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David Noel Freedman
GENERAL EDITOR

THE GNOSTIC SCRIPTURES

A NEW TRANSLATION
WITH ANNOTATIONS
AND INTRODUCTIONS

BY

BENTLEY LAYTON

DOUBLEDAY

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND
FIRST THOUGHT IN THREE FORMS

And I brought it (the first begetter) to the end of its judicial authority, which is the ignorance that belongs to chaos.
And while among the angels, I showed myself forth in their likeness;
While among the powers, as though I were one of them;
And while among the children of humankind, as though I were a child of the human being.
Although I am the parent of everyone.
I hid myself in all these (spiritual beings) until such time as I might show myself forth out of my own members.
And I taught them about the ineffable ordinances and about the siblings.
They are uninvoked by all realms and powers of rulers—only by the offspring of the light alone.
They are the ordinances of the parent; they are the glories superior to all glories; they are the five seals that are perfect through intellect.
Whoever possesses the five seals of these very names has taken off robes of ignorance and put on shining light.
And none that belongs to the powers of the rulers will appear before that person.
Within such persons, darkness will perish and [. . .] will die;
And the thinking of the [. . .] creation [. . .] bestow one and the same manner, and [. . .] will perish.
And [. . .] and [. . .] incomprehensible [. . .] in [. . .]
50 until such time as I should show myself forth [. . .] and until such time as I should gather [. . .] all [my (?) . . .] siblings in my [. . .].

And I proclaimed the [five] ineffable seals unto them, so that I might dwell in them, and they too might dwell in me.
For my part, I put on Jesus: I extracted him from the accursed wood; and I made him stand at rest in the dwelling places of his parent.
And the beings that watch over their dwelling places did not recognize me.
For myself am unrestrainable, together with my posterity.
And I shall bring my posterity into the holy light, in incomprehensible silence. Amen!

THE HOLY BOOK OF THE GREAT INVISIBLE SPIRIT
OR
THE EGYPTIAN GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO MS NHC IV
(EgG)

Contents

The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, also entitled The Egyptian Gospel ("The Gospel of the Egyptians"), tells the gnostic myth as though it were the solemn prelude to a baptismal ritual; the work ends with an account of the establishment of gnostic baptism and a baptismal service book, including a list of metaphysical beings that preside over gnostic baptism and a hymn to be said by the baptized. For further discussion of gnostic baptism, see the "Historical Introduction" to Part One. The entire gnostic myth is recounted, but with emphasis on the first and last acts of the mythic drama—that is, the expansion of the invisible spirit or first principle into a full spiritual universe and the establishment of the gnostic church. These two emphases provide a mythic setting for the participation of metaphysical beings in baptism and the establishment of the baptismal ritual. The spiritual universe is described as a glorifying throne room ("Doxomédon Domédon"), filled with incessant litanies sung by a hierarchical retinue whose names and laudatory epithets are repeatedly catalogued. The Barbelo aon in EgG has a threefold structure, as in FTh, Zs, Fr, and 3Tb. As in Bn, the preexistent savior (here called the great Seth) comes three times to intervene in human history. The third advent is said to be the incarnation or adoption of Jesus by the preexistent great Seth. The account of creation is brief and positive, emphasizing divine providence as in RR and FTh.

The work has no obvious Egyptian character; the reference to Egypt in the title is obscure. EgG is not identical to "The Gospel According to the Egyptians" occasionally cited by fathers of the church.

Literary background

The author and place of composition of EgG are unknown. The date of its composition must be sometime before A.D. 350, the approximate date of the MS. In mythic content the work resembles RAd, 3Tb, Zs, Fr, and 3Tb. The language of composition was Greek.
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The mixture of genres in EgG is slightly complex, combining various traditional materials:

1. Heavenly message
   A. Learned treatise: (1) cosmogony; (2) “true history”
   B. Liturgical service book: (1) uranography; (2) hymn

As in RAd and 3Tb, the whole work is presented (80:15f) as a heavenly message, in this instance composed by “the great Seth” (i.e., the spiritual archetype) and left by him in high mountains, perhaps engraved on tablets. The convention of the heavenly message is a commonplace of ancient Mediterranean revelation literature. The message is not spoken by Seth in the first person, but rather is quoted obliquely; the work therefore purports to be not the message itself, but a transcript of the message by someone else. The body of the heavenly message falls into two parts. The first has the form of a learned treatise on cosmogony, followed by a revisionist “true history” of the Sethid line of humanity down to the final incarnation of the savior. The second part is a liturgical service book for gnostic baptism, beginning with a uranographic catalogue (list of structural elements of the universe) of “great beings that stand at rest” and preside over gnostic baptism and concluding with an ecstatic hymn spoken by the newly baptized gnostic.

