

Le dossier baptismal séthien. Études sur la sacramentaire gnostique

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It seems paradoxical to speak of gnostic sacraments. One would think that gnosis and the use of sacraments would be mutually exclusive. How can one reconcile the mediation of material, contingent rituals with the necessity of a salvation effected through lost spirit's acquisition of pure, immediate knowledge? Some of the heresiological accounts, and many of the gnostic texts themselves, are either silent with regard to the role of ritual in salvation, or in fact present anti-baptismal polemics. But in other accounts, both those made by heresiologists, and those written by gnostics, we find traces of liturgical and ritual activity. These are not merely confined to thanksgivings or cultic affairs, but also involve at the very least rites of initiation.

The information provided by works in the Nag Hammadi collection, while allusive and difficult to interpret, nonetheless has the advantage of consisting of firsthand accounts. Although the study of these works cannot resolve all the questions of gnostic ritual, such study does allow us to look beyond the doctrinal and mythological systems described in gnostic works and to catch a glimpse of the community life of their authors. This in turn helps us to examine these communities from a sociological point of view, in addition to our examinations of the links and developments of their belief systems. The utility of sociological examinations of related texts, in addition to examinations based on their mythological interrelations, have often been acknowledged, but such examinations have rarely been undertaken.

The majority of this study is thus devoted to the analysis of these texts, in which the author first of all examines the information about baptism given by each of these texts, interpreting this information within the context provided by the text. The author also attempts, insofar as it is possible, to situate the passages dealing with baptism in the overall redactional history of the text, so as to ultimately identify the meaning of these passages both in themselves, and as elements of the text as a whole in its final version. In his examination of these baptismal passages, the author attempts as well to identify the significance of baptism, that is, its relation to salvation.