

Sethian Gnostic Adaptations of Plato's *Timaeus*¹

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The *Timaeus*

Plato wrote the *Timaeus* together with the unfinished *Critias* between 358 and 356 B.C.E., about ten years before his death. According to Luc Brisson,² Plato's *Timaeus* implements the twofold distinction that characterizes all of Platonic doctrine: intelligible forms versus sensible things, and soul versus body. Since the universe is visible, tangible, and has a body—and is thus an object of sense-perception—it belongs to the realm of changeable Becoming, but since it is the most perfect of all things and derives from the best of causes, it must be the *image* of something else, namely an unchanging and eternal ideal paradigm that belongs to the realm of immutable Being.

As mere images, sensible things—including the universe itself—do not have the principle of their existence within themselves. In order to construct them, Plato posits a divine entity who is pure intellect, whom he calls “Demiurge” and “Father.” With his gaze fixed on the Forms, the Demiurge fabricates first the Soul and then the body of the universe by introducing mathematical order into an indeterminate material, out of which he extracts the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth.

The universe is thus an ensouled living being. Since the providence of its creator also guarantees its preservation, it is eternal, and will never undergo dissolution. Once the Demiurge has divided the cosmic Soul's ingredients of Being, Sameness, and Difference into parts according to mathematical proportions, he splits it into two circles. The outer circle, called the circle of the Same, defines the motion of the fixed stars and has the intelligible realm as its object, while the inner circle of the Other is further divided into seven strips serving as orbits for the seven planets and has true opinion about the sensible realm.

As a sensible body endowed with the most perfect shape (a sphere) and motion (circular), the universe is a self-contained harmonious

mixture of the four elements. Thus the Demiurge must also organize the material necessary for their constitution. To this end, the axiomatic factors of Being and Becoming must be supplemented by a “third kind,” an inert receptacle in which all sensible things come to be and have their being, and out of which they pass away.³ But when the Demiurge starts his ordering activities, he finds not merely an inert and empty receptacle, but a kind of Becoming already embedded in it. The resistance of these pre-cosmic elements to the Demiurge's ordering efforts is said to be due to the work of Necessity. Thus the two forces that shape the cosmos are Necessity and the Reason by which the Demiurge persuades this Necessity into order. While the demiurgic ordering explains how the cosmic image resembles its model, it is the receptacle and that explains why it differs from its model.

In *Timaeus* 50D, Plato introduces the three “kinds”—model, receptacle, and image—as a family triad: the paradigmatic Forms as Father, the Receptacle as Mother, and the sensible images of the Forms as Child (ἔκγονος). As first principles, only the Forms and the Receptacle have any independent being of their own, while the images, the things that we see in the world, are only reflections in the prior being of the Receptacle.

Furthermore, the mortal human being is a microcosm of the larger macrocosm. Made from the same elements as the cosmic soul and body, it is fabricated, *not* by the divine Demiurge—who now retires to abide in his own proper character—but by his own creatures—certain younger gods (véoi θεοί) who appear in the heavens on specific occasions. These lesser gods imitate the Demiurge *as best they can* in both making and then controlling (ἄρχειν) mortal creatures (42E). Within the human's spherical head resides its own soul, whose rational and immortal component the Demiurge takes from the remaining mixture used for the divine and immortal cosmic soul and hands over to the lesser gods for incorporation into a suitable bodily vehicle. It consists of the same ingredients as the World Soul with its own two circular movements corresponding to Same and Different, but in a less pure mixture.

When, however, the lesser gods surround this immortal part of the soul with a mortal body subject to physical gain and loss, it experiences violent external stimulations and terrible but necessary sensations of desire, pain, pleasure, fear, and anger (42AB; 69CD); its

harmonious motions are upset and become chaotic. What is more, these lesser gods also append to the immortal soul two lower, mortal parts—spirit and appetite—yielding a tripartite soul with one immortal and two mortal parts. These mortal parts will sooner or later perish along with the body, while the immortal part endures forever, even though it must enter into a series of successive incarnations. The first incarnation is said to come about “out of necessity” (42A) and is decreed by fate (41E). But during an individual’s lifespan, the rational part of the soul can learn to control the bad influences of its lower parts and eventually return to its divine origin. In the meantime—since the circular motions of the cosmic soul are present in both the heavenly revolutions and in the immortal part of the human soul—humans can attune their souls to the cosmic soul by observing the heavenly revolutions through contemplative sight and thinking.

Middle Platonism

Three hundred fifty years later, in the first century of our era, there took place among Platonists a philosophical renaissance called Middle Platonism.⁴ For the Middle Platonists, God is a universal Intellect, to be identified with the Good, the supreme intelligible form of the *Republic*, and with the Demiurge of the *Timaeus*, not in his capacity as physical artificer, but as the architect whose mind discursively reasons out in a plan for the universe (*Tim.* 39E).⁵ His supremacy determines the type of relation this god maintains with the second principle, the Model or paradigmatic Forms that existed outside of and subjacent to the supreme Intellect as its thoughts. Some Middle Platonists—such as Numenius—went further by distinguishing a third, demiurgical intellect subjacent to both the supreme Intellect and the Model, who actually impresses the model’s Forms upon the cosmos.

Beyond God and the Model there was also a “third kind,” namely a homogeneous and undifferentiated material equivalent to Aristotle’s matter (ύλη) out of which emerged the four elements that comprised the physical world. This was what Plato in the *Timaeus* had called the “wandering cause,” “extension,” and “the receptacle of becoming.” Some Middle Platonists—such as Plutarch, Alcinous, and Numenius—supplemented even this with another quasi-distinct entity, a kind of irrational world soul, the agent of Necessity responsible

for animating its chaotic motions, that needed to be brought to order by the demiurgical intellect.

Gnostic Readings and Implementations of the *Timaeus*

It is well-known that the cosmogony and anthropogony of many gnostic texts is based on a creative reading of the text of Genesis in the light of the Platonic doctrine of models and copies, as a means of explaining how the deficiency of this world could have been derived from the perfection of the divine world. In the gnostic view, as in that of a Hellenistic Jew like Philo of Alexandria, the protology of Genesis occurs on two planes, the heavenly (the creation according to Gen 1:1–2:3) and earthly (the creation according to Gen 2:4 ff.). The first creation story tells of the creation of an intelligible world whose contents form the prototypes for the creation of its perceptible and comparatively deficient counterpart in the second account.

