

The Universe as Prophet: A Soteriological Formula in Plotinus

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IN THE NINTH CHAPTER of the treatise *Against the Gnostics* (2.9), Plotinus, defending the divinity and goodness of the cosmos against the claim of some Gnostic sects that it is evil and inferior even to mankind, parodies what he considers a particularly odious facet of Gnostic doctrine (51–60):

τὸ δ' ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἤδη ἐστὶν ἔξω νοῦ πεσεῖν. πείθονται δὲ ἄνθρωποι ἀνόητοι τοῖς τοιούτοις τῶν λόγων ἐξαιφνης ἀκούοντες ὡς «σὺ ἔση βελτίων ἀπάντων οὐ μόνον ἀνθρώπων, ἀλλὰ καὶ θεῶν»—πολλὴ γὰρ ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἢ αὐθάδεια—καὶ ὁ πρότερον ταπεινὸς καὶ μέτριος καὶ ἰδιώτης ἀνὴρ, εἰ ἀκούσειε: «σὺ εἶ θεοῦ παῖς, οἱ δ' ἄλλοι, οὓς ἐθαύμαζες, οὐ παῖδες οὐδ' ἄ τιμῶσιν ἐκ πατέρων λαβόντες, σὺ δὲ κρείττων καὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οὐδὲν πονήσας»—εἶτα καὶ συνεπηχῶσιν ἄλλοι;

To my knowledge only Eduard Norden has acknowledged the formulaic character of the phrase ‘You are the son of god’.¹ In his discussion of the stylistic tradition of the ceremonial formula ‘I am a god’ (or the variation ‘I am the son of god’), he takes note of this passage and compares similar passages in Christian polemicists, concluding that Plotinus is here reproducing well-known and controversial language of Gnostic soteriology. The expression apparently served as a conventional form of exhortation by which Gnosticism taught man of the possibility of his redemption by virtue of his natural affinity with the first god. Norden’s interest lay primarily in the stylistic continuity of the formula in the religious thought of later antiquity; consequently he does not consider

¹ E. NORDEN, *Agnostos Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Leipzig/Berlin 1913) 193 n.1. Responses to Norden’s study include G. P. WETTER, “Der Sohn Gottes”: *Eine Untersuchung über den Charakter und die Tendenz des Johannes-Evangeliums* (Göttingen 1916); T. ARVEDSON, *Das Mysterium Christi. Eine Studie zu Mt. 11.25–30* (Uppsala 1937); E. SCHWEIZER, *Ego Eimi . . . Die religionsgeschichtliche Herkunft und theologische Bedeutung der johanneischen Bildreden* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments N.F. 38 [Göttingen 1939]); H. BECKER, *Die Reden des Johannes-evangeliums und der Stil der gnostischen Offenbarungsrede* (Göttingen 1956). These works are cited hereafter by author’s name alone.

the reason for Plotinus' reproduction and criticism, nor does he mention that this is not the only place where Plotinus employs it.

The other version of the formula ('I am a god') appears also in a passage from the earlier treatise *On the Immortality of the Soul* (4.7.10.32–40):

ὄψεται γὰρ νοῦν ὁρῶντα οὐκ αἰσθητόν τι οὐδὲ τῶν θνητῶν τούτων, ἀλλὰ αἰδίῳ τὸ αἰδίων κατανοοῦντα, πάντα τὰ ἐν τῷ νοητῷ, κόσμον καὶ αὐτὸν νοητὸν καὶ φωτεινὸν γεγεννημένον, ἀληθεία καταλαμπόμενον τῇ παρὰ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ὃ πᾶσιν ἐπιλάμπει τοῖς νοητοῖς ἀληθειαν ὡς πολλάκις αὐτῷ δόξαι τοῦτο δὴ καλῶς εἰρησθαι «χαίρει', ἐγὼ δ' ὑμῖν θεὸς ἄμβροτος» πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ἀναβὰς καὶ τὴν πρὸς αὐτὸ ὁμοιότητα ἀτενίσας.

