

A Defense of Basilides the False

In about 1905, I knew that the omniscient pages (*A to All*) of the first volume of Montaner and Simón's *Hispano-American Encyclopedic Dictionary* contained a small and alarming drawing of a sort of king, with the profiled head of a rooster, a virile torso with open arms brandishing a shield and a whip, and the rest merely a coiled tail, which served as a throne. In about 1916, I read an obscure passage in Quevedo: "There was the accursed Basilides the heresiarch. There was Nicholas of Antioch, Carpocrates and Cerinthus and the infamous Ebion. Later came Valentinus, he who believed sea and silence to be the beginning of everything." In about 1923, in Geneva, I came across some heresiological book in German, and I realized that the fateful drawing represented a certain miscellaneous god that was horribly worshiped by the very same Basilides. I also learned what desperate and admirable men the Gnostics were, and I began to study their passionate speculations. Later I was able to investigate the scholarly books of Mead (in the German version: *Fragmente eines verschollenen Glaubens*, 1902) and Wolfgang Schultz (*Dokumente der Gnosis*, 1910), and the articles by Wilhelm Bousset in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Today I would like to summarize and illustrate one of their cosmogonies: precisely that of Basilides the heresiarch. I follow entirely the account given by Irenaeus. I realize that many doubt its accuracy, but I suspect that this disorganized revision of musty dreams may in itself be a dream that never inhabited any dreamer. Moreover, the Basilidean heresy is quite simple in form. He was born in Alexandria, they say a hundred years after the Cross, they say among the Syrians and the Greeks. Theology, then, was a popular passion.

In the beginning of Basilides' cosmogony there is a God. This divinity majestically lacks a name, as well as an origin; thus his approximate name, *pater innatus*. His medium is the *pleroma* or plenitude, the inconceivable museum of Platonic archetypes, intelligible essences, and universals. He is

an immutable God, but from his repose emanated seven subordinate divinities who, condescending to action, created and presided over a first heaven. From this first demiurgic crown came a second, also with angels, powers, and thrones, and these formed another, lower heaven, which was the symmetrical duplicate of the first. This second conclave saw itself reproduced in a third, and that in another below, and so on down to 365. The lord of the lowest heaven is the God of the Scriptures, and his fraction of divinity is nearly zero. He and his angels founded this visible sky, amassed the immaterial earth on which we are walking, and later apportioned it. Rational oblivion has erased the precise fables this cosmogony attributes to the origin of mankind, but the example of other contemporary imaginations allows us to salvage something, in however vague and speculative a form. In the fragment published by Hilgenfeld, darkness and light had always coexisted, unaware of each other, and when they finally saw each other, light looked and turned away, but darkness, enamored, seized its reflection or memory, and that was the beginning of mankind. In the similar system of Saturnilus, heaven grants the worker-angels a momentary vision, and man is fabricated in its likeness, but he drags himself along the ground like a viper until the Lord, in pity, sends him a spark of his power. What is important is what is common to these narratives: our rash or guilty improvisation out of unproductive matter by a deficient divinity. I return to Basilides' history. Cast down by the troublesome angels of the Hebrew God, low humanity deserved the pity of the timeless God, who sent it a redeemer. He was to assume an illusory body, for the flesh degrades. His impassive phantasm hung publicly on the cross, but the essence of Christ passed through the superimposed heavens and was restored to the *pleroma*. He passed through them unharmed, for he knew the secret names of their divinities. "And those who know the truth of this history," concludes the profession of faith translated by Irenaeus, "will know themselves free of the power of the princes who built this world. Each heaven has its own name and likewise each angel and lord and each power of the heaven. He who knows their incomparable names will pass through them invisibly and safely, as the redeemer did. And as the Son was not recognized by anyone, neither shall the Gnostic be. And these mysteries shall not be pronounced, but kept in silence. Know them all, that no one shall know thee."

The numeric cosmogony of the beginning degenerates toward the end into numeric magic: 365 levels of heaven, at 7 powers per heaven, require the improbable retention of 2,555 oral amulets: a language that the years reduced to the precious name of the redeemer, which is Caulacau, and to that

of the immobile God, which is Abraxas. Salvation, for this disillusioned heresy, involves a mnemotechnical effort by the dead, much as the torment of the Savior is an optical illusion—two simulacra which mysteriously harmonize with the precarious reality of their world.