For the Gnostics, there are two creative figures, the supreme deity who spontaneously gives rise to the divine heavenly world, and his lowly counterpart, the creator Archon who aggressively fabricates a lower psychic and material world as a dim copy of the heavenly one. Likewise, gnostic sources often distinguish two maternal figures, the Mother on high, the providential instrument of the supreme deity, and a lower and somewhat errant mother—usually called Sophia—who mistakenly gives birth to this creator Archon, but later becomes active in the lower world to assist in restoring the deficiency she had thereby produced.

In his *Tree of Gnosis*,⁶ Ioan Culianuvi concluded that “Gnosticism is Platonic hermeneutics so suspicious of tradition that it is willing to break through the borders of tradition, any tradition, including its own. Conversely, regarded through the eyes of tradition, any tradition, it appears as ‘creative misprision’.” Again: “Gnostic exegesis of Genesis admits a definition strikingly similar to Philonic exegesis: It is an interpretation of a Jewish text according to a set of rules derived from Platonism.”

Thus in Middle Platonic fashion, Philo of Alexandria identified the Biblical creator God with a supreme Monad who generates and presides over the Logos—the intelligible world of ideas conceived as his thoughts—whose powers create and govern the sensible world. But the Gnostic reading of scripture revised this ranking by identifying the

supreme God of Genesis with Plato's Demiurge, whose supremacy—on a *literal reading* of the *Timaeus*—appeared to be compromised by having to consult a divine paradigm *above* him as the model for his creation. This suggests that there must be a God presiding over the ideal realm who is superior to the God of Genesis. In addition, the biblical stress on the sole godhead of a creator who jealously asserts his sole supremacy, would cause Platonist exegetes to raise serious questions about a god who boasts in his supremacy (e.g., "I am a jealous God" in Deut 5:9 and "I am God and there is none other beside me" in Isa 45:5–7, 18, 21; 46:9), but who is now recognized *not* to be supreme. The implication is that this creator god must be a faulty being, vainly boastful and ignorant of the God beyond him.⁷

As the link between the supreme God and the lower creator, the Gnostics followed Middle Platonic precedent by positing an intermediate divine figure as the realm of the divine thoughts or Ideas, who may be conceived either as the supreme deity's masculine Child or Intellect or as his feminine consort or First Thought. The multiplicity of God's thoughts is expressed as a Pleroma of male and female ideal aeonic entities the last of which, usually named Sophia, becomes the mother of the actual creator of the perceptible universe. Generally speaking, Platonists could well identify the creator of Genesis with either the supreme Intellect or its discursive, demiurgical component. By contrast, Gnostics perceived a contradiction between 1) a divine intellect and its ideal aeonic constituents who respect their rightful *subordination* to an even more superior deity and 2) a world creator who boasts in his *own* uniqueness and supremacy. They would thus conclude that the creator of the sensible realm must be ignorant, not only of the supreme God, but also of the subordinate aeonic realm from which he himself originated.

These three beings—God, the divine intelligence, *and* the world creator—would be connected in such a way as to maintain God's inculpability for the faults and deficiency of this world and account for the creator's ignorance of what is beyond him. Although culpability must be assigned to the world creator, he must also maintain an essential relation to the divine intelligence of which he is indeed a distant product. This dilemma was resolved by construing the world creator as an *unintended* product of an element of the divine intelligible realm that has sufficiently distanced itself from its source as to become unaware of its proper subordination to the supreme God.

In turn, this element—usually named Sophia or even Logos—becomes an ambiguous figure: it not only gives unwitting rise to the creator of a world that was not intended to be as it is, but also serves as the channel for a portion of the divine intelligence that—either unintentionally or by actual theft—comes to reside in the created order, specifically in the protoplastic human.

This ambiguity in both the Sophia/Logos figure and the world creator's ignorance of the divine realm seem to be the fundamental point of the Gnostics' departure from the general Platonist view expressed especially in the *Timaeus*: that the cosmos is the necessary expression of the fullness of the world of ideas implemented without jealousy by a Demiurge who *is* cognizant of the transcendent realm beyond him. Thus the paradigm of the *Timaeus* becomes the ideal aeonic world generated by a deity superior both to it and to the demiurge, whose original role is further subdivided between two distinct figures, both defective and ignorant: the initial desire to express the fullness of the ideal world is reassigned to a new parental figure such as Sophia or the Logos, while the actual creative implementation is assigned to an even lower offspring and his divine assistants.

In effect, this Sophia-Logos figure becomes the agent of the *Timaeus*'s resilient "works of Necessity" conceived by Middle Platonists like Numenius and Alcinous as an irrational cosmic soul animating the primal chaos into resisting its proper ordering by the "works of Reason." In these ways, it appears that the *Timaeus*—with certain readjustments⁸—offered a basic template for gnostic solutions to the exegetical enigmas of the Genesis creation account. In what follows, I would like to explore some of the Gnostic answers to such matters, primarily in Sethian texts.

Sethian Interpretations of the *Timaeus*

With the exception of the reversed episodes of the fall of the angels and the flood, it is the narrative sequence of Genesis 1–9 that governs the episodic sequence of the anthropogonical and soteriological drama of the second part of the *Apocryphon of John* (II 13,14–30,11), while the hierarchical interrelationship between its main actors and their respective roles seems to be governed by the reinterpretation of the *Timaeus* cosmogony that I have described. On the other hand, the influence of Genesis is far less apparent in the

theogony and cosmogony of its first part (II 2,26–13,14), limited perhaps to the origin of light, darkness, and the primeval chaos narrated in its first eight verses. These are articulated along typically Middle Platonic lines: the nature of the first principles, the divine intelligence and its contents, and the question of what originates and governs the cosmos. And it is mainly the *Timaeus*—sometimes fancifully interpreted—that guided their articulation.