Mythic characters

I. The Incorruptible Beings

The parent. The great invisible virgin spirit.

Three powers and their lights:

1. The father, consisting of
   Thought
   Verbal expression (Word)
   In corruptibility
   Eternal life
   Will
   Intellect
   Prior acquaintance
   Androgynous father

2. The mother

3. The son

Aeons, glories, powers, thrones, etc., partly associated with the Doksmedon realm

Ioel. The silence of silent silence, a masculine female virgin.


É-Sephek. The child of the child, holder of the glory.

The Moirothea, probably the same as Plèsitha. Mother of the luminaries and the incorruptible beings that are with them.

Four luminaries and their consorts, attendants, and attendants’ consorts:

Harmozèl
Loveliness—Gamaliël—Memory
Oroïael
Perception—Gabriel—Love
Daeieitha
Intelligence—Samblo—Peace
Eléléth
Prudence—Abrasaks—Eternal life

Beings that dwell with the luminaries:

The self-originating Word (or verbal expression). An offspring of the anointed (Christ). Fused with Adamas.

II. The Rulers

Sakla. The great angel that rules over Hades and chaos, the devil.

Nebrouel. The great demon that is with Sakla.

Sakla’s angels, that preside over Hades and chaos

III. Humankind

Adam
His wife (Eve)

Three sons ("sowings") begotten on Eve:

A son by the rulers (Cain)
A son by Adam (Abel)
A son by the great Seth (Seth)

The race of Seth on earth, including perhaps:

A female virgin by whom Seth becomes incarnate (Mary)

Jesus of Nazareth. Seth incarnate as a reason-born being.

Text

The original Greek apparently does not survive. The text is known only in Coptic translation, attested by two manuscripts, MSS NHC III (pp. 40–69) and NHC IV (pp. 50–81), which were copied just before A.D. 350 and are now in the Cairo Coptic Museum. Each of the two Coptic manuscripts contains an independent and stylistically distinct translation based on the Greek; thus, wherever the two texts are parallel, they differ in vocabulary and style. Careful comparison of the parallels has made it possible to gain a systematic understanding of the different ways in which the two ancient Coptic translators carried out their task; and thus, in cases where one of the two manuscripts is defective, its original text can often be restored by consideration of the wording of the parallel.

There are also important differences between the two manuscripts that are not a matter of ancient translation technique, but rather indicate that two distinct editions of the Greek text were already in circulation in antiquity when the Coptic translations were being made. At present, there is no certainty among scholars as to which ancient edition contains the more accurate version of the original text, though the editors of the critical edition believe that NHC IV may have been generally superior. For that reason the present translation is based on MS NHC IV; in many places where NHC IV is defective, its readings can be conjecturally restored by comparison and stylistic adjustment of the reading found in the other manuscript. Such restorations, which are supported by the parallel manuscript, are printed in italics.
Comparison of the other manuscript has also clarified the meaning of certain Coptic expressions in NHC IV and has thus been an aid in translation. In a few instances both manuscripts are defective in a given passage but the original text can nevertheless be conjectured with certainty; these totally conjectural restorations are enclosed within square brackets [ ]. Reference numbers keyed to the translation follow NHC IV, even in italicized passages, except when NHC IV is so defective that its line numbers are uncertain. In such cases a reference to NHC III is given (e.g. III 55).

The translation below is based upon Böhlig and Wisse’s synoptic critical edition of the Coptic, with some alterations: A. Böhlig and F. Wisse, Nag Hammadi Codices III,2 and IV,2 . . . (see Select Bibliography”), 52–167. The translation is based on MS NHC IV; parallel line references of the other manuscript are also provided in the margin.

An English translation of the other ancient edition of the work, which is found in MS NHC III, is given in Böhlig and Wisse’s critical edition.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


Speyer, W. “Religiöse Pseudepigraphie und literarische Fälschung im Altertum.” See RAd, “Select Bibliography.” (The heavenly message as a convention of pseudepigraphy.)

