

Les Sentences de Sextus (NH XII,1). Fragments (NH XII,3) [P.-H. Poirier], suivi du Fragment de la République de Platon (NH VI,5) [L. Painchaud]

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In addition to various small fragments, this volume brings together two short writings, both of which have extant Greek parallels—a rare situation for Nag Hammadi writings. These two works are the *Sentences of Sextus* and a fragment of Plato's *Republic*.

The *Sentences of Sextus* is the best-preserved of the works contained in codex XII, and this despite the fact that each of its five sheets is damaged. The work is written in Coptic, in the Sahidic dialect primarily, although traces of Achmimic, Sub-Achmimic (Lycopolitan) and Fayyumic dialectal influences are also present. It is a translation of an earlier Greek model, which might well have been composed towards the end of the second century in Alexandria. Comparison of this Coptic version of the text with the two preserved Greek manuscripts of the *Sentences of Sextus* indicates that the Coptic translator was working with a different exemplar than were the scribes of the extant Greek versions. The *Sentences of Sextus* must have been widely popular in Christian environments, as in addition to these Greek and Coptic versions, there are also versions in Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopic.

Comparison of the Coptic version with the other witnesses to the text does not bring to light any signs of doctrinal modification. Specifically, the work does not seem to have been “gnosticized.” Why, then, would it have been included in the Nag Hammadi collection? To answer that question, we must keep in mind that gnostics were in fact capable of using works also used by their fellow (non-gnostic) Christians, as long as those works could be brought into harmony with their own view of the world. It would seem, then, that the presence of the *Sentences of Sextus* in the Nag Hammadi collection can be explained by its general popularity, and furthermore by the support that it would have given to the ascetic and spiritual ideals of the group that brought this collection together.

The other text treated in this volume, the fifth writing in codex VI, is a fragment of Plato's *Republic* (588b-589b), a passage that was widely known in antiquity. This passage is cited by Plotinus (*Ennead* I, 1.7) and is repeatedly mentioned by Proclus in his commentary on the *Republic*, as well as being used by Eusebius (*Preparation for the Gospel* XII, 46) and Stobaeus (*Anthology* III, 9). A vivid and concise summary of Platonic anthropology, this work seems to have been featured in anthologies of philosophical texts used in scholastic contexts. The Nag Hammadi version, however, was rendered so obscure by its Coptic translator that it was not until almost twenty years after its discovery that its true identity was recognized. There is no other Coptic version of this text, nor indeed of any other of Plato's writings.

Taking into consideration the elements introduced by the Coptic translator into this Platonic text, one is led to the hypothesis that this translation took place in a milieu in which protogonic accounts featuring the archons circulated, and in which circulated as well the theme of creation through the Word (a veritable leitmotiv in the *Apocryphon of John*) and Valentinian anthropological conceptions. In its eclecticism, such a milieu would have much in common with the environment in which the Nag Hammadi collection was assembled.