

Les Leçons de Silvanos (NH VII,4)

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With its vivid and rich collection of imagery, speaking in the voice of an elder figure passing on his accumulated wisdom to a junior, the *Teachings of Silvanos* is a striking representative of sapiential literature, a category which includes such works as the Biblical book of *Proverbs* and the ancient Egyptian *Wisdom of Amenem-Opé*. The *Teachings of Silvanos* is strongly syncretistic, and while many aspects of it are amenable to gnostic interpretation, it is not itself a gnostic text – in fact, as Dr. Janssens points out, it even contains a brief but strong anti-gnostic assertion.

The *Teachings of Silvanos* is the fourth text in Nag Hammadi codex VII, being preceded by the *Paraphrase of Shem*, the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. It is followed by the *Three Steles of Seth*. Codex VII is one of the best preserved codices of the Nag Hammadi library, and the *Teachings of Silvanos* is clear and almost completely undamaged. It is in Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic, although its language of composition would have been Greek. Dr. Janssens argues that the original version of this text was written towards the end of the second century C.E., perhaps in Egypt. The name of the alleged author appears only in the title, thus suggesting that the attribution to Silvanos might have been added at a later redactional stage. The New Testament mentions a Silvanos who is a companion of Paul's (*Acts* 15:22, as well as in the introductions to both the Thessalonian epistles). A Silvanos is also mentioned as a scribe and faithful companion to Peter (*1 Pet.* 5:12). It is possible that the author of the title of our text was alluding to one or both of these people.

The text commences with a comparison of the soul to a military camp (84,26-7) that must be defended against the passions, for if it is not, it will become like a deserted city, full of brigands (85,8-11). The same sort of opposition of images recurs at 106,9-14, where by rejecting the passions one is said to become a temple rather than a tomb. Similarly, the passions, which here are brigands, are there described as animals (105,27-106,1).

The importance of both wisdom and education are strongly affirmed, but the truly essential thing is to take Christ as one's master and friend (90,33-91,1). The soul has acquired Death and Ignorance as its father and mother (91,9-12): it must abandon these and return to its original parents, God the Father and Wisdom. The text uses a contemporary philosophical motif to describe the nature of human being: it is the product of the mixture of the divine intellect, the carnal elements, and the soul which lies between the two and must decide which it will follow. Foreign knowledge, or gnosis (94,29-33), is to be rejected, as are false friends who try to lead one away from the one God. God is affirmed as being in all places, yet contained by none of them, thus both immanent and transcendent. Because of this transcendence, even the angels cannot truly know him: only Christ, the Logos, can do this. Christ is a road that we are to follow, and someone to whom we must surrender ourselves in order that we may be enabled to reject the passions. We also are to be temples and not tombs, by becoming pure and rejecting the passions, portrayed here as animals (105,27-33). We are also enjoined to fear God (114,19-20), and to fight against the powers of the Adversary (114,9-13).

Immediately after the text of *Silvanos*, there is a scribal note in the form of the acrostic *ichthus* (standing for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour"), which is followed by Greek words for "extraordinary wonder". This note is surrounded by Greek letters, the meaning of which is not discussed in the commentary.

As mentioned above, the *Teachings of Silvanos* is quite syncretistic. Dr. Janssens, in both her

introduction and her commentary, shows how wide a range of influences it has. Gnostic thought has obviously made its mark on the text, but it is far from the only, or even the most important, element. In fact, at one point the text seems to lash out against the gnostic denigration of the god responsible for the creation of the world, by arguing that in fact he is not the ignorant deity that he is often alleged to be, since nothing can be hidden from him (116,7-13). (This is not the only example of the undeservedly overlooked heterogeneity of the Nag Hammadi collection.)

In addition to the gnostic and more general Christian influences, there is also a great deal of philosophical thought evident, both of the Platonic and the Stoic variety. The Stoic element is particularly prominent with regard to the moral teaching of the text. While its general exhortation to battle against the passions could be either Stoic or simply Christian (gnostic or orthodox), the specific passions (pleasure, desire, and fear) are the ones most opposed by Stoicism. (However, this is tempered by the author's evident Christianity: the one beneficial fear is the fear of God.) Other distinctively Stoic features include the emphasis on education and wisdom (for example, 87,5) and the need for a guiding principle, or inner guide (*hègemonikon*) (84,28). But here too a Christian context is added, when it is said that he who fears God is the one who will keep his *hègemonikon* (108,20-24).

Such a melange of influences denotes an educated and widely-read author. Dr. Janssens devotes a great deal of attention to identifying and contextualizing the text's literary allusions, noting parallels with the writings of authors as varied as Clement of Alexandria, Marcus Aurelius, Paul, and Plato.