To scoff at the fruitless multiplication of nominal angels and reflected symmetrical heavens in that cosmogony is not terribly difficult. Occam's restrictive principle, "*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*" [What can be done with fewer is done in vain with more], could be applied—to demolish it. For my part, I believe such rigor to be anachronistic or worthless. The proper conversion of those heavy, wavering symbols is what matters. I see two intentions in them: the first is a commonplace of criticism; the second—which I do not presume to claim as my discovery—has not, until now, been emphasized. I shall begin with the more obvious. It is a quiet resolution of the problem of evil by means of a hypothetical insertion of a gradual series of divinities between the no less hypothetical God and reality. In the system under examination, these derivations of God dwindle and weaken the further they are removed from God, finally reaching the bottom with the abominable powers who scratched out mankind from base matter. In the account of Valentinus—who did *not* claim the sea and silence to be the beginning of everything—a fallen goddess (Achamoth) has, by a shadow, two sons who are the founder of the world and the devil. An intensification of the story is attributed to Simon Magus: that of having rescued Helen of Troy, formerly first-born daughter of God and later condemned by the angels to painful transmigrations, from a sailors' brothel in Tyre.¹ The thirty-three human years of Jesus Christ and his slow extinguishing on the cross were not sufficient expiation for the harsh Gnostics.

There remains to consider the other meaning of those obscure inventions. The dizzying tower of heavens in the Basilidean heresy, the proliferation of its angels, the planetary shadow of the demiurges disrupting earth, the machinations of the inferior circles against the *pleroma*, the dense population, whether inconceivable or nominal, of that vast mythology, also point to the diminution of this world. Not our evil, but our central insignificance,

¹Helen, dolorous daughter of God. That divine filiation does not exhaust the connections of her legend to that of Christ. To the latter the followers of Basilides assigned an insubstantial body; of the tragic queen it was claimed that only her *eidolon* or simulacrum was carried away to Troy. A beautiful specter redeemed us; another led to battles and Homer. See, for this Helenaic Docetism, Plato's *Phaedrus*, and Andrew Lang, *Adventures among Books*, 237–248.

is predicated in them. Like the grandiose sunsets on the plains, the sky is passionate and monumental and the earth is poor. That is the justification for Valentinus' melodramatic cosmogony, which spins an infinite plot of two supernatural brothers who discover each other, a fallen woman, a powerful mock intrigue among the bad angels, and a final marriage. In this melodrama or serial, the creation of the world is a mere aside. An admirable idea: the world imagined as an essentially futile process, like a sideways, lost glimpse of ancient celestial episodes. Creation as a chance act.

The project was heroic; orthodox religious sentiment and theology violently repudiated that possibility. The first creation, for them, was a free and necessary act of God. The universe, as St. Augustine would have it understood, did not begin in time, but rather simultaneously with it—a judgment which denies all priority to the Creator. Strauss claims as illusory the hypothesis of an initial moment, for that would contaminate with temporality not only the succeeding moments but also the “precedent” of eternity.

In the first centuries of our era, the Gnostics disputed with the Christians. They were annihilated, but we can imagine their possible victory. Had Alexandria triumphed and not Rome, the bizarre and confused stories that I have summarized would be coherent, majestic, and ordinary. Lines such as Novalis' “Life is a sickness of the spirit,”² or Rimbaud's despairing “True life is absent; we are not in the world,” would fulminate from the canonical books. Speculations, such as Richter's discarded theory about the stellar origin of life and its chance dissemination on this planet, would know the unconditional approval of pious laboratories. In any case, what better gift can we hope for than to be insignificant? What greater glory for a God than to be absolved of the world?

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²That dictum—“*Leben ist eine Krankheit des Geistes, ein leidenschaftliches Tun*”—owes its diffusion to Carlyle, who emphasized it in his famous article in the *Foreign Review*, 1829. Not merely a momentary coincidence, but rather an essential rediscovery of the agonies and enlightenments of Gnosticism, is the *Prophetic Books* of William Blake.