Here it is not parodied as an arrogant claim of revelatory knowledge by Gnosticism or any other sect; to the contrary it is presented in a positive manner as an expression of the moment of soul's self-revelation of its inherent divinity. Why then does Plotinus in 4.7.10 insert the formula as a serious articulation of soul's discovery of its own divinity, only to ridicule it later (2.9.9) as an example of the absurd language of revelatory redemption used among the Gnostics?

A detailed examination of the relationship between the two uses of the formula in the *Enneads* will show that their full significance transcends merely stylistic interests. I wish to argue (1) that the parody of the formula in 2.9.9 can only be understood in light of both 4.7.10 and an extraordinary statement at 2.9.9.41, where Plotinus remarks that the visible universe 'prophesies' to man concerning the 'products' of the One; and (2) that in the latter statement Plotinus is giving a new dimension to the function of the visible universe in soul's quest for the transcendent world of Intellect: the visible universe becomes the metaphysical counterpart to the personal prophet of religious cult. More specifically, Plotinus imbues the universe with prophetic powers in reaction against Gnostic prophecy characterized by the soteriological formula. Before confronting these issues, we must analyze the contexts for the two articulations of the formula and provide confirmation for its close association with soteriological prophecy in general.

I

Norden found that both versions of the formula, 'I am a god' or 'I am the son of god', belong to a group of closely related liturgical utterances shared by many Hellenistic cults, and attested in all three persons.² There is ample evidence of its intimate connection with prophetic revelation;³ perhaps the best known example is a passage from Celsus preserved by Origen, in an imagined dialogue between an enemy of Christianity and certain pseudo-prophets.⁴ Celsus recalls several variations of a formula of self-predication—'I am the god', or 'son of god', or 'divine spirit'—as the prophets' accustomed forms of religious address. Their self-predications introduce their theme: the prophet is the instrument of god, himself a god or son of god, who appeals for rebirth of the masses; those who heed his call to salvation will themselves become such as he. More accurately, they will finally share in the knowledge that they have always been the children of god.⁵ The contexts of 4.7.10 and 2.9.9, with parallels from other writers, show that Plotinus employed the formula in just this sense.

Although Norden did not note the occurrence of the formula in 4.7.10, he did examine its source, the prooemium of the *Purifications* of Empedocles,⁶ which he regarded as the stylistic precursor

² Norden 184ff and 221f. Cf. J. Kroll, *Die christliche Hymnodik bis zu Klemens von Alexandria* (Königsberg 1921) 22 n.1; A. Dieterich, *Abraxas. Studien zur Religionsgeschichte des spätern Altertums* (Festschrift Hermann Usener) (Leipzig 1891) 25 and 68, *Eine Mithrasliturgie* (Leipzig 1903) 52f and 138ff, *Kleine Schriften* (Leipzig/Berlin 1911) 27; A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York/London 1927) 136ff; W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos; Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus*⁶ (Göttingen 1967) 52ff; A. N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric, the Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge 1971) 50 and 113.

³ See Wetter 4f; Arvedson 86ff; Becker 15f. In *Corp. Herm.* 13.4 the formula is used to express Hermes' redemptive power as divine minister: ἀγνοεῖς, ὅτι θεὸς πέφυκας καὶ τοῦ ἐνὸς παῖς, ὃ καὶ γώ (cf. 13.2). It appears frequently in the New Testament in two forms: as the so-called formula of adoption (e.g. *Mark* 1.11, cf. *Luke* 3.22) and as an identification of Christ in the Gospels (e.g. *Matth.* 16.16, *Mark* 14.61, *John* 11.27). Hymnic repetition of its first person correlate occurs in the *Acta Thom.* 32: υἱὸς εἰμι ἐκείνου τοῦ βλάψαντος . . . υἱὸς εἰμι ἐκείνου τοῦ καθεζομένου ἐπὶ θρόνου ἀπωλείας εἰς τὴν ὑπ' οὐρανόν . . . υἱὸς εἰμι ἐκείνου τοῦ τὴν σφαῖραν ζωννύοντος. . . . Cf. Norden 185 for discussion of the 'Adoptionsformel'. See also Dieterich, *Abraxas* (*supra* n.2) 152 and Arvedson 123 (with regard to the formula as it occurs in the Old Testament).

