

L'Apocalypse d'Adam (NH V,5)

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Part of the job of fully reading a text involves reading its context. Creation *ex nihilo* is not a human prerogative: every text gives evidence of its author's environment, concerns, and affiliations. This is especially the case with the *Apocalypse of Adam*. It is considered to be representative of a particular school of thought, called "Sethian" by J. D. Turner (or more appropriately simply "gnostic", as B. Layton has recently proposed).

The significance of identifying a school (in however formal or informal a sense one understands the word) and identifying a given work as belonging to that school, is that one can then use the work to explain the tendencies of the school, and the school to explain or supplement the work, as Professor Morard does with the *Apocalypse of Adam*. The Sethians (for simplicity's sake we will restrict ourselves here to this name for the school) created a daring and original mythological system. However, no one text provides a full expression of this system. However, it is often the case that gaps left by one text can be filled by evidence provided in another, or that concepts left undeveloped in one text can be elaborated in, or by contrast with, another text. When this is done properly, it brings us closer to reading the text as the author and the author's circle would have understood it: it is the slow rebuilding of a context that contemporary readers would have taken for granted.

The *Apocalypse of Adam* is the fifth and last text in Nag Hammadi codex V, a codex which also contains *Eugnostos the Blessed*, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, and the *First and Second Apocalypses of James*. The language of our text is Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic: the language of the original would have been Greek. The text is fairly well preserved, although the bottoms of many of the pages have been damaged: this is where the majority of the lacunae, some covering four lines or more, are found. The papyrus is of inferior quality, compared to that used for the rest of the Nag Hammadi texts, and the handwriting is also not of the highest quality. Scraps of papyrus used to stiffen the codex's cover suggest that codex V was manufactured in the first quarter of the fourth century CE. The Greek original of the *Apocalypse of Adam* itself is dated by Professor Morard to the early second century CE.

The text presents itself as being the revelation given by Adam to his third son, Seth, a little before Adam's death. This revelation is intended to teach Seth about his own origins, the origins of the world, and things to come. The first part of the revelation (64,1-67,14), as is common in gnostic and particularly in Sethian writings, rewrites the creation story in *Genesis*, using the broad outlines of the structure but changing both specific events and its overall meaning. This section concerns the subjugation of Adam and Eve to the god who created them, but who is nonetheless inferior to them, due to their exalted origin, which predates their material creation by the god mentioned above. However, this god divides them and causes them to forget their true origins and to lose their glory, so that they serve him "in fear and slavery" (65,20). Adam is to some degree awakened from his forgetfulness by three men from a higher realm, but not sufficiently, and he is chastised for his disloyalty by the creator god. This god fathers at least one son with Eve, and Adam too falls prey to desire for her (67,4).

The second part of the revelation (67,14-85,30) concerns things yet to come, which were revealed to Adam by the three men mentioned above. The overall theme is that of the repeated attempts by the creator god to eliminate the progeny of Seth (who are the true heirs of Adam and Eve, and thus in their essence are alien to the creator god), and the overall motif remains that of rewriting and reinterpreting *Genesis*. The various cataclysms that take place (i.e. the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and

Gomorrah) are portrayed as attempts by the creator god to destroy Seth's offspring, attempts continually foiled by glorious angels, sent by the superior god, who rescue the intended victims. Also, there are three "illuminators" or groups of illuminators that come down to make the offspring of Seth aware of the real situation. The first group consists of the three men who partially awakened Adam. The second group consists of men who have come forth from "the knowledge of the great aeons and of the angels," (71,12-14) who will appear immediately after the Flood. The third is a saviour figure, and although the Sethian tradition is considered to be essentially non-Christian, this saviour figure was easily assimilable to Christ by Christian gnostics. His coming throws the world of the creator god into confusion: he is understood only by the "kingless generation," (82,19-20), the heirs of Seth, who will be kept safe from the evil designs of the powers of creation for the sake of their "knowledge of the truth" (83,13-14).

As mentioned above, this text belongs to the Sethian school of writings, an affiliation that it shares with many other texts found at Nag Hammadi. Professor Morard, in her introduction and commentary, uses comparisons with other Sethian texts to both fill in the gaps in the mythology presented by the *Apocalypse of Adam*, and to explain the meaning of what is present. For example, the *Apocalypse* simply states without explanation the idea that Eve taught Adam "a word of knowledge of the eternal god" (64,12-13). By drawing on other Sethian texts, in this case the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and the *Writing without Title* on the origin of the world, Professor Morard is able to bring out far more of the meanings that this incident would have evoked for the text's original readers. The more detailed telling of the story in these texts shows clearly that the readers for whom the text was intended would have seen Eve not simply as Adam's wife, but also as an envoy from higher realm to instruct Adam. Having been made aware of this interpretation, one can then turn anew to the *Apocalypse of Adam* and note that, while it does not explicitly present this doctrine, there are mysterious suggestions or turns of phrase that become explicable if one assumes that the author had in mind such an underlying doctrine. Also, comparison with other Sethian works also helps to nuance our understanding of some of the ideas that are expressed in the *Apocalypse*, such as the precise understanding its readers would have had of the nature of the third illuminator.

Professor Morard also helps to nuance our understanding of the relations between Sethianism and Christianity. Rejecting an oversimplified binary conception of Sethian texts as being either non-Christian or Christianized, she argues that the *Apocalypse of Adam*, though non-Christianized, shows itself to be influenced by the particularly Christian combination of the Davidic Messiah with the Suffering Servant figure of Isaiah in its portrayal of the role of the third Illuminator.

Last but not least, she has given a visual outline of the text's complicated sequence of events by means of a chart included with her introduction.