THE HOLY BOOK OF THE GREAT INVISIBLE SPIRIT

or

THE EGYPTIAN GOSPEL

I. THE INCORRUPTIBLE REALM

Title. The parent.

Title a. The double title is found in the colophon in MS NHC III at the end of the work (III 09:66). Many scholars translate the subtitle as ”The Gospel of the Egyptians” and call the work only by this designation. The following translation is based on MS NHC IV wherever that MS is extant; for the meaning of italics, see the introduction to EGd, “Text.”

IV 50 a. In the colophon of MS NHC III, the main title of the work is copied as the last phrase, a normal place for titles. It is based upon these opening words.

b. MS NHC III next has “unaging and.”

c. “living”: gnostic jargon used in this text to indicate membership in the incorruptible realm.

Title a. Apparently not an actor but a place.

b. The parent.

c. MS NHC III next has “unfamiliar.”

d. This passage is a detailed retelling of 50:29.

f. “thrice,” i.e. “supremely”: gnostic jargon used in this text; “male”: gnostic jargon used in this text to indicate membership in the incorruptible realm.

g. Or “servant.”
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thought; Bn 4:26 +
Word (verbal expression); Bn 5:20
incorruptibility; Bn 5:26
eternal life; Bn 6:14
will; Bn 7:6
intellect; Bn 7:9 +
52 prior acquaintance; Bn 7:10
androgynous father.

The mother

2 (11) The second power or octet:
the mother; Bn 4:36
the [masculine] female virgin, the Barbêlô; (Epitüthôk[. . . jai]; (Memeneaim[. . . .]);
[. . . ] kabin;
Adône;
[, . . . ] who presides over the heaven [. . . ];
[, . . . ] jakrôbôria[r[, . . . ], the inexplicable and ineffable power, who [. . . ].

(7) Having emanated, she (the mother) self-radiated, and took delight in the parent of the living silence. Bn 6:23 +

The son

15 (21) And the third power or octet, which constitutes the son of silence together with silence (?), and acquaintance with the [masculine] female virgin, the Barbêlô, in the light of the wonderful ineffable silence of the parent, the third female, the Barbelô, the great mystery emanated: Bn 6:23 +

19 (4) the Word (or verbal expression) derives from them, [and is] their fulfillment.

24 (4) They amount to three powers or three octets, which the parent emitted from its bosom in silence [and] in its forethought.

Completion of the Doksomedon realm

3 (7) In that very same place, the place where Doksomedon the eternal realm of the aeons was shown forth along with the thrones (?) that are within it and the powers [that] surround them and glory and incorruption, [the] parent of the great light Bn 6:23 +

12 (5) forth in silence [. . . ] the great Doksomedon realm, in which the [thrice]-male (?) child reposes. And within it was 55:11 +

19 (5) established the throne of its glory; and upon it was 55:11 +

(19) its obscure e name [was inscribed] . . . the Word (or verbal expression) . . . the parent . . . light of the entirety . . .

23 (21) silence, *which emanated in silence, which repose in silence, 50:29 +

52 a. The words in angle brackets are supplied from MS NHC III; they are erroneously omitted in NHC IV.
B. MS NHC III instead has "silent silence."

d. "great": gnostic jargon used in this text to indicate membership in the incorruptible realm.
e. Or "seven voices."

53 a. Possibly "[came]."
b. Or "inexplicable."
c. The grammatical connection of the last five phrasing is unknown, owing to the imperfection of the manuscripts.

d. What follows is a copy of the "obscure (or ineffable) name." written "on the tablet," attached to the throne of the "thrice-male" child. The seven Greek vowels are arranged, in descending order, in the Hebrew alphabet. "Teou- Epsilion—Alpha—Omega" and each vowel is copied twenty-two times, the number of letters in the Greek alphabet. "Teou" may be a variant of Teou, the name of the true god according to certain gnostics (cf. the Book of Enoch, 15, edited by C. Schmidt and V. MacDermott; Nag Hammadi Studies, vol. 13; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978). It may ultimately derive from 1a, a conjuring name of Yahweh commonly used in Jewish-Greek magical spells. "Epsilion" (the letter E) also represents "five" in Greek, and may refer to the quintet structure of the parent's forethought, or Barbelô, in classic gnosticism (cf. Bn 6:21). "Alpha—Omega" (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet) is a traditional acclamation (cf. Rv 1:8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God."). The "tablet" thus contains a pseudo-Semitic representation in Greek of the ineffable name of god.