The Supreme Principles and the Pleroma

The most prominent of the Sethian texts, the *Apocryphon of John*, features a supreme divine triad called Father, Mother, and Child. In earlier work I have suggested that the nomenclature and metaphysics of this Father-Mother-Child triad was likely derived from an interpretation of the second main section of Plato's *Timaeus* (48E–52D),⁹ where Plato enumerates a triad of principles (leaving aside the Demiurge, who would be a fourth):

... that which comes to be, that in which it comes to be, and that from whose imitation what comes to be is born. We may fittingly compare the receptacle (τὸ δεχόμενον) to a mother, the source to a father, and the nature (φύσις) between them to a child (*Timaeus* 50C–D).

The Father-Mother-Child triad of the *Apocryphon of John* exhibits some attributes similar to those that Plato applied to this triad of principles in the *Timaeus*: Plato's Father becomes the Invisible Spirit, who emits the Forms—conceived as sparks of light—that enter into the Mother Barbelo, “the Womb of the All” or maternal receptacle in which the self-begotten Child—the Autogenes-Christ—is generated from a luminous spark of the Invisible Spirit's light.¹⁰

Again, while the four Platonizing Sethian treatises—*Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, the *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Marsanes*—basically portray Barbelo as a masculine divine intellect within which intelligible entities are generated, they also assign Barbelo characteristics echoing those of the maternal receptacle of Plato's *Timaeus*. Thus according to *Zostrianos*, Barbelo is a “pre-existence of non-being” (VIII 79,7–8), eternally moving from undividedness into active existence, an image which comes to be in an act of reversion (“turning”; 80,9) upon its source,

making herself stable and at rest by knowing herself and her preexistent source (cf. *Allogenes* XI 45,15–46,35). As such, she serves as an “eternal receptacle” or “space” (χώρημα, VIII 82,8) in order that the intelligible entities that indwell her might have a stable and limited place, and that those who come forth from her might become purely simple “individuals.” (VIII 88,16–22; 127,7–15). There are, of course, deviations from Plato's scheme, principally in the fact that Barbelo is not, like Plato's maternal receptacle, an ultimate principle independent from and coeval with the Invisible Spirit, even though she is his direct image and the hypostatic manifestation of the pre-existent light which is coeval with the Father.

Another difference from the *Timaeus* is that Barbelo is never associated with the attribute of Necessity or the “wandering” cause, nor with the uneven swaying that Plato attributes to the Receptacle when it is filled with the disordered traces of precosmic potencies. Instead, the *Apocryphon of John* assigns these characteristics to a lower mother figure, Sophia, who does indeed manifest characteristics of irrationality, intractability, instability, and wandering. Together with the Four Luminaries in whom she originally resided, Sophia initially occupies a place in Sethian cosmology similar to that of the cosmic soul in the *Timaeus*, with its circles of the Same and the Different.¹¹ The Luminaries are set in a rational and harmonious order by Barbelo's Child, the Autogenes-Christ, who thereby plays a positive role quite similar to that of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*. But while the Luminaries stay the same, Sophia subsequently falls outside into the sphere of irrationality, difference, and otherness.

As the source of disorder and evil, Sophia is conceived as the lower feminine principle unmastered by the masculine principle of order, in effect also playing the role of Necessity in the *Timaeus*. She takes on a notable characteristic of Plato's Receptacle (*Timaeus* 52D–53A) when it is said that she became “agitated” when Yaldabaoth extracted some of her power from her, moving to and fro in the darkness of ignorance (BG 45,6–19; II 13,13–26). While Sethian sources never explicitly identify Sophia as an irrational soul, her fall into agitation and separation from the eternal stability of the divine Luminaries is essentially the act of an irrational soul. Again, Sophia's subsequent repentance and plea for restoration to her original station narrated in the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Trimorphic Protennoia*—as well as in Valentinian sources—resembles the restoration of the essentially

irrational world soul in ch. 14 of Alcinoüs's *Didaskalikos*, which requires "arousing" by the supreme God, who is the cause of its intellect.

The Gnostic World Creator and Plato's Demiurge

According to the *Timaeus*, the universe "has come about through divine providence" (30B8–9). Generously modeled by a good and intelligent Demiurge, the universe is exempt from destruction by the "everlasting bond" of his providence. By contrast, the gnostic world creator is a jealous conniver who makes a counterfeit universe according to a blueprint he cannot directly see. According to the *Apocryphon of John*:

II 12 ³³ Now he put ³⁴ everything in order, in the likeness of the first ³⁵ aeons that had come into being, so as to 13 ¹ create them in an incorruptible pattern—not that ² he himself had actually seen the incorruptible things—rather, it was the power ³ within him that he had received from ⁴ his Mother, since she had begotten within him the likeness of ⁵ the cosmos.

The Sethian world creator Yaldabaoth—though never explicitly identified as "demiurge"—is clearly a negative parody of Plato's Demiurge. The Sethian world creator—who is *himself* amorphous and chaotic—is no true demiurge. Even though he thinks he is copying an *image* of the eternal aeonic paradigm, he cannot directly see it and thus produces a chaotic copy with more similarity to his own being than to the image he copies. And his ability to copy what he does is due not to his ungrudging intelligence or to his vision of the supreme realities, but to the power he stole from his mother Sophia, by which an unintended element of perfection has nevertheless come to dwell in his creation. To be sure, the overall scheme resembles that of the *Timaeus*, yet it is more a parody of it than a direct implementation.