⁴ *Cels.* 7.8. Cf. R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres: Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur* (Leipzig 1904) 214ff.

⁵ See Dieterich (*supra* n.2) *Abraxas* 161ff and *Mithrasliturgie* 52f, who maintains that in all mystery religions the idea recurs that only a child (son or daughter) of the god can be beneficiary of the secret knowledge and immortality bestowed by him. In the cult of Mithras the god is depicted as father and his believers as his sons.

⁶ At fr. 112.4 D-K, ἐγὼ δ' ὑμῖν θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός; Norden 198; cf. Arvedson

of later prophetic exhortation.⁷ Indeed one finds in the *Purifications* what Norden termed a “prophetic anger” concerning the “wretched race of mortals” (124 D-K). Empedocles attempts to lead men from allegiance to Strife back to their originally divine state under the dominion of Love. In much the same spirit Plotinus, in the midst of his own exhortation that man abandon his material self, excerpts Empedocles’ self-predication as a statement of self-revelation by one who has become a god by realizing the divine within himself. The self-revelation is not arbitrary or immediate, but is conditional upon a definite propaedeutic. Only after stripping away all lower accretions, including his lower self, can man see himself as immortal in the pure, intelligible sphere. He will then see all things there and will recognize himself as an “intelligible, shining cosmos” (35).

That the formula was an established expression of prophetic revelation in Gnostic soteriology is indicated by the similarity, as Norden saw, between the parody in 2.9.9 and invective in Christian polemicists. So Irenaeus presents, in much the same vein as Plotinus, a vehement objection to the use of this type of predication in Gnostic religious practice:

*Hic autem est fabricator coeli et terrae . . . ; et non is qui a Marcione, vel a Valentino, aut Basilide, aut Carpocrate, aut Simone, aut reliquis falso cognominatis Gnosticis adinventus est falsus pater. Nemo enim illorum filius fuit dei, sed Christus Jesus dominus noster, adversus quem et contrariam exercent disciplinam. . . .*⁸

Clement echoes this sentiment in remarks concerning the Gnostic heresy of Prodicus:

77ff and 94f; Becker 7 n.5; G. Zuntz, *Persephone* (Oxford 1971) 190, noting Plotinus 4.7.10.

⁷ Exegesis of Empedocles’ predication by Diogenes Laertius (8.57ff) and Sextus Empiricus (*Math.* I 303) suggests that the formula became somewhat of a *locus classicus* for later philosophers. Their assessments differ: Diogenes cites the formula as evidence for a tradition attributing to Empedocles the powers of an ancient mantic, while Sextus treats it as a statement of philosophical import, asserting that Empedocles was expressing the old epistemological principle that like is known by like. The true philosopher, he says, will understand that “Empedocles called himself a god because he alone had kept his mind free from evil and unmuddied and by means of the god within him apprehended the god without.” Cf. Norden 198 and Arvedson 94f. W. Theiler, *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus* (Berlin/Zürich 1964) 109, believes that both passages are indebted to Posidonius.

⁸ *Haer.* 4.6.4. H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*¹ (Göttingen 1954) 200ff explains the formula in its Gnostic context: it is affirmation of the new ‘I’ of the Gnostic and is part of their eschatological teaching (cf. *Corp.Herm.* 13.200).

τοιαῦτα καὶ οἱ ἀπὸ Προδίκου ψευδωνύμως γνωστικούς σφὰς αὐ-
τοὺς ἀναγορεύοντες δογματίζουσιν υἱοὺς μὲν φύσει τοῦ πρώτου
θεοῦ λέγοντες αὐτούς, καταχρώμενοι δὲ τῇ εὐγενείᾳ καὶ τῇ ἐλευ-
θερίᾳ ζῶσιν ὡς βούλονται . . . ὡς ἂν κύριοι τοῦ σαββάτου καὶ
ὑπεράνω παντὸς γένους πεφυκότες βασιλῆιοι παῖδες.⁹