54 a. According to Bn 5:6, the Barbelô is "the mother-father . . . the thrice-male . . . the thrice-androgynous name."
b. "The latter:" MS NHC III instead has "they."
c. "silence (or silence): the masculine female virgin."

55 a. Or "peoples."
b. "Anointed" and "Christ" are the same word in Greek.
c. Or possibly "the silence (which is an offspring) of silent silence."
THE HOLY BOOK OF THE GREAT INVISIBLE SPIRIT

56:20 which beholds [glories . . . treasures] in . . . invisible mysteries . . . of silence . . . the masculine [female] virgin [girl].

20 (-) Next was [shown forth the child of the] child Éséphêkh.²
23 (-) And [thus] it was completed:
24 (-) the [father];
25 (-) the [mother];
25 (-) the five seals;
25 (-) the invincible power, which is the great [anointed (Christ)] of all the incorruptibilities.
26 (-) [ . . . ] 57 holy [ . . . ] the end [ . . . ] and [ . . . ] are powers, [glories],
27 (-) and incorruptibilities [ . . . ] emanated [ . . . ] it lifted [up praise] unto
28 (-) the hidden, obscure [ . . . ] the concealed [aeon]²[ . . . ] in [ . . . ] the aeons [ . . . ] theos ( . . . ) and [ . . . ]
29 (-) each [ . . . ] countless myriads of [ . . . ] surrounded [ . . . ] and [ . . . ];
30 (-) 58 the father;
31 (-) the mother;
32 (-) the son;
33 (-) the five seals [ . . . ] of [ . . . ].
34 (-) They [ . . . ] presiding over [ . . . ] and the aeons [ . . . ] and the [ . . . ] eternal aeons [in very] truth.

Emanation of another being

23 (-) Next [ . . . ] [emanated] in [silence] together with [living] silence [of] the spirit [and] the parent’s Word (or verbal expression) and light. [It had [ . . . ]] the five seals, which the
24 (-) parent emitted) from its bosom; 59 it had passed through all
25 (-) the aeons [ . . . ] which I have already spoken; and it had established
26 (-) glorious thrones [and] countless [myriads] of angels [that]
27 (-) surrounded [them]—powers and incorruptible] glories, [signs] and glorifying, all praising [ . . . ] with [one voice] in a form
28 (-) with a never silent cry, [ . . . unto):
29 (-) the father;
30 (-) the [mother];
31 (-) the son, [ . . . ];
32 (-) [all the] fullnesses [of which I have already spoken];
33 (-) [the great] anointed (Christ), which came from [silence], which is the [incorruptible] child
34 (-) Telmaêl-Telmakhâël- Éli-Éli]-Makhâr-Makhâr-
35 (-) Seth, [the] power [that] is in very truth living; [the] masculine [female virgin] that is with [it], Iouël;
36 (-) Éséphêkh, holder [of the glory] and [child] of the child;
37 (-) the crown of [that being’s] glory;

58 a. "[the] concealed [aeon]": according to Zs, the highest of the three aeons that constitute the Barbelôl aecon.

57 a. "[the] concealed [aeon]": according to Zs, the highest of the three aeons that constitute the Barbelôl aecon.
58 a. Only part of this word is preserved in the one surviving MS of the present passage; the original text might have been either "[an emanation]" or "[forethought]."

Emanation of the Mioirothea and production of Adamas

30 (49) Thence there next emanated the great cloud of light, a living power, the mother of the holy incorruptible beings of the great powers, the Mioirothea. 61 And she engendered that being whose name I shall utter by saying,
4 (5) Ea, Ea, Ea²
6 (-) [Thou art unique!]
7 (-) Thou art unique!
8 (-) Thou art unique!
9 (7) Et, Et, Et²
10 (8) Inasmuch as the latter—Adamas—is light that has radiated
11 (9) . . . , this being [is] the eye of the [light]. *Indeed, [this is] the first human being, because of whom [are] all things, unto whom
12 (10) are all things, and without whom is nothing: * the inaccessible parent* beyond thought, who has become immanent and has
emanated down from above for the obliteration of the lack.