A slightly different and fuller version of the world creator's demiurgical activity is offered by the Sethian treatise *Zostrianos*:

VIII 8 ³⁰ [And] 9 ¹ the [great] pre-eminence ² Authrounios said [to me]: "The ³ atmospheric realm came into being by a ⁴ rational principle, and it incorruptibly manifests generated ⁵ and perishable things ⁶ for the sake of the advent ⁷ of the great judges (i.e., stars), lest they ⁸ experience perception and ⁹ be enclosed in the creation. But when ¹⁰ they came upon it and thereby perceived ¹¹ the works

of the world,¹² they condemned its ruler to a perishability¹³ that is a pattern for the world, since it¹⁴ is a [substance] and principle of matter,¹⁵ the dark, corrupt [product].¹⁶ When Sophia contemplated¹⁷ [these], she emitted the darkness,¹⁸ [fleeing what] is subject to the¹⁹ [Archon, since it] is [an invisible] mold,²⁰ [a principle] of the [insubstantial] substance²¹ [and the form]less form²² [...] a [shapeless] shape.²³ [It makes room] for²⁴ [every cosmic thing ...] the All²⁵ [... the corrupt product]²⁶ [since it is a rational principle]²⁷ [that persuades] the darkness. [He sows]²⁸ [from his] reason, since it [is im]possible²⁹ [for the archon] of [creation] to³⁰ see any of the eternal entities. 10¹ He saw a reflection, and with reference to² the reflection that he [saw]³ therein, he created the world.⁴ With a reflection of a reflection⁵ he worked upon the world,⁶ and then even the reflection of⁷ the appearance was taken from him. But⁸ Sophia was given a place of rest⁹ in exchange for her repentance.¹⁰ In consequence, because there was within her no¹¹ pure, original image,¹² either pre-existing in him or that had¹³ already come to be through him, he¹⁴ used his imagination and fashioned the remainder,¹⁴ for the image belonging to Sophia¹⁶ is always corrupt [and]¹⁷ deceptive. But the Archon—[since he simulates]¹⁸ and embodies by [pursuing the image]¹⁹ because of the superabundance [that inclined downward]—looked²⁰ downward.”

Like Plato's Demiurge, the Archon of creation has the task of acting the role of “reason persuading necessity.” He “[sows] [from his] reason,” which turns out to be only his imagination. While Plato's Demiurge looks above to the paradigmatic living being and the forms therein (*Timaeus* 39e), the Archon can only look down; he is unable to see the transcendent, eternal ideas. In Platonic terms, he can only chase after fleeting and dim reflections of the *images* of whatever forms have been projected into the dark receptacle of matter, not the true forms themselves.

Plato's “Lesser Deities” and the Creation of the First Human

In effect, the Sethian accounts of the world creator constitute a kind of gnostic “creative misprision” of the very Platonic exegetical template borrowed from the *Timaeus* in an attempt to solve protological enigmas raised not only by *Genesis*, but by the *Timaeus* itself! The gnostic rereading of these two protological texts entails parallel

demotions: just as the Jewish creator God is subordinated to an even higher supreme deity, so also the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* is interpreted in terms of his lower subordinates, the “younger gods.” They are the agents of irrational Necessity to whom the Demiurge assigns the task of combining the rational substance of the cosmic soul created by him with the essentially irrational spirited and appetitive parts of the mortal human soul, and incarnating this mixture into the mortal bodies of humans. In this way, the figure that in each tradition is responsible for the creation of humans is demoted from its place in the original narrative as a way of explaining the origin of a human condition perceived as defective.

In the *Apocryphon of John*, when the image of the divine “First Human” is projected upon the chaotic sea of primordial matter, Yaldabaoth’s fellow archons—or in the longer version Yaldabaoth himself—beckon one another: “Let us create a human after the image of God and after our likeness” (Gen 1:26–27): Although some of the oldest gnostic cosmogonies say the world was created by a group of rebellious angels,¹³ these angelic “authorities” of the *Apocryphon of John* seem to be consciously modeled on the lesser deities of the *Timaeus*.

Pierre Boyancé and Roleof van den Broek have argued that the creative role of the planetary rulers in many gnostic systems is easily derivable from Plato’s statements concerning the lesser, “younger deities” (véoi θεοί, παῖδες) of the *Timaeus* (41A–42E). Having constructed the cosmic soul and body, the entirely good Demiurge fashions a slightly less pure mixture of divine and immortal substance left over from the ingredients of the cosmic Soul. Once he distributes it into single souls for each star, he then transplants it into the various planetary bodies as the immortal and rational ingredients to be enclosed in human bodies by the younger gods.¹⁴ Boyancé goes on to point out that this “role [of the archontic younger deities], which is in Plato *positive* and strives as much as possible for the good, becomes . . . in Gnosticism marked with a *negative* sign . . . this negative sign is definitely the most original thing about Gnosticism.”¹⁵

But even in the *Timaeus*, the altogether reasonable Demiurge’s positive intentions are hindered by another more negative element that Plato introduces in the second main section of the dialogue (47E–68D): the works of “Necessity” or the “errant cause” (47E–48A) as opposed to the “divine” cause (cf. 68E–69A). It is this element of irrational Necessity that especially enters into the work of the younger

gods whom the Demiurge commissions to fashion the mortal bodies of humans and to append certain necessary mortal additions to the human soul (42DE). Indeed, the initial incarnation of the immortal element of the human soul into material bodies is said to come about “out of necessity” (ἐξ ἀνάγκης, 42A):

[42A] And when, by virtue of Necessity (ἐξ ἀνάγκης) they (immortal human souls) should be implanted in bodies, and their bodies are subject to influx and efflux, these results would necessarily follow (ἀναγκάϊον εἶη): firstly, sensation that is innate and common to all proceeding from violent passions; secondly, desire mingled with pleasure and pain; and besides these, fear and anger [42B] and all such emotions as are naturally allied therewith, and all such as are of a different and opposite character.

According to the *Timaeus*, when the younger gods cast the immortal part of the soul into a material vessel comprised of the four elements, it becomes completely disordered and confused:

Timaeus [42D] So He, then, having given all these commands, resumed His accustomed state. Meanwhile his children heeded their Father's command and obeyed it imitating their own Maker, they borrowed from the cosmos portions of fire and earth and water and air, [43A] they cemented together [43B] so that the whole of the living creature was moved, but in such a random way that its progress was *disorderly* and *irrational* the flood which foamed in and streamed out to supply nourishment rushed through the body and impinged upon the Soul and violently upset the orbits of the (human) soul, and robbed it of its control and orderly motion, and disordered the orbit of the Other so that. . . they were twisted in every direction, causing [43E] every possible kind of fracture and disruption to their circles, which barely held together one with another, and although they moved, they moved irrationally, now in reverse, now sideways, now upside down.