Plotinus' criticism of this doctrine is quite different from that of Irenaeus and Clement. The Christians make the natural appeal to Christ as the only son of God, while also rejecting the notion of a completely unknowable first god.¹⁰ Plotinus, on the other hand, accepts both the idea of an ineffable One and the possibility that man can become a god (2.9.9.50); as we shall see, it is his notion of the means by which man is to become divine that markedly separates Plotinus from the Gnostics.¹¹

II

Thus, although at first sight there seems a contradiction in Plotinus' two uses of the formula as expressions of revelation, we have found a correlation of thought: both examples appear in passages dealing emphatically with a fundamental precept of Plotinian psychology, the apotheosis of soul. The formula as it occurs in 4.7.10 is for Plotinus an accurate statement of self-revelation of soul's natural divinity when it has become an "intelligible, shining cosmos," and in 2.9.9 a similar revelation by the Gnostics is parodied as a ludicrous version. In the case of the latter, Plotinus is not arguing that the Gnostics err in saying that men can become gods or the sons of god; according to 2.9.9 it is possible for man to become a god according to the limits imposed by his mortality. He is stating precisely that they misunderstand and misrepresent the true path to apotheosis. Both versions of the formula are thus simi-

⁹ *Strom.* 3.30.525. *υἱός* and *παῖς* (cf. 2.9.9.57) are interchangeable in Greek versions of the formula; cf. Wetter 146 and Bousset (*supra* n.2) 56.

¹⁰ Cf. Norden 74f and Wetter 4ff.

¹¹ Plotinus is in agreement with the Christian polemicists in stressing the revelatory character of the Gnostic formula. In their view any idea of redemptive promise is abrogated by the Gnostics, who improperly exalt themselves as gods. Their arrogance stems from the false belief that they are superior to other men, the heavens, and the lesser gods (see *infra*). A further point of correspondence is the emphasis on what is 'natural'. The Gnostics evidently claimed that they were the sons of the god 'by nature' (so Clement). Plotinus responds that man must exalt himself "only so far as his nature permits" (2.9.9.47); he adds (42–43) that nature demands that there be gods inferior to the One. Plotinus is obviously at odds with the Gnostics as to the natural order of things.

larly employed as expressions of the revelation of soul's divinity; the distinction between the two uses is the purported truth of one and speciousness of the other. Exactly how does the false revelation of Gnosticism contravene the true revelation as expressed in 4.7.10? The answer must lie in Gnosticism's deprecation of the visible universe and the 'lesser gods', against which Plotinus expressly argues in 2.9.9. But then what role does the visible universe play in soul's self-revelation, and how in Plotinus' view does the Gnostics' rejection of that role vitiate their soteriology?

Plotinus insists that the Gnostics' formula of redemption, and all their exhortations to men to realize their exalted status as sons of the first god, mean nothing. By setting themselves alone by god's side and not allowing a place for other gods, they prevent themselves from becoming gods as far as it is possible for them. Man *can* become a god, although not in the Gnostic manner. What then is the true teaching which will lead men to become gods? What provision is there in Plotinus' philosophy—not to be found in Gnosticism—which guarantees man a place as a god among other gods? The answer is soul's ability to contemplate. To determine the role of contemplation in soul's deification, and with it the basis for Plotinus' specific condemnation of the Gnostics in 2.9.9, we must consider again the context of the formula in 4.7.10. There the description of soul's journey upward reflects Plotinus' emphasis on the need for sufficient preparation before soul can envision itself as an intelligible cosmos. Divine revelation depends for its legitimacy on fulfillment of the required propaedeutic. The structure of that propaedeutic should reveal the nature of Plotinus' antipathy toward Gnostic soteriology. In short, we must delineate the method by which soul becomes an intelligible cosmos.

