling a Dubious Category* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996]; Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003]), rather than anything weird like "anticosmic dualism" or "Sethian Gnosticism." The dominant scholarly line (it is hardly a consensus) on Gnosticism today is that there is no Gnosticism: rather,

there is a diversity of ancient Christianities, some of which ancient heresiologers and modern scholars have attempted to consign to the periphery by calling them Gnostic.

Jonathan Cahana-Blum's *Wrestling with Archons* tells a different story, presenting "Gnosticism as a critical theory of culture transcribed in a religious alphabet" (2), by way of six essays of unequal length. The introduction sets the course of investigation by offering a brief *Forschungsbericht* of the study of Gnosticism. Hans Jonas here assumes special importance. His fundamental insight was to treat Gnosticism as a specimen of ancient philosophy (2, 54–55), opening up Cahana-Blum's strategy of treating Gnosticism as a specimen of ancient cultural criticism, virtually without parallel until the modern era (3). The first chapter circumscribes the evidence under review—heresiological and Coptic Gnostic sources (41–46)—and introduces the lens that Cahana-Blum wishes to use to understand it, namely modern cultural theory. Chapter 2 reads this evidence as challenging ancient assumptions of the superiority of long-standing cultural traditions (whether Jewish, Greek, or Roman—; 69–80) as well as of the origin and function of sex, gender, and bodies (80–108). The third chapter asks "what does Frankfurt have to do with Alexandria?" (128), offering a freewheeling comparison between the ancient texts at hand and modern culture criticism, focusing on Adorno and the Frankfurt School (the culture industry is an archontic creation!), radical feminism (Nature is a tool of oppression!), and Stuart Hall's notion of the cultural theorist as possessing a kind of special, quasi-revealed knowledge (*gnōsis*!) that is nonetheless appropriated by the oppressing powers (proto-orthodox Christianity!). The final chapter offers a brief theological meditation on Christian origins as queer and "Gnostic," and of proto-orthodoxy as "deviant" (esp. 158–59), and is followed by a conclusion summarizing the book.

Cahana-Blum is right that the genius and lasting influence of Jonas's writing on Gnosticism is the interpretation of the phenomenon at hand in terms of existentialist philosophy. Accordingly, he mimics Jonas's approach: just as Jonas believed that the ease with which we may understand Gnostic sources in terms of existentialist philosophy indicates that the historical Gnostics were ancient existentialists, Cahana-Blum avers that the facility by which we may read Gnostic literature as transgressive and queer can only mean that the current deadlock among historians about the nature and character of ancient Gnosticism may finally be solved if only we denote the evidence at hand the product of ancient culture critics (54–55, 101–2, 134). The synchronic arguments are used in service of a diachronic thesis; ay, there's the rub. Curiously, Cahana-Blum pays little attention to why Jonas's work on Gnosticism went out of fashion: while his synchronic interpretations of the evidence made for compelling existentialism, many of his diachronic arguments held up less well over the years given advances in historical criticism, philology, and theory and method in the study of religion. Though Cahana-Blum would prefer to dismiss them (1–2), the little details dropkick *Wrestling with Archons*, too. There are errors of fact, as when P.Berol. 22220 (the *Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon*) is mentioned when P.Berol. 8502 (the Berlin Gnostic Codex) appears to be meant (56 n. 13), or *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* is repeatedly stated to be from Nag Hammadi Codex VII (42—the reference is not incidental to the argument at hand—and 59 n. 42), while it is found in Codex VI. We read of "the Hebrew Bible god" (38, 142, passim), although we know that the *gnōstikoi* engaged in exegesis of the Septuagint, not the Hebrew Bible. There are non sequiturs, such as the argument that religious pluralism is incompatible with counterculturalism (32 n. 116), or the repeated statement that "we possess virtually no primary sources for historical Christian Gnosticism" (3) because the Coptic sources are (ostensibly) monastic in origin and the heresiological evidence is from hostile witnesses. Typos are numerous and include howlers, particularly in the rendering of the names of scholars (unforgettable: "Moron Smith," 6).

So one wonders why Cahana-Blum bothers with the philological details and the diachronic arguments in the first half of the book, when he clearly is most comfortable in open-ended philosophizing, bringing gender trouble to places like the aeon "called Barbelo, with respect to thought the female one of three [kinds]—male, virgin, perfect" (*Zostrianos*, NHC VIII 83.8–12, my translation; cf. 82–83). Does it really matter if Epiphanius of Salamis's notorious sect of the Borborites (the term is Greek for "Filthies") actually practiced ritual sodomy or not, when Cahana-Blum is absolutely right that Rocky O'Donovan's flat statement "I like Sodom now" invites a contemporary theological reading of the libertine Gnostic dossier of evidence (93), or the *Paraphrase of Shem*'s denunciation of the female demiurge Nature lends itself so well to the hermeneutics of Andrea Dworkin (90–91)? The case for the philosophical salience of ancient Gnostic literature for modern thought and culture criticism is in no way incumbent on historians' quibbling about the *gnō stikē hairesis* or the monastic origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices, so why weave the two lines of argument together?

Sure enough, Cahana-Blum shines when he takes the argument to the theorists themselves: as he astutely points out, the culture industry has to be run by somebody (archons), and its unmasking presumes a revelatory event (134–35); conversely, ancient Gnosticism, with its metaphysics and salvation-histories, offers us the possibility of an optimistic culture-criticism where Nature really can be overcome (143–44). Cahana-Blum states that he will refrain from calling Stuart Hall a Gnostic, even though Baudrillard has been dubbed one already (145, 150). In a book like this, why hold back?

Dylan M. Burns, *University of Amsterdam.*