

La Prôtennoia trimorphe (NH XIII,1)

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Of that which has come to be known as Nag Hammadi codex XIII, there remains only four folios, found tucked inside the cover of codex VI. Although these folios are without pagination, it has been determined that they probably correspond to pages 35-50 of codex XIII. They contain one complete text, the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, and, following it, the first ten lines of the *Writing without Title* on the origin of the world, also conserved as the fifth text in codex II.

The language of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* is Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic, although the language of the original would have been Greek. Professor John D. Turner has argued elsewhere that this original was composed in the second half of the second century. The text has many lacunae, occurring mostly at the tops and bottoms of pages, sometimes extending over several lines.

The *Trimorphic Protennoia* is divided into three sections, each introduced with an aretalogy, a list of the speaker's characteristics or names prefaced with an "I am" formula. This is a form of writing also encountered in the *Thunder, Perfect Mind* in the Nag Hammadi collection, as well as in the canonical *Gospel of John*.

The first section (35,1-42,2) concerns the creation of the intelligible cosmos. This is accomplished in two phases, and discussed on three levels. The beginning of this section affirms that creation is ultimately, one might say ontologically, dependent on the Protennoia. (Neither the name nor the gender of the narrator of this text is fixed. In this section, it is primarily female, and is also given the name of Barbelo.) It is she who is present in everything and who gives life and knowledge to everything. In order to do so, she assumes the three forms of Father, Mother, and Son. After she anoints the Son, he reveals himself to his Aeons, personified and grouped in three groups with four Aeons each. One of these Aeons is named Eleleth. There are many similarities between this text and other Nag Hammadi texts, and the name Eleleth is one that recurs, for example, in the *Apocryphon of John*. In the *Protennoia*, Eleleth declares "I am King! Who belongs to Chaos, and who to the Underworld?" This cry arouses Saklas, also known as Yaltabaoth and Samael, the demiurgic figure common to many gnostic writings, who rules over the lower realms. Our present text does no more than make reference to his origin and nature, evidently assuming that its readers would be familiar with the myth from other sources. Saklas creates his own Aeons, and when the speaker dissuades him, he creates a person in her image, both of these independent creations being common elements of the myth. There are elements of the higher realm trapped in Saklas' creation, and it is in order to liberate these that the speaker descends, overthrowing the power of "the demons of the underworld" (41,6) and revealing her mysteries – or rather, *his* mysteries, since it is in the form of the Father that she/he descends.

The second section (42,3-46,3), after opening with an aretalogy, tells of the narrator's second descent, this time in female form. She predicts the coming of a new Aeon, one that is about to be born. Its birth-pangs cause the realm of chaos to tremble, altering the very foundations of the world, including Fate. In a powerful and evocative section, these disturbances come to the attention of "those who follow Fate," which could mean astrologers and the like. They ask the Powers who rule the world for an explanation, and the Powers in turn go to the Archigenetor, that is, Saklas. They speak to him rebelliously, declaring that their time has come and that they are to be overthrown and imprisoned. They now realize that he was not omniscient, because he did not foresee the things that have come to pass. The section ends with an invitation by the narrator, urging the "Sons of the Light" trapped in the

underworld to enter the “supreme, perfect Light” (45,13).

The third section (46,4-50,20), after the customary opening aretology, identifies the speaker as the Son, or the Word, and—significantly—addresses the readers as “brethren” (46,35). It concerns the speaker's third descent, this time in disguise. As did the apostle Paul, he has become “all things for all men,” to the point where the Archons even take him to be “their Christ” (41,8), the son of the Archigenetor. The text ends with the narrator's resolution to remain hidden until he gathers together and saves all of his brethren, as he has already saved Jesus.

Professor Janssens, in her introduction, notes the significance of the number 3 in this text. Its very title gives evidence of its tripartite structure. Yet the number three has more than merely a structural importance. There are the three descents of the protagonist as well, and even the protagonist's identity has three aspects. And these examples, while among the more important, are far from exhaustive. Threes recur continually throughout the text.

However, as Professor Janssens demonstrates, this focus on the number three is common to many gnostic systems. She discusses the importance of that number - especially concerning its use in descriptions of the divine nature and its self-revelation - in the systems of the Valentinians, the Basilideans, and the Perates, and also in the system underlying the *Apocryphon of John*, a text with which the *Trimorphic Protennoia* is shown to have strong links. Finally, Yvonne Janssens believes that this hymn is very old, both in terms of its composition (although she does not propose a definite date of composition) and in terms of the doctrine that it presents. In her opinion, this doctrine has been preserved in a relatively pure form, with few mythological elements, although we nonetheless do find some traces of magical formulas (38,29). In her opinion, this little writing is an extremely valuable source for knowledge of Gnosticism generally and barbelo-gnosticism in particular.