The characterization of soul as a *κόσμος νοητός* is more fully explicated in 3.4.3, a discussion of the nature of the guardian spirits that guide soul to a higher level of existence. Soul is omnifarious, Plotinus says, encompassing all grades of the upper and lower spheres. Hence it is an intelligible cosmos, coming into contact with this world by its lower powers and with the intelligible world by its higher powers and by those of the cosmos (22–24). Now, the powers of the cosmos certainly denote the World-Soul, as 3.4.6.22–28 (a third reference to soul as an intelligible cosmos) suggests. Yet, as the latter passage verifies, the powers of the World-Soul do not determine the cosmic soul as *νοητός*, for the World-Soul is a system of active powers distributed throughout the universe, and as such is not intelligible, since all intelligible

entities are completely at rest. Why then does Plotinus in 3.4.3 include the powers of the cosmos among those enabling soul to come into contact with the intelligible world? Because, I shall argue, the World-Soul, or the Soul of the universe, alone of all things below the sphere of intelligible Being, has the power to raise the individual soul beyond the realm of visible entities to the world of intelligibles. That power is realized through contemplation.

In 3.8.8 Plotinus speaks of a 'living contemplation' (*θεωρία ζῶσα*, 10) in which subject and object are one. Such vision is the same as that of Intellect contemplating itself. Soul, which in all its phases is contemplation, is in its highest contemplative level at rest, *i.e.*, it has itself as its own object and seeks nothing outside. To attain this level it must pass through intermediate stages in the contemplative hierarchy, each of which in order is a higher power of contemplation and, having been attained, becomes a means for reaching a still higher level of vision (*cf.* 3.8.6). The lowest stage is that of the individuated soul as a *λόγος* and a sort of intellect contemplating itself, but as an external object (3.8.6.26). The remaining stages ascend in order through contemplation of Nature, the World-Soul (visible to man in the stars and planets and so equivalent to contemplation of the unified cosmos; *cf.* 3.4.6), and finally Intellect (3.8.8.1–4, .18, and .10). Contemplation of the World-Soul is the most important of the preliminary stages in the hierarchy, for it alone bears a symmetrical relationship between the individual soul and Intellect, and thereby allows soul to pass to true and ultimate contemplation in which subject and object, soul and Intellect, are one. The symmetry of the relationship consists on the one hand of the connection between the visible universe and Intellect, which are associated as image to archetype (*cf.* 3.8.11), and on the other of a corresponding connection between the visible universe and soul, whose respective powers and natures are homogeneous (*cf.* 3.4.3 and 6, and 2.3.9). The physical universe mediates between the higher and lower worlds, being closely tied to both by nature. The vision of higher reality that it provides the soul is a product of its natural affinity to each.

The visible universe, as an image of the intelligible universe, is therefore a necessary step in man's contemplative ascent described in 4.7.10. What is more important for our analysis, it is a pivotal step in that ascent, for contemplation of the visible universe is the final stage before the soul passes to the transcendent world of intelligible Being (*cf.* 3.8.11). As a living being it is a proper object of the living contemplation; he who contemplates what comes to

be in it at the same time contemplates its origins. The cosmos is a god; accordingly it requires a god to distinguish providence and its workings from the substrate and all that it gives to what results from it (3.3.6). Man, insofar as he has become an 'intelligible cosmos' by contemplation of its image, is a god and so is capable of such knowledge.

III

We are now in a position to explain the meaning of Plotinus' statement in 2.9.9.41, as well as its relationship to the parody to which it is an introduction. The statement is not at all characteristic of Plotinian metaphysics:

καὶ ὁ κόσμος δὲ ὄδε δι' ἐκεῖνόν ἐστι κάκει βλέπει, καὶ πᾶς καὶ θεῶν ἕκαστος καὶ τὰ ἐκεῖνου προφητεύει ἀνθρώποις καὶ χρώσιν ἃ ἐκεῖνοις φίλα.

What is remarkable about this assertion is Plotinus' choice of the verb *προφητεύειν*. As part of religious terminology the verb had a rather specialized sense, the act of a *προφήτης* as spokesman or instrument of the supernatural.¹² Plotinus' preference for such language is thus striking and seems incongruous with his rationalistic psychology. Moreover, to my knowledge the word is not used elsewhere in the *Enneads* with this sense. If we are to capture his intention here, we must realize that he is responding directly to Gnostic prophecy, and its attitude toward the visible cosmos, by recasting the relationship between the cosmos and soul in a novel manner. Plotinus' dispute with the Gnostics in 2.9 concerns their concept of an inferior, mortal universe; his argument at 2.9.9 centers on the implications of that concept for Gnostic soteriology. Rejection of the divinity of the cosmos amounts to rejection of the Plotinian propaedeutic for divine revelation, for insofar as the cosmos is divine it is the image of the intelligible world, and its importance within the propaedeutic rests on its function of providing for the ascendant soul the necessary link with the intelligible archetype. This is indeed the justification for the parody in 2.9.9. My contention is that Plotinus, to reinforce his argument against