Fusion of the self-originate Word with Adamas

18 (16) Next, the great divine self-originate Word (or verbal expression) and Adamas the incorruptible human being became by
22 (21) fusion a human rational faculty. * And human beings came into existence because of a rational faculty.
23 (22) This (fusion) lifted up praise unto
24 (23) the great invisible, incomprehensible, virgin spirit;
25 (24) the masculine female virgin, [the Barbelôl];
26 (25) the thrice male child;
27 (26) the masculine female virgin Iouël;
29 (30) the child Éséphêkh, holder of the glory and child of the child;

60 a. An esoteric word, not Greek. The MS is imperfect here.
61 b. The divine Logos (Word) is not identical with the preexistent Christ but rather its offspring.
61 c. Cf. note 55c.
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3 (3) the crown of that being’s glory;
4 (6) the great aeons of Doksomedon;
5 (5) the thrones that are within them;
6 (6) the powers that surround them—glories and incorruptibilities and the whole fullness of which I have already spoken;
9 (10) the ethereal god-receiving realm, where holy people of the light receive image—people of the light of the parent of silence and the [silent] living wellspring;
14 (15) i.e. the parent and all the fullness of these beings, as I have just said.

Adamas’s request for four aeons

16 (17) The great divine self-originating Word (or verbal expression),
19 (21) and made a request for power and eternal strength and [incorruptibility] (to be given) unto the self-originate in the form of a full complement of four aeons; *so that by their agency might appear the glory and power of the first parent unto the holy people of the great light that was to descend unto the gloomy world.

Production of the great Seth

30 (51) [Next] Adamas the [great?] incorruptible human being
1 (7) itself—63 *that for its part, it (the child) might become parent
4 (9) of the immovable and incorruptible race; *that, for the sake of
6 (12) this race, silence and speech might be shown forth; *and that, at its instigation, the realm that is dead might arise and dissolve.

Production of four luminaries

8 (14) And so the great [. . .] power of the great light emanated
11 (16) from above. *The effulgence engendered four luminaries:
Bln 7:30+

Harzomzēl;
Oroisēl;
Daueithe;
Ellēlēth;
14 (20) together with *the great incorruptible Seth the son of Adamas [the great] incorruptible human being.
17 (22) And so was completed the full septet—which resides in a [mystery] of hidden mysteries, and which was glorified [. . .]
22 (32) and *became a group of eleven octets, thus [being completed by (?)] four octets.

Production of the luminaries’ consorts

24 (3) And the parent consented, and the full complement of the
27 (6) luminaries joined in the consent. *Consorts were shown forth

62 a. Lit. “airy.”
b. MS NHC III next has “invisible”; the original reading of the text is uncertain.

63 a. The “child” is the great Seth, and
b. i.e. a septet of octets.

III

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to bring about the completion of the octet of the divine self-originate:

2 (8) 64 loveliness, for the first luminary Harzomzēl;
3 (10) perception, for the second luminary Oroisēl;
5 (11) intelligence, for the third luminary Daueithe;
6 (12) prudence, *for [the] fourth luminary Ellēlēth.
8 (14) This is the first octet of the divine self-originate.

Production of the luminaries’ attendants

10 (16) And the parent consented, and all the full complement of the
13 (19) luminaries joined in the consent. *And attendants emanated:
14 (20) first, great Gamaliēl, [belonging to] the great luminary Harzomzēl;
17 (22) great Gabriēl, [belonging to] the second great luminary Oroisēl;
19 (24) great Sambōlō, belonging to the third great luminary Daueithe;
20 (26) great Abrasaks, belonging to the fourth [great] luminary Ellēlēth.

