L'Exégèse de l'âme (NH II,6)

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All of the texts found at Nag Hammadi are significant, and all have enriched our understanding of Gnosticism and more generally of early Christianity. But they also tend to be dense and difficult to understand. They're not easy reading.

The *Exegesis on the Soul* is an exception. Although it is by no means a shallow or obvious text, the author has used his knowledge of the genre of hellenistic romance to give his story a setting that is immediately engrossing. The teaching itself, strongly gnostic, concerns the fall and eventual salvation of the soul, personified here as a helpless victim who tumbles into a world of thieves and brigands.

The *Exegesis on the Soul* is the sixth text in Nag Hammadi codex II, housed at the Coptic Museum of Old Cairo. It is preceded in codex II by the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospels* of *Thomas* and *Philip*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Writing without Title* on the origin of the world. It is followed by the *Book of Thomas*.

The language of our text is Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic, but the language of composition would have been Greek. The *Exegesis on the Soul* was written in a hellenized environment, as is shown by its use of Greek philosophical and rhetorical techniques. It is also marked by an emergent gnostic religiosity. It was likely composed in Alexandria in the first half of the second century CE, and is a precious source of information about the origins both of Gnosticism and of Alexandrian Christianity.

The story begins with the descent of the Soul (in this text personified and considered as female) from her previous pure state into the world, where she falls into the hands of brigands, and is insulted and abused by them (127,25-128,4). She loses her virginity and is deceived by their lies and pretenses. But bad goes to worse: after leaving the brigands, she drifts from abusive lover to abusive lover, and finally is left entirely alone. Her attempts at repentance fail until the Father takes notice of her plight (131,16), purifies her, and protects her from further assaults on her virtue (131,19-132,2). He then sends down from heaven her rightful husband. After he and the Soul are spiritually married (132,27-133,6), the Father regenerates the Soul, enabling her to regain her lost youth and beauty. This regeneration, the author tells us, is the true ascent to heaven, the true resurrection from the dead (134,13-14). The story as such having ended, the final three pages (135,4-137:26) of the text are hortatory, urging its readers to repent honestly, as the Soul has done, and to implore the aid and mercy of God.

In addition to this basic story, the author of the *Exegesis* has inserted extensive citations of a wide variety of other sources. At times these are used to advance the narrative: at other times they function as proof-texts or commentary. They are also used as illustration of the issues raised by the narrative. The texts are drawn from the *Old Testament* (i.e. *Jeremiah*, *Genesis*, *Ezekiel*), the *New Testament* (*I Corinthians*, *Acts*, *Luke*/*Matthew*, etc.), and from Homer's *Odyssey*.

In his analysis of the text, Professor Sevrin looks both at the story itself, and at the citations that have been added. By subtle analysis of the citations—their relationship to each other, to the story, and to citations used by other ancient authors—he is able to argue that the author of the *Exegesis* probably had access, not necessarily to the original texts, but to collections of quotations from them. Such anthologies are assumed to have existed in the period of the *Exegesis*, but it is rare to find a case where we can be certain that the author was using one. However, Professor Sevrin argues that

certainty is possible in this case, both from the nature of the text itself and specifically from the way the author deals with two of his citations from the *Odyssey.* The use of this sort of anthology, as well as Platonic aspects of the doctrine expressed in the text, suggest that the text comes from a scholastic background: "le texte sent l'école." (p. 56)

Professor Sevrin also carefully examines the relationship between the non-Christian aspect of the myth that is at the core of the text, and the obvious Christianity of the author and context. He argues that the text represents a pre-Valentinian gnosticism, "une religion gnostique à peine dégagée de ses racines platonisantes (et qui) intègre sans peine et sans profondeur le christianisme," (p. 58) —more specifically, Alexandrian Christianity. If this is so, this text is remarkably early—Professor Sevrin dates it to between 120 and 135 AD. It is also remarkable for the light that it sheds on the development of both Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity, especially with regard to Alexandria's scholarly milieu where ideas of all sorts could mingle, and the consequent syncretism that seems to have been acceptable at that time and place. Early Alexandrian Christianity has long fascinated and tantalized scholars: this text, aesthetically appealing in itself, also contains valuable information about its place of origin.