¹² See E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge 1965) 53–68. Wetter 22 defines the term as follows: “*vaticinari* und *προφητεύειν* bedeuten eigentlich nur *ἐν πνεύματι λαλεῖν*. Der Prophet ist der von Gott Besessene; er ist das Instrument, auf dem Gott spielt.”

the Gnostics, here gives to the universe a new dimension which is in fact an amplification of its role in the propaedeutic of contemplation: Plotinus undermines Gnostic revelation by presenting in its place the notion, derived from the principles of his own rationalism, of the visible universe as prophetic instrument of the intelligible world.

The statement at 2.9.9.41 has embedded within it two distinct notions corresponding to the two aspects of the visible universe: (1) the cosmos as a whole reveals (*προφητεύει*) to men the nature of the One, and (2) the gods within it make plain through oracles what is pleasing to them. Plotinus conceived the powers of the diverse gods within the cosmos, by which he means the heavenly bodies, to be different in degree from those of the cosmos viewed in its essential unity. When envisioned as a multiplicity, the cosmos is a system of individual deities who impart a variety of oracular and astrological signs. Because the multiplicity is totally inter-related through the ordering of a single, rational principle of the universe, any one of these signs can reveal to the wise man the order of the entire world of sense experience. Thus individual signs pertain only to this world, and their efficacy depends upon the essential unity of the visible cosmos which is a single living being, a unity in diversity. By participating in its unity, its constituent parts are 'full of signs' (*cf.* 2.3.7–8). Contemplation of the movements and positions of individual stars and planets will therefore disclose the harmony and correspondence of all things in nature. But the universe in its entirety, viewed as a single living being and not a multiplicity of constituent parts, is for the soul the one direct image of the intelligible world, such that contemplation of it will reveal an intelligible order of Being more ultimate than, and indeed the source of, the order imposed on nature. What it reveals to the contemplative soul extends beyond the senses to transcendent reality, and so corresponds to that level of the contemplative hierarchy in which the All is envisioned, *viz.* the Soul, as distinct from the body, of the universe.¹³

There are therefore two levels of contemplation of the visible

¹³ This basic distinction is stated or implied often in the *Enneads*: *e.g.*, 2.3.1 (the course of the stars indicates what is going to happen only *in each case*; *cf.* 3.1.5); 2.3.6 (the 'rule' of the universe does not belong to any one star or planet); 3.2.3 (this universe is the best of all corporeal entities; one can find fault with it only if it is seen in its multiplicity and not as a whole). In 2.3.8–9 the body and Soul of the universe are distinguished, the body being the diversity of its parts and its Soul the All, its unity. The stars cooperate toward the All since they are parts of it.

cosmos: (1) contemplation of the multiplicity of the cosmos, whereby the individual stars and planets reveal the interrelationship of all aspects of the sense world; (2) a more profound contemplation of the cosmos as a unified and living being and image of intelligible reality, whereby the rational order of the All discloses truly intelligible Being. The oracles of the gods within the universe (the divine stars and planets) refer in 2.9.9.41 to the first of these levels; the 'prophecy' of the cosmos refers to the second and higher level.

