

L'Hypostase des archontes. Traité gnostique sur l'origine de l'homme, du monde et des archontes (NH II,4), suivi de Noréa (NH IX,27,11-29,5)

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Students of Gnosticism are often struck by the way that certain gnostic authors appropriate biblical traditions. Familiar stories are revisited and transformed, they are re-interpreted and given new values. Sometimes the text in question is only subjected to a daring and unconventional exegesis, but the wholesale rewriting of sacred texts can also occur. Whatever the approach taken, the book of Genesis was an extremely popular target, and in particular its earlier chapters. In his Introduction to the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Professor Barc argues that the author of this text used as a source a rewritten version of *Genesis*, one which was also used by the authors of the *Writing without Title* on the origin of the world and the *Apocryphon of John*, two other texts also found at Nag Hammadi.

The *Hypostasis of the Archons* is the fourth text in Nag Hammadi codex II. It is preceded by the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Gospels of Thomas and Philip*, and is followed by the *Writing without Title* and the *Exegesis on the Soul*. It is in a very good state of preservation, with some minor lacunae. The language of our text is Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic. The language of composition of the text would have been Greek. Professor Barc argues that its links with the thought of Philo indicate Alexandria as being a likely place of composition. He feels that the text as we have it is the result of a Christian re-editing of an originally Jewish gnostic text. The original text he dates to the early second century CE, the re-editing to the late second century.

The stated intent of this writing (86,26-27) is to teach the truth about the “rulers” or archons, the powers who have authority over this world. The narrative begins with the boast of the Demiurge, the chief archon, in words attributed to the God of the Bible, namely “It is I who am God there is none apart from me.” However, what in the Bible is God's true self-revelation is not so here, for there are others apart from the Demiurge, of whom he is unaware. These powers reprove him, and he tumbles into chaos.

At this point, “incorruptibility” gazes down into the primal waters. The archons below become enamoured with this image, but cannot take possession of it. So instead they create a figure in its image, Adam, who receives a spirit from the realm above the archons. After having him name the various animals and birds, the archons place Adam in the Garden of Eden, where they try to take from him the spirit that he has received from above. But this spirit becomes a woman, “Mother of the Living” (89,15). The archons try to rape her, but she turns herself into a tree, leaving only a reflection of herself to be defiled. This reflection is the “carnal woman” (90,2), the biblical Eve, who becomes Adam's wife.

The original, spirit-endowed woman now becomes a snake, and in this form she instructs Eve, telling her to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve and Adam both do this, and are cast out of the Garden as in *Genesis*, the difference being that this text shows the chief archon in a very bad light, as being ignorant and jealous and fearful.

After this, the Cain, Abel and Seth story is retold. However, unlike the version of the story told in *Genesis*, she also bears a daughter, Norea, who is actually the spirit-woman from the Garden of Eden. When, out of jealousy, the archons seek to destroy mankind, Norea seeks refuge with Noah. It is at this point that the archons try to rape her, and she calls for help (93,1-2). Her cry is answered by the

arrival of the angel Eleleth.

At this point, the narrative voice changes to first person, and the text takes on the form of a revelatory discourse, with the narrator asking Eleleth about the nature and origin of the archons, her own nature, and the amount of time remaining until the eschatological liberation of the “children of the light” (97,13-14), i.e. the narrator and the elect. In his replies to Norea's questions, he tells her about the creative activity of Sophia, her production and abandonment of Samael (the Demiurge), the activity of Sophia's daughter Zoe (“Life”) and the repentance of Samael's son Sabaoth. Professor Barc notes that these latter revelations are drawn from a different source than the ones that opened the *Hypostasis*, and that the two sources are not completely in accord with one another. The text ends with a discussion of the coming “true man” (96,33), who will teach and free the elect, those who come from the “incorruptible light” (96,21).

As mentioned above, Professor Barc argues that this text based itself in turn on two other texts. One of them would have considered itself a “Genèse véritable,” that is, a retelling of the story of *Genesis* from a gnostic point of view. One could loosely describe this as a paraphrase, but as Professor Barc points out, from the point of view of the author and readers of this text, our version of *Genesis* would have been considered the paraphrase. By giving, in parallel columns, relevant citations of the *Hypostasis*, the *Writing without Title*, and the *Apocryphon of John*, Professor Barc is able to establish that all three of these texts made use of the same “Genèse véritable.” He also discusses the techniques that this document used to reinterpret and rewrite the biblical narrative.

Professor Barc calls the second text, which inspired the second part of the *Hypostasis*, the *source théogonique*. The complexity of the situation with regard to the *Apocryphon of John* renders it uncertain as to whether its author availed himself of this source, but certainly the author of the *Writing without Title* used it. By a comparison of this latter text with the *Hypostasis* Professor Barc is able to hypothetically reconstitute at least a part of the *source théogonique*, and subject it to a detailed analysis. This in turn enables him to demonstrate its links with the philosophy of Philo Judaeus (*fl.* early first century CE), the great Alexandrian exegete and philosopher. In particular, it seems to represent a development of Philo's doctrine of the two hypostases of God, and his ascription of different characteristics to each.

Professor Barc also points out the existence of contradictions within the *Hypostasis* itself which seem to have been caused by a later editor reworking the first edition of the text. He argues that this first edition of the *Hypostasis* was the product of Jewish gnosticism, and that the second edition was produced by a Christian editor. This editor has not greatly altered the material derived from the “Genèse véritable.” However, he or she has made changes to the sections drawn from the *source théogonique*, to reflect a Christian view of history.

This volume also treats the text *Norea*, a short poem. *Norea* is the second text in Nag Hammadi codex IX, being preceded by *Melchizedek* and followed by the *Testimony of Truth*. Our text is in Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic. The opening situation is superficially similar to a scene in the *Hypostasis* (92,33-93,6) that deals with the Archons' attempt to rape Norea. In both texts, a character called Norea cries out to the supreme god and is saved. She is then restored to her original place among the “Imperishable Ones” (28,10) where she remains until the present, speaking words of life (28,13-14) and glorifying the Father (28,20). However, she is still deficient in some sense, and so the text ends by looking forward to the time when she will leave deficiency behind and will go to the Pleroma, thanks to four holy protectors, who will intercede with the Father of All on her behalf.

In his discussion of *Norea*, Professor Roberge discusses its status as poetry, and more precisely as a hymn celebrating Norea. He shows that, due to its brevity, it is also the sort of text that might find itself incorporated into larger texts, while nonetheless retaining its own literary unity, as has happened with the 13 Kingdoms section of the *Apocalypse of Adam* (V, 77,27-82,19). He also discusses the myth that underlies the hymn, establishing its links with the mythological systems expounded by the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, and the *Three Steles of Seth*. In so doing he explains the significance of the various entities named in the hymn, and argues that—despite their common name and common cry—the Norea of this text is not the Norea of the *Hypostasis*.

This volume includes both Coptic texts with French translations in parallel columns, as well as Greek

and Coptic indices for both texts, and an index of proper names. It also includes introductions and notes to both texts by Professor Barc and Roberge.