

La Paraphrase de Sem (NH VII,1)

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«Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi [section «Textes»]», 25

2000

xxx + 282 p.

ISBN: 2-7637-7592-6

The first of the five tractates contained in Nag Hammadi codex VII is entitled the *Paraphrase of Shem*. This document is mainly an apocalypse, with the narrative frame describing the ascent of the visionary, Shem, the son of Noah (1,5b-16a), and his subsequent transformation into a celestial being at the end of his ecstatic experience (41,21b-42,11a). The revelation is related by Derdekeas, the son of the infinite Light, and begins with a long cosmogonical and anthropogonical account (1,16b-24,29a), which is followed by an interpretation of the history of salvation centered around the flood (24,29b-28,8a), the destruction of Sodom (28,8b-30,4a), the baptism of the Saviour (30,4b-38,28a), and his return to the celestial spheres in the middle of his crucifixion (38,28b-40,31a). The teaching concludes with an address to Shem regarding his mission on earth (40,31b-41,21a). To this apocalypse is added an initial eschatological discourse delivered by Derdekeas (42,11b-45,31a), a description of Shem's ascent into the spheres (45,31b-47,32a), a second eschatological discourse by Derdekeas (47,32b-48,30a), and, as a conclusion to the entire tractate, a final address to Shem (48,30b-49,9).

The present volume constitutes the first comprehensive interpretation of a text known for its complexity and its apparent incoherence. The elaborate introduction analyses the manuscript, the language of the document, its literary genre, and the narrative procedure utilized by the author, as well as it suggests a detailed outline. An extensive study of the system shows that the treatise employs a coherent world view drawn from the Bible, Stoicism, and Middle Platonism, especially Numenius of Apamea and the Chaldean Oracles. It also borrows many elements from other Gnostic systems, particularly Valentinism, but the final synthesis remains completely original and anticipates many aspects of Manichaeism.

We have no information concerning the origin of the work or its author. Nevertheless, several indications are provided by the text itself, particularly its connections with Bardesanes of Edessa and Mani, which point toward eastern Syria. Its writing is set in a period in which the great Gnostic systems were already established and when the polemic against the Great Church was at its peak, i.e., in the first half of the third century.

The *Paraphrase of Shem* has been connected to the treatise entitled the *Paraphrase of Seth*, which Hippolytus refers to in his note on the Sethians (*Elenchos* V, 19-23). A detailed comparison of the two systems, however, reveals that any similarities in the terminology and images of the two systems can be explained by the same cultural milieu. Neither text could have provided a basis for the other and it is equally unnecessary to appeal to a common source or school.