Now in the *Apocryphon of John* (11,22–12,33), the “powers” that Yaldabaoth grants to his seven authorities or “kings” to control the planetary spheres are derived, *not* from the pure and immortal luminous power he stole from his mother Sophia—the rough equivalent of the “indivisible and ever constant” (*Tim.* 35A)

ingredient of Plato's cosmic soul—but from Yaldabaoth's own fire. While the *Timaeus* narrates the immortal soul's material incarnation as a product of Necessity in the second part of the dialogue (48E–68D), it postpones the account of its emotional and physical construction until the third section (68E–92C) as psychosomatic products of the persuasion of Necessity by Reason. But the *Apocryphon of John* (II 15,1–19,14) first narrates the construction of Adam's psychic body and only later (II 20,32–21,13) narrates the manner of its material incarnation as a still further means of capturing and enslaving the archetypal divine image.

Constructing the mortal human	<i>Timaeus</i>	<i>Apocryphon of John</i> (longer version)
1. material incarnation	42D–43E	II 20,32–21,13
2. emotions	69C–D	II 18,14–19,1
3. bodily parts and faculties	73B–81E (body)	II 15,1–18,14 + 19,2–14 (soul)

Just as the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* commands (41A–42E) the younger gods to fabricate the human mortal soul and body (42E–92C), in the *Apocryphon of John* (II 15,1–29), the lower creator assigns the task of creating Adam to his archontic authorities. In the third and final section of the dialogue (68E–92C), Plato describes the addition of mortal psychic appendages to the immortal soul and its encasing into a mortal physical body as a blending of divine and rational elements with certain necessary and irrational elements. This section begins (68B–72D) with the younger deities' construction of the mortal appendages to the immortal part of the human soul, in particular the emotions that will comprise the mortal spirited and appetitive parts of the human soul:

Timaeus [69C] He himself (the demiurge) acted as the fashioner of things divine, but he commanded his own engendered sons to execute the structure of the mortal things. And receiving the immortal principle of soul, they, imitating him (the demiurge), encased it in a mortal, physical globe with the entire body as its vehicle. And they built on to it another mortal part [69D]

containing *terrible* and *necessary passions*: first *pleasure*, the chief incitement evil; next, *pains* that recoil from the good; besides these, *rashness* and *fear*—both foolish counselors—and then obstinate *anger* and seductive *hope*. Blending these with *irrational sensation* and all-daring *lust*, they provided the mortal soul with its necessary equipment.

According to the lengthy excerpt from the *Book of Zoroaster* included in the longer version of the *Apocryphon of John*, virtually the same set of passions—pain, pleasure, lust and fear—is supplied, not directly by the seven planetary powers, but by four demons:

II 18 ¹⁴ The four ¹⁵ chief demons are: Ephememphi who ¹⁶ belongs to *pleasure*; Yōkō the one who belongs to *lust*; ¹⁷ Nenentōphni is the one who belongs to pain; Blaomēn ¹⁸ is the one who belongs to *fear*; And the mother of all these is ¹⁹ Esthēnsis-ouch-epiptōē. Now from these four ²⁰ demons, the passions came into being. ²¹ And from *pain*: envy, jealousy, ²² pain, trouble, ²³ strife, ²⁴ callousness, anxiety, mourning, ²⁵ and the rest. From *pleasure* comes ²⁶ much evil and vain ²⁷ conceit and similar things. ²⁸ From *lust*: anger, wrath, ²⁹ [bitterness], bitter passion and ³⁰ unfulfilled desire, and similar things. ³¹ From *fear*: panic, ³² pleading, anguish, shame. All these ³³ are like virtues and vices. ³⁴ But the thought of their truth is Anaiō, ³⁵ i.e., the head of the material soul. 19 ¹ She exists with the seven senses Ouch-epiptōē.

A bit later in the *Timaeus* (73B–76E), Plato proceeds to discuss the actual construction of the human body, whose fundamental physical components are marrow (and brain, to which the soul is anchored), bones, sinews, flesh, skin, hair, nails, and later (80D–81E), under the topic of the irrigation and respiratory system, blood.¹⁶ While the *Timaeus* regards these components as the physical constituents of the human body, the *Apocryphon of John* regards them as constituents of Adam's psychic body. With a few variations in order, these psychic components are—except for the nails—the same as those in the *Timaeus*:¹⁷

II 15 ⁶ And ⁷ each one of the authorities contributed a feature to his (= the creature's) ⁸ psychical being ⁹ from the pattern of the image that <they> had seen. <They> created an entity ¹⁰ after the likeness of the First Perfect Human. ¹¹ And they said, "Let us call him ¹² 'Adam,' so that his name might be ¹³ for us a luminous

power.” And the powers began: ¹⁴ The first, Goodness (BG & III = Divinity), created ¹⁵ a bone-soul; the second, Providence (BG = *chrēstos*, Lordship), ¹⁶ created a sinew-soul; the third, ¹⁷ Divinity (BG = Fire, III = *chrēstos*), created a flesh-soul; ¹⁸ the fourth is Lordship (BG & III = Providence); it created ¹⁹ a marrow-soul (BG adds: “and the entire foundation of the body”; for Plato marrow is the starting point, ἀρχή, of the human frame, *Timaeus* 73B; *On the Origin of the World* 114,33–35 has “brain and marrow”); the fifth is Kingdom; ²⁰ it created a blood-soul (Plato discusses blood later at *Timaeus* 80–81E); the sixth is ²¹ Jealousy (BG & III = Understanding); it created a skin-soul; ²² the seventh is Understanding (BG & III = Wisdom); it created ²³ a <hair>-soul.

Roelof van den Broek has tabulated the association of each of these authorities with its ruling power, its assigned planetary sphere, and the soul substance which each power contributes to Adam’s psychic body as follows:¹⁸

Authority	Power	Sphere	Soul element
Iaoth	Providence	Moon	Marrow
Astaphaios	Goodness	Mercury	Bones
Eloaios	Divinity	Venus	Sinews
Iao	Fire	Sun	Flesh
Sabaoth	Kingship	Mars	Blood
Adonein	Understanding	Jupiter	Skin
Sabbataios	Sophia	Saturn	Hair

The result of their creative efforts is a completely lifeless and inert body. To vivify it, the divine Mother causes the unwitting Yaldabaoth to inspire it with the luminous power inherited from or stolen from his mother Sophia, whereupon the body suddenly moves and becomes luminous, with a greater intelligence than its creators. Out of jealousy the chief archon casts the psychic body out of Paradise into the lowest region of matter and entombs it in a material formation made out of the four elements fire, earth, water and air (conceived as flaming wind or spirit); Adam becomes a mortal man, whose only hope of survival lay in propagating his kind through sexual intercourse.