Production of consorts for the luminaries’ attendants

23 (53) And consorts emanated by the parent’s consent to them:
26 (4) memory, for the first, great Gamaliēl;
27 (3) love, for the second, great Gabriēl;
28 (7) peace, for the third, great Sambōlō;
1 (8) 65 eternal life, for the fourth, great Abrasaks.
2 (10) And thus the five octets became complete, a sum total of forty: the inexplicable [power].
5 (12) Next the great self-originating Word (or verbal expression) and
all the full complement of the four luminaries lifted up praise unto:

9 (18) the great invisible, uninvoked, unnameable virgin spirit;
12 (18) the masculine female virgin; *the
13 (19) the great aeons of Doksomedon;
14 (20) the thrones that are in them;
15 (21) the powers that surround them—glories and powers and authorities;
17 (23) the thrice-male child;
18 (24) the masculine female virgin Iouēl;
19 (25) Esēphēkā, holder of the glory; *the
20 (54) crown of that being’s glory:
21 (3) all the fullness and all the glories within the inaccessible fullnesses and the unnameable aeons;

64 a. “intelligence . . . prudence,” MS NHC
b. The MS here erroneously inserts “and.”
III: NHC IV here has “acquaintance . . .
teaching,” alternate Coptic translations of the corresponding Greek words (syn-
thesis . . . phronēsis).
65 a. The Barbēkā.

b. MS NHC III next has “and [child] of
the child.”
THE HOLY BOOK OF THE GREAT INVISIBLE SPIRIT

Enthronement of the four luminaries in the four eternal realms

Next the fullness began to move, and disturbance seized the incorruptibles. And then the thrice-male child emanated down from above unto the unengendered and self-originating beings, and unto those engendered in the (realm of) generation. That great being who belongs to all the greatestness of the great anointed (Christ) emanated, and established thrones of glory in the four eternal realms (aeons). And countless myriad powers surrounded them—glories and incorruptibilities. And in this way it emanated.

And the incorruptible spiritual congregation developed into full strength within the four luminaries of the great, living, self-originating [Word (or verbal expression)], the god of truth, praising [and] singing, all glorifying with one voice in unanimous form with a never silent cry unto:

the father;
the mother;
the son;
their fullness, of which I have [already] spoken
the five seals that preside [over] the myriads;
the beings that rule over the aeons;
the governors that convey glory, having [been] ordered to appear unto the worthy.

Amen!

II. HISTORY OF THE SEED OF THE GREAT SETH

Next the great Seth, son of Adamas the incorruptible human being lifted up praise unto:

the great, invisible, uninvoked, nameable, virgin spirit;
the masculine female [virgin];
the thrice-male [child];
the masculine [female] virgin (io)lël;

III 55 (io)Éépêbhkh, holder of the glory;
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vessel, by the means of the virgins of the defiled sowing of this realm.

Incarnation of the seed of Seth

18 (9) Next the great Seth came, bringing his seed, and he sowed it in the earth-born aeons, whose number is the infinite number of Sodom.

22 (12) [And they (the aeons)] were called a pasture of the great

25 (15) Seth, i.e. Gomorrah. The great Seth took the plant from [the]

26 (16) spring of Gomorrah and planted it in the second location, which also was called Sodom.

30 (19) This is the race that appeared through the agency of Edōkla.

72 For by means of reason, it (Edōkla) engendered truth and right (?), i.e. the source of the seed of eternal life and of all those who are going to endure because of acquaintance with their emanation. *This is the great incorruptible race that appeared from out of three (previous) worlds.*

The flood and other catastrophes

10 (61) And the flood will come as a prototype for the end of the age

13 (4) [and descend] against the world. *On account of this race*

16 (6) conflagrations will come upon the earth [. . .] grace will come through the agency of the prophets and the watchmen of the living race. *On account of this race plagues and famines will occur. All these things will come to pass on account of this great, incorruptible race. *On account of this race, temptations [and] deceptions of false prophets will occur.

Prediction of Sakla’s downfall

27 (16) Next the great Seth saw that in the devil’s activity, in its crookedness, in its scheme that it was going to bring down upon the immovable race, in the persecution waged by its powers and its angels, and in its deception, 73 it was going to act recklessly against its own self.

27 (27) Next the great Seth lifted up praise unto:

28 (24) the great, uninvoked, invisible, unnameable, virgin spirit [of the father];

29 the masculine female virgin, the Barbēlō;

30 the male child Telmaēl-Telmakhaēl-Elī-Elī-Makhar-Makhar-Seth, the power that is in very truth living;

31 the masculine female virgin Iouēl;

32 the crown of that being’s glory;

33 the great glorifying aeon.

f. The “reason-born vessel” is Jesus, cf.