The new dimension given to the function of the cosmos in this regard is Plotinus' reinterpretation, signaled by his choice of the word *προφητεύειν*, of the second level of its contemplation. By saying that the cosmos 'prophesies' to man, Plotinus counters Gnostic teaching with his own notion of prophetic revelation, a notion with a strongly religious connotation, to be sure, but one founded on a purely philosophical basis. The Gnostics are not justified in declaring themselves and their followers sons of god, for their teaching actually prevents them from becoming gods at all. The revelatory proclamation of redemption is legitimate only for those who have followed the proper method of contemplation and have become intelligible universes. A necessary and pivotal step in that method is contemplation of the unity which is the visible cosmos, in that it is the one entity in the sense world the vision of which will lead soul beyond that world. In this sense the cosmos is the medium between the transcendent realm and the individual soul, revealing to the latter its ultimate association with the former, and as such is the natural counterpart of the Gnostic prophet. The parody of the Gnostics' formula is occasioned by their renunciation of the power of the visible cosmos to reveal to soul the world of intelligible Being. In defiance of Gnosticism's false prophecy, Plotinus invests all prophetic activity and efficacy in the cosmos, since, as image of the intelligible archetype and the best of all corporeal things (*cf.* 3.2.3), it alone is the instrument for conveying the truth of the divine world to contemplative man.

The full meaning of Plotinus' parody can now be discerned. The Gnostic formula is in the second person a promise of, and in the first person an acknowledgment of, man's nature as a divine being in the highest sense, as a child of the first god.¹⁴ Such is the revelatory message of the Gnostics' teaching. Part of their arrogance, in the view of Plotinus, derives from the resulting circumvention of

¹⁴ *Cf.* Arvedson 90f and Becker 54.

the cosmos as the real organ of prophetic revelation: the Gnostic teaching has appropriated the function of ministering god's message, a function which, Plotinus suggests, can properly be assigned to the divine cosmos alone. For Plotinus, the cosmos is both the source of all oracular and astrological providence, and also, as the unified All, the divine agent, or 'prophet', of a revelatory wisdom from the ideal world. Man is granted enlightenment of his godlike state in the same way he receives signs from the stars, *viz.* by contemplating the cosmos.¹⁵

Herein lies the crucial difference between the Gnostic and Plotinian conceptions of divine enlightenment. The Gnostics' minister of prophecy is a personal agent of the first god who freely bestows total redemption immediately upon man's understanding and elicits acceptance of the prophetic message. In the *Enneads*, on the other hand, the cosmos is a living being and must be sought out by man for knowledge of the divine order of things, inasmuch as the heavenly motions are the only direct reflections of the intelligible world. In this respect Plotinus is indebted to Plato's *Timaeus*. Plotinus accepts the Platonic idea of a final, sudden enlightenment through the intuitive phase of the soul, but it is conditional upon the mediate process of contemplation, as it is also for Plato. In Gnostic terms redemption can come from sudden recognition by virtue of the spoken word, whereas for Plotinus man must first contemplate the heavens before overcoming his corporeal bonds. This is the arduous path to knowledge which cannot be bypassed by arbitrary pronouncement of a false *gnosis*. The Gnostic seeks to elevate himself above the cosmos "without troubling himself" (*οὐδὲν πονήσας*, 58–59), *i.e.* without bothering with the required effort of contemplation. For the pure Hellenic rationalist, the only prophet of divine enlightenment is the contemplated universe.

It may be added parenthetically that Plotinus was well aware that the practice of magic was associated with at least some sects of Gnosticism (2.9.14), and it is highly probable that he considered their prophetic language a form of their diabolically persuasive magic, as did the Christian polemicists.¹⁶ If so, then one of the

¹⁵ In 3.2.3.19–41, a rare personification in the *Enneads*, the whole universe 'speaks' to one who contemplates it telling him of its origin and divine nature.

¹⁶ Wetter 74ff points out that many ancient interpreters associated magic with the prophetic teachings of Gnosticism (*cf.* *Iren. Haer.* 1.13.3 on the Gnostic Marcus). The association was viewed with suspicion by Christians, who tended to separate the magician from the prophet. *Cf.* Dieterich, *Abraxas* (*supra* n.2) 148ff on the *Pistis Sophia* (which maintains

reasons for his invective in 2.9.9 is to exclude prophecy from the realm of magic and to place it totally within the limits of his own metaphysical scheme. His argument and parody give added strength to the central purpose of 2.9, the vindication of Hellenic rationalism in the face of what he obviously considered to be an un-Hellenic mysticism.¹⁷ By placing what had become for Gnosticism a feature of religious mysticism in the sphere of a purely rationalistic metaphysics, Plotinus is once again squarely within the tradition of Hellenic philosophy. If later Neoplatonists turned to religious revelation of the type found in the *Chaldaean Oracles* and similar texts,¹⁸ it was not without the clear admonition of the foremost exponent of their school.