II 20³² When they (the authorities) looked up, they saw³³ that his intellect was superior, and they devised³⁴ a plan with the entire archontic³⁵ and angelic company. They took fire and earth 21¹ and water and mixed them together² with the four flaming winds, and beat them³ together, and created a great⁴ disturbance. And they brought him into the shadow⁵ of death, so that they might remold him,⁶ from the earth and water and fire⁷ and wind that are from matter—i.e.,⁸ the ignorance of darkness and desire⁹ and their Counterfeit Spirit—which¹⁰ is the cave of the remolding of the body¹¹ with which the robbers clothed the human,¹² the chain of forgetfulness. And he became a¹³ mortal human.

Providence and Fate

Given the *Apocryphon of John's* equation of the supreme divine Mother Barbelo with universal Providence, it is curious that it also identifies the first of the authorities—Iaoth (Yaldabaoth in Irenaeus and parallels)¹⁹—contributing to Adam's psychic body as "providence" (πρόνοια). But a similar distinction occurs in the *Timaeus*. Near the beginning of the first main section of the *Timaeus* (29D–47E), it is said that "this universe came to be in very truth through God's Providence" (30BC), while toward its end, it is implied that the generation of the human soul and bodies in their discrete parts came about through the agency and *providence* of the (younger) gods (44C). There are thus two providences, one exercised by the Demiurge on behalf of the entire universe—the macrocosm—and another providence to be exercised by the younger gods on behalf of the construction of the mortal human soul and body—the microcosm. In addition to these, there are also the "decrees of Fate" (νόμους τε τοὺς εἰμαρμένους, 41E) and the works of Necessity (42A) that equitably govern their initial incarnation of human souls. In later Middle Platonism—probably in reaction to Stoic fatalism—these two providences become three.²⁰ Thus Nemesius (*De natura hominis* 44; cf. Pseudo-Plutarch, *De fato* 573–74; Apuleius, *De Platone* 1.12), summarizing the doctrine of Calcidius—perhaps based on Numenius—says that Plato divided Providence into three types: a primary Providence that the First God exercises primarily over the Ideas and then over the entire universe; a secondary providence—which Pseudo-Plutarch associated with Fate—that the secondary gods exercise over common animals, plants and everything involved in birth and decay; and a tertiary providence that

the demons stationed around the earth exercise over the affairs of life.²¹ In this way, Platonists provided assurance of a providential deity beyond the influence of the cosmic powers that Pseudo-Plutarch associated with Fate.

In the *Apocryphon of John*, primary Providence is none other than the supreme Mother Barbelo who, as the divine First Thought, contains the divine intelligence and manifests its Ideas as Aeons. In the *Apocryphon of John* II 28,5–32, the equivalent of secondary providence —“the changeable chain” of Fate—is a kind of negative providence begotten by these same seven “powers” through their adultery with Sophia as a prelude to the flood:

II 28 ¹¹ He (Yaldabaoth) devised a plan ¹² with his authorities who were his powers. And ¹³ together they committed adultery with Wisdom, and from them, like a wound, ¹⁴ Fate was begotten, ¹⁵ i.e., the final, changeable chain. ¹⁶ And it is because ¹⁷ they change into one another that (Fate) is diverse. And it is oppressive and ¹⁸ perverse, this with which ¹⁹ were mixed gods and angels and demons ²⁰ and all the generations to this day. ²¹ For from that Fate ²² <appeared> every wickedness and ²³ injustice and blasphemy and chain ²⁴ of forgetfulness and ignorance and every ²⁵ burdensome commandment, and burdensome sins ²⁶ and great fears. And in this way, ²⁷ the whole creation was blind, ²⁸ so that they might not recognize the God who is ²⁹ above them all. And because of the chain of forgetfulness, ³⁰ their sins were hidden. For they were bound with ³¹ measures and times and seasons, ³² since (Fate) is master over all things.

While in the *Timaeus* secondary Providence is diligently exercised by the secondary gods by creating, governing, and preserving mortal affairs in an orderly fashion, in the *Apocryphon of John*, secondary providence is evil. It is the source of chaotic disorder and ignorance and ultimately assists in its own undoing by provoking salvific intervention of the higher Providence—Barbelo—into the realm of mortals to raise her offspring into the “honored place.”

Conclusion

In these observations, I have tried to show that several features of the *Apocryphon of John* and related Sethian treatises are based upon

an interpretive template derived from a gnostic reading of the *Timaeus*. Some constitute actual parodies of the *Timaeus*: the Sethian anthropogonic melothesia, the doctrine of a dual providence, a demiurgical world creator who creates angelic powers according to a reflected divine paradigm which he cannot directly see. On the other hand, as I have tried to show, there are also positive appropriations of the *Timaeus*: the Sethian doctrine of the primal triad Father, Mother, Child trinity, the association of the Mother Barbelo with certain positive features of the receptacle of becoming and the association of Sophia with certain of its enigmatic features, ultimately expressed in terms of dual Mother figures. Although the Gnostics were not concerned to map out the creation of the cosmos along the lines of the *Timaeus* in the manner of a Philo, they nevertheless—to use G. E. L. Owen's phrase—certainly stood “in the shadow of the *Timaeus*,” perhaps in the process even capturing—however dimly—some of its light.