74:25f and 75:15f. The begetting of Seth the son of Adam establishes a line of descent “by means of the virgins . . . of this realm’’ leading ultimately to Jesus and his adoption by the great Seth.

17 (10) the race of Seth on earth.

18 (7) the crown of that being’s glory;

19 (6) the race of Seth on earth.

20 (5) Ésēphēk, holder of the glory;

21 (4) the masculine female virgin Iouēl;

22 (3) the great, uninvoked, invisible, unnameable, virgin spirit [of the father];

23 (2) the male child Telmaēl-Telmakhaēl-Elī-Elī-Makhar-Makhar-Seth, the power that is in very truth living;

24 (1) the masculine female virgin, the Barbēlō;

25 the great, uninvoked, invisible, unnameable, virgin spirit [of the father];

26 the masculine female virgin Iouēl;

27 the crown of that being’s glory;

28 the great glorifying aeon.

b. Corresponding to the “three advents” of 74:17. MS NHIC III next has “into the present world.”

b. “the devil”: Sakla.

73 a. MS NHIC III instead has “the thrice-male child.”

72 a. Gk. themis, perhaps a proper name coined by the author. In Greek themis means "established custom, right."

72 b. MS NHIC III, "the great Doxomēdōn aeon."

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THE HOLY BOOK OF THE GREAT INVISIBLE SPIRIT

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IV 70 sixth, [Cain, whom all (?) the races of] humankind call “the sun”;

3 (7) [seventh, Abel];

4 (8) eighth, Akerēssina;a

5 (9) ninth, Lōūbēl;

6 (10) tenth, [Harmouiaïēl];

7 (11) eleventh, Arkheir[-Adōnēin],b

8 (12) III 58 (12)twelfth, [Bēlas].

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III 58:10 (10)second, Harmas, [the eye of fire];

(12)third, [Kalīla];

(12)fourth, Lōūbēl;

(13)fifth, Adōnēin, who is called “Sabaōth”;

1 (15) IV 70 sixth, [Cain, whom all (?) the races of] humankind call “the sun”;

3 (7) [seventh, Abel];

4 (8) eighth, Akerēssina;a

5 (9) ninth, Lōūbēl;

6 (10) tenth, [Harmouiaïēl];

7 (11) eleventh, Arkheir[-Adōnēin],b

8 (12) III 58 (12)twelfth, [Bēlas].

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Reproof of Sakla’s arrogance

(23) (22)And after the preparation of the... Sakla said to its...

(24) [angels (?)], "If for my part, I am a [jealous] god; and none has [come to exist] apart from me." [for it was] confident of its origin.

(59) III 59 (11)Next a voice came from on high, saying, "The human being and the child of the human being exist"—with reference to the descent of the higher image resembling its voice on high, which belonged to the image.

Projection of an image. Creation of Adam.

(8) "It (the image) gazed out. By the gaze of the image was modeled the first modeled form, because of whom repentance came into existence.

(10) [The image] received its realization and its power through the will of the parent and the delight that the parent [took in] the great incorruptible, immovable race of the great Seth.

(16) people of the great Seth, IV 71 who sowed it (the image) in the earth-born aeons, so that because of it the lacks might be completed. *For that (image) which descended from on high into the gloomy world [. . .] came to issue exhortation.*

Cain, Abel, and Seth

6 (21) And after the sowing by the ruler of this realm and those that derive from that ruler—a defiled and corrupt sowing of the demon-begetting god—[and] after the sowing by Adam,

10 (60) a sowing that resembles the sun and the great Seth,* next the great angel Hormos* emanated in order to prepare for the great Seth’s sowing through the holy spirit in a holy realm.

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b. Melkhei-Adōnēin in Bfn.

III 58 a. Possibly “[of the world].”

b. Or possibly “[for it was not].”

III 59 a. Adamas.

b. Or “son of man”; i.e. the great Seth.

c. “first modeled form”; i.e. Adam; Jewish and Christian jaragian, based on the fact that the creator modeled Adam out of earth.

d. The following passage (to IV 78:18f) survives in MS NHIC IV, and the translation is based on that MS.

IV 71 a. Or “to summon.”

b. The begetting of Cain (and perhaps Abel) by Sakla and Sakla’s offspring.

c. The begetting of Seth son of Adam.

d. Lit. “refuge.”

e. Or “seed.”

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[Notes and references provided as per the document format.]

