

La Sagesse de Jésus-Christ (NH III,4 ; BG 3)

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The doctrine exposed in the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* must have been widely known, to judge by the number of witnesses to it that have come down to us. There are two versions of the work preserved in Coptic. One is found in Nag Hammadi codex III, preceded by the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sacred Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, and followed by the *Dialogue of the Saviour*; the other is contained in BG 8502. These two versions are written in the Sahidic dialect of Coptic, but both are translations of earlier versions written in Greek. A fragment of a Greek version of this text is also preserved in papyrus 1081 from Oxyrhynchus. This latter manuscript is dated to the fourth century CE, while the creation of Nag Hammadi codex III can probably be dated slightly later. As far as BG 8502 is concerned, Catherine Barry has argued that its original Greek version of the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* would have been composed in Egypt at the start of the third century CE, and then the Coptic version would have been copied towards the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century CE.

The *Sophia of Jesus Christ* tells the story of humanity, from its preexistence in the Unengendered through to its eventual salvation. This story is told by means of a dialogue between Christ and several of his disciples, namely Philp, Matthew, Thomas, Mary and Bartholomew. The author of the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* seems to have been primarily concerned with the advantages that this revelation has procured for humanity—thus we see a great interest in the material world (associated with forgetfulness) and a strong desire to link the historical career of the Saviour with the spiritual maturation of the elect and the end of the reign of forgetfulness. The text shows the extension of a theology of history that already existed, in undeveloped form, in the codex III version of *Eugnostos*.

Through the use of the phrase, “from the beginning of the world until now” (70,4), the author of the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* puts the good news proclaimed by *Eugnostos* within history, at the end of a period characterized by the failure of humanity's attempts to find God. In fact, the author situates the revelation quite precisely: it takes place in Galilee, after the resurrection of the Saviour, during his appearance to the gathered disciples (BG 77,9-78,2a = NHC III 90,14b-91,3a), during which he instructs them.

The Saviour's first exposition deals with the failure of human attempts to find God, this failure being emphasized in order to show the contrast with the Saviour's own ability to reveal the truth to those of his disciples who are capable of receiving it. The Saviour's own knowledge is due to his place of origin, for he is from the infinite Light. As for the disciples, their worthiness to receive this knowledge derives from the fact that they derive their true origin from the Saviour, and not from matter (BG 82,9b-19a = III 93,16b-24a).

With his second exposition, the Saviour turns to the cosmogonic aspect of his revelation, emphasizing the productive power of the Spirit. The text grants to the unknown Father of the All the title of Productive Spirit, and describes him as one who, through generosity, desired to create other spirits who would in turn create as he had done (BG 87,15-88,2a = III 96,21-97,12). The productive power of the unknown, unengendered Father is thus used to create the Immortal Man as well as the Son of Man, for they are manifested through the “Spirit of the Light.”

The Saviour's revelation then turns to deal with the function of the Man with regard to his disciples, since according to the author of this text the entire purpose of the divine manifestation lies with them. Thus, the Man has been manifested solely in order that salvation might be achieved through the

emissary who will bring to an end the reign of forgetfulness.

The author of this work then turns to the figures of the Saviour and Wisdom, explaining through their union the descent of the spiritual element into matter. Also of concern to this author in this regard is the amnesia suffered by the spiritual element upon its descent, and its eventual salvation through the intermediary of the Saviour. At the end of the revelation, Mary speaks up, asking about the origin of the disciples, their nature and their destiny. The response begins with an explanation of the veil that separates the higher world, the place of the celestial eons, from the lower world. For although the essence of the ones who come after the great eons is spiritual and luminous, as is the essence of their predecessors, nonetheless they are only "veiled manifestations." There has thus been a loss of lustre in the course of the progression of the spiritual essence, a darkening which presages the material world to which the spiritual element will descend, this spiritual element from which the true nature of the disciples originates.

There then follows an exposition of the different degrees of knowledge and the levels of repose that correspond to them. The dialogue finishes with a recapitulation of the Saviour's revelations and the investiture of the disciples as Children of the Light. Finally, a narrative conclusion shows the beginning of the disciples' missionary activities, which is the period allocated for preaching, the time of the Church (BG 126,17-127,10 = III 119,8b-17).

Through her analysis of the two Coptic versions of the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Catherine Barry is able to show the doctrinal development of this text. Her examination of the vocabulary and the Greek nuances present in the codex III version shows that it is much closer to its Greek predecessor than the version in BG 8502. Furthermore, she notes in the BG 8502 version the presence of editorial additions and commentary which, in her view, also suggest that this version of the work is later than that found in codex III.

In speaking of the development of the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, one is obliged to speak as well of its relation to *Eugnostos*. As is well known, the two works have many elements in common. Catherine Barry does not question the common scholarly consensus that the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* is dependent on *Eugnostos*. However, as a careful reading of the text shows, this recasting of the doctrine initially promulgated by *Eugnostos* cannot be interpreted simply as a secondary phenomenon, a mere Christianization of the doctrine, but must instead be seen as involving the development of doctrinal tendencies already present in *Eugnostos*, particularly the version found in codex III.

In addition to this fundamental influence, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* shows evidence of its author's knowledge of New Testament writings, particularly the Gospel of John and the letters to the Corinthians—although, as Barry notes, the New Testament material seems to have passed through the hands of a Sethian redactor before being integrated into the text. But despite the influence of and links to such works as the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the *Writing without Title*, and the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* cannot be considered a Sethian work, at least not according to the definition proposed by the late H-M Schenke. And while it does have strong ties to the Ophite Sethian group described by Irenaeus in his *Against the Heresies* (I 30), nonetheless the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* differs in its doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In addition, despite the important role played by Thomas, here presented as the perfect initiate and the only to prove his recognition of the Saviour, still the ideas exposed by him do not suffice to link this text to the so-called Thomasite literary tradition.

This volume contains the Greek and Coptic texts, which are edited by Catherine Barry, and accompanied by a French translation, an introduction, and a commentary. The volume also contains a bibliography, Greek and Coptic indices, and a linguistic analysis of the two Coptic texts.