Notes

1. Contributed with best wishes in honor of my friend and colleague of more than thirty five years, Fred Wisse.
2. Luc Brisson, “Plato's *Timaeus* and the Chaldaean Oracles,” in *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*, ed. Gretchen J. Reydam-Schils (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 111–32, esp. 111–13. See also his magisterial *Le même et l'autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon: Un commentaire systématique du Timée de Platon* (2nd rev. ed.; Sankt Augustin: Akademie Verlag, 1994).
3. The following are the characteristics of the receptacle: it is distinguished from Being and Becoming as a third entity (48E4); it has the nature of a receptacle of all becoming (πάσης γενέσεως ὑποδοχήν, 49A5–6); it is like a nurse (τιθήνη); it must be called always the same (ταύτον αἰεί, 50B6–7); it never departs from its own power or function (δύναμι, 50B7–8); it always receives the whole (τὰ πάντα, 50B8–9); it never in any way takes on a shape of any of the things entering it (μορφήν οὐδεμίαν ποτὲ οὐδενὶ τῶν εἰσιόντων ὁμοίαν εἴληφεν, 50B8–C1); it is naturally there for everything as a mold (ἐκμαγείον, 50C2); it is changed and distorted by things entering it, and on their account appears differently at different times (κινούμενον τε καὶ διασχηματιζόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν εἰσιόντων, φαίνεται δὲ δι' ἐκεῖνα ἄλλοτε ἄλλοιον, 50C2–4); it is that in which it becomes (τὸ δ' ἐν ᾧ γίνεται, 50D1); it is a mother (μήτηρ, 50D); it is an invisible and shapeless form, all-receiving, partaking somehow most mysteriously in the intelligible (ἀνόρατον εἶδος τι καὶ ἄμορφον, πανδεχές, μεταλαμβάνον δὲ ἀπορώτατά πη τοῦ νοητοῦ, 51A7–B1); it is a kind of being which is spatial,

eternal (γένος ὃν τὸ τῆς χώρας αἰεί), and indestructible, and provides a basis (ἔδραν) for all created things, and is apprehended imperceptibly by a sort of spurious reasoning (μετ' ἀναίσθησίας ἀπτόν λογισμῷ τινι νόθῳ, 52A8–B2); it existed before the heaven (οὐρανός, 52D4) and it is the nurse of generation (γενέσεως τιθήνη, 52D); it is this receptacle that subsequent Platonists—but not Plato—will call a “substrate” or “matter” (ὑλη). It is at first said to be completely passive and neutral, not at all serving as the material out of which anything is made, but merely receiving the copies of the Forms that have already taken shape in the Paradigm.

4. Here again, I follow the admirably succinct summary of Luc Brisson, “Plato’s *Timaeus* and the Chaldaean Oracles” (above, n.2), itself derived from his treatment of Middle Platonism in *Philosophie grecque*, sous la direction de Monique Canto-Sperber, en collaboration avec Jonathan Barnes, Luc Brisson, Jacques Brunschwig, and Gregory Vlastos (Coll. Premier Cycle; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 611–17.

5. “According, then, as Intelligence (νοῦς) discerns Forms existing in the Absolute Living Creature (the paradigm), such and so many as exist therein, he intended (διενοήθη) that this World should also possess.”

6. Ioan P. Culianu, *Les gnosés dualistes d’Occident: histoire et mythes* (Paris: Plon, 1990), ET by H. S. Weiser, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 123–25.

7. For M. Waldstein (“The Primal Triad in the Apocryphon of John,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration*, ed. J. D. Turner and A. McGuire [Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 44; Leiden: Brill, 1997], 154, the *Apocryphon of John* splits the Jewish creator god into an upper God of pure goodness, who is personally identified as the transcendent God of Middle-Platonic theology who retained some central features of the God of Israel, and an evil lower God, Yaldabaoth, who was personally identified as the God of Israel, but is portrayed as a parody of the Demiurge in Plato’s *Timaeus*. Yaldabaoth, mistakenly begotten by his mother Sophia by means of on her own productive power and wisdom and without either the consent of the supreme deity or the cooperation of her appointed male consort, is clearly identified with the creator God of Genesis. He turns out to be even more self-willed than his mother, whose spiritual power he literally steals in order to begin creating a world of his own that he can control however he pleases. Aware only of his mother Sophia who bore him, but completely unaware of the divine realm above her, his mother’s stolen power moves him to create unwittingly a counterfeit world as a poor imitation of the higher divine realm which he can at best only imagine. Thereupon he immediately brings into being a gang of angelic subordinates as fellow archons (rulers) to help him control the realm of darkness below the

luminescent divine world. And he does this thinking that he, Yaldabaoth, is the only god.

8. Mainly the interposition of a misguided Sophia-Logos figure between the creator and rest of the aeonic paradigms.

9. See my *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section « Études » 6. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval; Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2001), 532; I have discussed this supreme triad elsewhere in "The Gnostic Threefold Path to Enlightenment: The Ascent of Mind and the Descent of Wisdom," *NovT* 22 (1980): 324–51; "Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, ed. C. W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 55–86; "Gnosticism and Platonism: The Platonizing Sethian Texts from Nag Hammadi in their Relation to Later Platonic Literature," in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, ed. R. T. Wallis and J. Bregman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 424–59; "Text, Translation and Notes" to *Allogenes in Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII and XIII*, ed. C. W. Hedrick (Nag Hammadi Studies 28; Leiden: Brill, 1990); "Introduction" and "Commentaire," in C. Barry, W.-P. Funk, P.-H. Poirier, J. D. Turner, *Zostrien (NH VIII, 1)* (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section «Textes» 24; Québec and Leuven-Paris: Presses de l'Université Laval and Peeters, 2000), 32–225; 483–662, and "Introduction," in W.-P. Funk, M. Scopello, P.-H. Poirier, and J. D. Turner, *L'Allogène (XI,3)* (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section "Textes" 30; Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval; Louvain-Paris: Éditions Peeters, 2003), 14–210.

10. The Berlin Codex version of the *Apocryphon of John* portrays this event in a strictly Platonic manner by having Barbelo conceive the Son as a self-begotten spark in her act of turning toward the Invisible Spirit and contemplating him, while the longer version of Nag Hammadi Codex II portrays a more procreative process in which the Invisible Spirit looks at Barbelo and begets in her a spark of light.