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Emanation of guardian angels

And he first made a request for guardians of his seed. Next four hundred ethereal angels emanated from the great aeons; with them were Aeriosiel and the great Selmelkhel, the guardians of the great incorruptible race, its fruit, and the mighty people of the great Seth 74 "from the time and age of truth and right (?)" down to the end of these aeons and their rulers, whom the great judges have condemned to death.

Seth’s incarnations

Next the great Seth was sent by the four great luminaries—by the will of the self-originates and all their (the luminaries’) whole fullness, through the gift and delight of the great, invisible spirit, the five seals, and the whole fullness to live through the three advents of which I have already spoken, the flood, the conflagration, and the judgment of the rulers, authorities, and powers; to save that (race) which went astray, by [destruction] of the world and baptism of the body, and by [that] reason-born being which the great Seth prepared mystically through the female virgin; to make the holy people be born again by the holy spirit and invisible, hidden symbols; by destruction of world against world; by renunciation of the world and the god of the thirteen aeons; by invitation from the holy, ineffable, and incorruptible beings (in) the bosom of the mighty light that preexists in forethought.

His establishment of baptism

And by forethought he established the holy and the baptism that is higher than the heavens: (he did this) by the holy, by the incorruptible, and by the living reason-born Jesus, whom the great Seth put on (like a garment). And he nailed down the powers of the thirteen aeons and made them inactive; at his instigation they are fetched and they are removed.

Effect of baptism

But henceforth by the agency of the holy and incorruptible Poimäel, acting for the sake of those worthy of baptism
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III 67 a. The Barbêlo.  b. Or "grace."

IV 79 a. "episylphin," or "five." Cf. note 53d.

b. Here MS NHC IV seems instead to have "For it has been blended with [the] baptismal [waters of all]..." or "reveal this... and those..."
ZÖSTRIANOS
(EXCERPTS)
(Zs)

Contents

Zöstrianos describes gnostic baptism of acquaintance as a mystical ascent of the soul toward acquaintance or gnōsis with the ineffable first principle. The steps in the ladder of this ascent are the “aeons”—eternal hypostases or abstractions—that according to gnostic myth have emanated from the first principle and populate the spiritual universe. The structure of abstractions follows a threefold division of the Barbêlo as in EgG; although most details are lost owing to the imperfection of the manuscript, the structure is clearly one in which higher levels subsume lower ones in a relationship of whole to parts.

The theory of the soul’s progress from higher to higher abstraction toward a mystical leap to gnōsis had been laid down by Plato in a much-studied passage of the Symposium (210a–212a), and it was a standard element in the teaching of Platonism in the second century A.D. The mystical ascent is not, therefore, the final and decisive ascent of the soul after death, but rather a means of gaining nondiscursive knowledge or gnōsis (“acquaintance”). Once it has achieved its goal, the soul must descend back through the same levels it passed before, in reverse order. Zs thus narrates the intellectual voyage of the mystic. In accordance with a convention of apocalyptic literature, the voyager is accompanied by a series of revealing angels who explain the various levels of abstraction and incidentally mention other details of the gnostic myth.

Because baptism was the main metaphor of acquaintance in gnostic Christianity, the voyage is mythologized as a progression of “baptisms” in “waters” that “fill” each abstraction. A precedent had already been set in BJn 4:21f, where the first principle is called a wellspring; RAd 85:22f explicitly equates baptism with gnōsis or acquaintance with god. Higher levels of abstraction in Zs are thus mythically quantified as numbers of baptisms, with resultant transformations of the voyaging soul. For further discussion of gnostic baptism, see the “Historical Introduction” to Part One.

Zs is of particular importance in the history of philosophy because Plotinus, the great Neoplatonist philosopher, was acquainted with its contents (cf. Porph 16.3f) and took it into account in his cycle of lectures against the gnostics (Enneads 3.8, 5.8, 5.5, and 2.9 [nos. 30–33 chronologically]).

The work concludes with a classic example of gnostic sermon.

The limited scope of Zs does not allow for reference to the history of Israel or the foundation of Christianity, and the pseudopigraphic frame story and its main character imply a setting in pre-Christian Persia. Some scholars therefore consider

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Colophon in MS NHC III

[Text from the colophon in MS NHC III, which might include references to the book's title, author, or publisher.]