We have then in 4.7.10 and 2.9.9 Plotinus' appraisals of both the legitimate and the illegitimate contexts for the revelatory proclamation of divinity. The Gnostics in their arrogant claim of superiority over the lesser gods derogate the necessary propaedeutic of man's ascent through the hierarchical stages of contemplation in favor of the primacy of the redemptive Word alone. What Plotinus must mean when he says that the cosmos 'prophesies' to man is that primarily through contemplation of the visible universe man comprehends, and in a different sense becomes, the intelligible cosmos. The legitimate self-predication of divinity can be made only at the end of the process of contemplation, which can be inferred as the foundation for soul's ascent to the intelligible world described in 4.7.10 and which cannot be replaced by the sudden false revelation of the Gnostic Logos. Although we might well wonder why Plotinus did not elaborate so provocative an idea as this, it must be emphasized that it is not presented in isolation, but echoes a theme prevalent in 2.9, that the Gnostics are godless and their soteriology inane because they lack the ability or will to contemplate the beauty of the cosmos.¹⁹ Plotinus would have ex-

that only the Gnostics are in possession of the arts of magic and astrology): in magical texts 'magicians', using the style of self-predication, declare themselves gods; their formulae of divine identification provide the foundation upon which they can legitimately claim to lead men to spiritual awakening (see also 136 n.1). Cf. Becker 54. Plotinus considers both the Gnostics' soteriological formula and their magical incantations as instances of their persuasive *αὐθάδεια* (2.9.9.56 and .14.5ff, 41f).

¹⁷ See Kroll (*supra* n.2) 65 n.2. The mystic often identifies himself with god, and so speaks in the language of god. Such addresses, being imitations of those of the gods, are formulated in the first person because that is the usual mode of speech of the gods. This fact, combined with Dieterich's remarks (*supra* n.16), suggests how Plotinus could have discerned both magical and mystical elements in Gnostic prophecy.

¹⁸ See Dodds (*supra* n.12) 122f.

¹⁹ Several examples will illustrate the theme: the Gnostic imperative 'Look to god' has no

pected his audience, which we may suppose was familiar with Gnostic soteriology,²⁰ to understand that his comments in 2.9.9 were an expansion of that theme. Porphyry (*Plot.* 16) notes that it was principally against the 'revelations' (*ἀποκαλύψεις*) of the Gnostics and other sectarians that Plotinus directed his attack in 2.9.²¹ Hence, although his argument in chapter nine is but one of many designed to expose fallacies in the Gnostics' deprecation of the visible cosmos, it has special import for the work as a whole.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA
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meaning unless one is to teach men how to look (.15.33–40); if God is absent from the universe, he will be absent from you (.16.25–27); the Gnostic is blind and far from seeing the intelligible world since he does not even see the world open to the senses (.16.37–39); because the Gnostics are not moved by the beauty of the cosmos, they have no contemplation, and therefore no god (.17.22–25); as we come closer to the perfectly untroubled state we are able to imitate the Soul of the All and of the stars, and approaching a resemblance to them we hasten to the same level of contemplation which Soul possesses; the Gnostics claim an ability to contemplate, but that does not make them any more contemplative, nor does their declaration that they can leave the universe when they die, while the stars cannot (.18.30–38).

²⁰ See Plotinus' admission in 2.9.10, and Porphyry's corroboration in *Plot.* 16, that a number of his students were adherents to certain Gnostic sects.

²¹ A. D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World II* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1972) 944 n.1 remarks, "In Porphyry the term *apokalypsis* ('revelation') as a book title has no known parallel among pagan book titles." We need not assume that Porphyry is referring to the actual titles of these books. The term is best taken simply as descriptive, referring to the *genre* of Gnostic literature which Plotinus felt compelled to attack. Cf. Dodds (*supra* n.12) 122.