11. For Plato, the cosmic soul is certainly a rational entity; even the Circle of the Other "partakes of reason and harmony" (36E), contemplating every aspect of reality along with the Circle of the Same. On the other hand, the Soul's rationality is a derivative one, having been bestowed upon it by its maker, the Demiurge. In the *Statesman* 269C7 the Stranger describes the universe (τὸ πᾶν) as "a living thing which has been allotted reason by its framer" (ζῶον ὃν καὶ φρόνησιν εἰληχὸς ἐκ τοῦ συναρμόσαντος); although Plato does not use the word "soul," he surely implies its presence as something granted rationality by a principle external to it, as in the *Timaeus*, although its innate motion is due to Necessity (ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἐμφυτον, 269D2), which suggests its essential irrationality. In addition, there is also the well-known

passage concerning the existence of both a good and an evil cosmic soul in Book 10 of the *Laws* 896DE, where the Athenian Stranger concludes: "let us assume not less than two—the beneficent soul and that which is capable of effecting results of the opposite kind."

12. According to the *Hypostasis of the Archons* 87,7–10 "Pistis Sophia established each of his (Yaldabaoth's) offspring in conformity with its power after the pattern (*tupos*) of the realms that are above. . . "; cf. *On the Origin of the World* 102,2–5: "they (Yaldabaoth's offspring) were born androgynous, consistent with the immortal pattern (*tupos*) that existed before them, according to the will of Pistis." In the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (III 68,5 ff. / IV 56,22 ff.) and *Trimorphic Protennoia* (39,13 ff.), it is the "Fourth Luminary" Eleleth, not Sophia, who is responsible for the creation of the world and the origin of Yaldabaoth.

13. Thomassen, "The Platonic and Gnostic 'Demiurge'," 228, who mentions Irenaeus's accounts of Simon Magus, Menander, Saturninus, and Carpocrates in *Adv. Haer.* I.23.2, 3.5; 24.1; 25.1.

14. P. Boyancé, "Dieu cosmique et dualisme: Les archontes et Platon," in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, 340–86. According to R. van den Broek ("The Creation of Adam's Psychic Body," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity* [NHMS 39; Leiden: Brill, 1996], 67–85) G. Quispel ("The Demiurge in the *Apocryphon of John*," in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis. Papers Read at the First International Congress on Coptology*, ed. R. McL. Wilson [NHS 14; Leiden: Brill 1978], 30), observing that Jewish heretics and later the Gnostics claimed "that the world was created by a lower demiurge," mistakenly claimed that in the *Apocryphon of John* the human body was fashioned directly by the demiurge.

15. "Dieu cosmique et dualisme," 384 f.

16. Roelof van den Broek has shown in detail how this section of the *Timaeus* underlies the *Apocryphon of John*'s account of the creation of the earthly Adam (BG 41,12–42,10 + 43,6–44,18 + 48,14–51,1; II 11,4–6.26–35 + 12,10 13,1 + 15,1–19,14).

17. Van den Broek suggests that the application of Plato's melothesia of the physical human body to its psychic elements is due to Middle Platonic doctrines of the descent of the soul thorough the planetary spheres from each of which it receives a characteristic that comprises its pneumatic vehicle or astral body, as in the Hermetic *Poimandres* 25 and Numenius (frg. 52 Leemans, *apud* Macrobius's *Commentary of the Dream of Scipio* 1.11.12–12.18).

18. Van den Broek, "The Creation of Adam's Psychic Body," 76, based on the text of the shorter version. He goes on to show the influence of this *Timaeus* passage on the melothesias of the Persian Zādspram 30,4–12, Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* 3.12, the Greater Bundahīšn and the Manichaean *Kephalaia* 33

and 42. These seven authorities are listed, with slight variations, in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.30.6; *Ap. John* BG 41,18–42,7; 43,11–44,4; 48,11–50,12 = II 11,26–34; 12,15–25; 15,14–23; *Orig. World* II 101,26–102,1; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 31–32; and in a Gnostic amulet (C. Bonner: “An Amulet of the Ophite Gnostics,” *Commemorative Studies in Honor of Theodore Leslie Shear* [Hesperia: Supplement 8, Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1949], 43–46 + plate 8). The most recent antique attestation of these authorities is found in Gesine Robinson, “Sethianism and the Doctrine of Creation in a Partially Restored Coptic Codex (Papyrus Berlinensis 20 915),” *Mus* 113 (2000): 239–62. Frg. B4 verso reads: “But [others] said: [A great] archon created man.’ But [this great] archon who rules over [them, they] called [Yalda]baoth, [there being with] him also [S]abaoth, and Adonai[s, Yaoth], [E]loaios, Oraios, (and) A[staphaios], so that they take part in the [creation] of man. This [now is the teaching] of the Sethians.”

19. Similar lists of these names are found in apparently “Ophite” sources: Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1.30.11, Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.30; *Orig. World* 100,1–102,1; a Gnostic amulet (see Bonner, 43–46 + plate 8; together with *Orig. World* 100, 24–25 it is the only known document designating Ialdabaoth as “Ariel”) and in the Berlin Codex 20915 (see Robinson, “Sethianism and the Doctrine of Creation,” 239–62), describing the teaching of “Sethians.”

20. See M. A. Williams, *The Immovable Race. A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (NHS 29; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 131–38 and idem, “Higher Providence, Lower Providences and Fate in Gnosticism and Middle Platonism,” *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (ed. R. T. Wallis and J. Bregman; Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern 6; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) 483–507 (cf. also PHEME PERKINS, “On the Origin of the World (CG 11,5): A Gnostic Physics,” in *Vigiliae Christianae* 34 [1980], 36–46), who cites Pseudo-Plutarch, *On Fate* (ed. E. Valgiglio, Rome, 1964), the essay *On Fate* preserved by Calcidius in his *Commentary on the Timaeus* (ed. J. den Boeft, 1970 [as *Calcidius on Fate: His Doctrine and Sources*, chs. 142–90] summarized by Nemesius of Emesa [*Nat. Hom.* 38–44]), and a closely related account in Apuleius, *On Plato* 1.12.

21. Primary Providence was associated with the Demiurge: “For God desired that, so far as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil” (*Timaeus* 30A), while secondary and tertiary Providence were associated with the younger gods of *Timaeus* 42DE who “govern the mortal creature in the fairest and best way possible, to the utmost of their power, except in so far as it might itself become the cause of its own evils.”