

Les Trois stèles de Seth. Hymne gnostique à la Triade (NH VII,5)

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One usually thinks of the various groups called “gnostic” predominantly in terms of their relationship with Christianity. The first unambiguous attestations of their existence and beliefs are found in the works of Christian authors such as Clement and Irenaeus, and they have historically been considered simply as off-shoots of Christianity. This is unsatisfactory for many reasons, one being that there are clear links between some of the Nag Hammadi texts and the philosophical movements of the second and third centuries, in particular neoplatonism, and thus these texts cannot be adequately understood when viewed simply in the context of Christianity. The *Three Steles of Seth* is one such text and must be considered in the light of the teachings of the great neoplatonist Plotinus.

The *Three Steles of Seth* is the fifth and last text in Nag Hammadi codex VII, being preceded by the *Paraphrase of Shem*, the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Teachings of Silvanus*. Although it is largely intact, there are lacunae, some extending over several lines. The language of our text is Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic: the language of the original would have been Greek. Professor Claude gives three possibilities for the date of composition of the Greek version of the text as we now have it, and two possibilities for the place of composition, all drawing on its links with Plotinus. If the text was produced in Alexandria, this would have taken place either around the turn of the 3rd century CE (that is, immediately predating Plotinus), or between 235-245, when Plotinus was studying with Ammonius Saccas. If the text was produced at Rome, it would have been during Plotinus' tenure there, which extended from 245 to his death in 270.

The text opens with an *incipit* identifying the discoverer of the *Three Steles* as Dositheus and identifying the original author as Seth. In effect, Dositheus' testimony is being used to legitimize the *Three Steles'* claim to Sethian authorship. Whether or not this “Dositheus” is meant to be taken for the legendary teacher of Simon Magus is left open by Professor Claude. At any rate, the things which Seth wrote are said to have been seen, understood, read and finally given “to the elect” (118,17). From this point on the authorial voice is that of Seth, who precedes his revelation proper with an assertion of his worthiness to possess such knowledge.

The first Stele is addressed to the Autogene, also referred to as Geradamas and Mirotheas, also called the Father and in particular the Father of Seth and his seed (the elect). The Autogene's foreignness is stressed, and is immediately used to validate the foreign and superior nature of the elect themselves: the Autogene is praised as the one that both reveals the good, and through that action saves the worthy. The Stele ends with a communal prayer of thanksgiving.

The second Stele is addressed to Barbelo, the androgynous “female” hypostasis of the Triad. (Barbelo's gender is often ambiguous in Sethian writings: she/he is referred to alternately as male or female, and given titles such as “Barbélo, Vierge mâle” [121,21]. However, overall she is usually more female than male.) She too is praised as being a saviour, but also as a creator, or rather as the “Génitrice parfaite, productrice d'Éons” (122,5-6). She is seen as being the principle of movement between opposites, and their consequent unification. The second Stele ends as the first did, with a communal prayer.

The third Stele celebrates the Unconceived, an absolutely transcendent being, existing prior to everything else—in fact, prior to existence itself. One must be already saved even to bless it, and blessing it is simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically the route to eternal salvation. In any case, it is the origin of all salvation, and it saves whomever it chooses. Though it cannot properly speaking be

named, names can be used to refer to it, such as Senaon, Deiphanes, Antitheus, and Armedon. It can also be referred to by title. Most of these—such as titles “le Préexistant réel” (124,19), and “Proto-Essence antérieure aux essences” (124,28-29) —betray a philosophically-oriented approach to negative theology.

The third Stele concludes, as the first two did, with a communal prayer: the assembled elect give thanks for their salvation, and glorify the Unconceived. At this point, there is a large lacuna, obliterating six lines. The text resumes with a description of ritual and of the path to understanding. It ends, as is common amongst the Nag Hammadi texts, with its title. A brief scribal blessing follows, ending the codex.

In his introduction, Professor Claude argues that the text as we have it was produced by a second redaction of an already-existing hymn to a divine Triad, a hymn which was probably attributed to Seth, and which consisted of a brief introduction (118,20-24), an invocation of the three hypostases of the Triad (the Autogene, Barbelo, and the Unconceived), and a final exhortation (127,4-11). The final redactor wished to put the hymn in a form that would be more appropriate for liturgical reading, and also to introduce idea of the four races, the division of mankind into four classes that was a particularly Sethian innovation.

The possibility of liturgical use of this text is extremely significant. It is rare to find evidence of cultic activity in gnostic texts. Often this facet of religious life is ignored, or even denied, by the gnostic sources we have, and ridiculed or parodied when mentioned by the “orthodox” sources. However, as Professor Claude shows, within the *Three Steles of Seth* there are “des indices laissant croire à l'existence d'une communauté liturgique qui se servait des trois hymnes comme prière” (p. 25), as well as indications of communal religious behaviour - for example, to cite the *Three Steles* itself: “tous disent ces bénédictions *individuellement et en commun....* Puis, *selon la manière qui leur a été fixée.....*” (127,11-14, my italics).

The above are suggestions of the text's social environment. Also discussed is its intellectual environment, which—unlike many gnostic texts, and unlike the popular preconception of all of them—was clearly non-Christian. There is some discussion of the links between the *Three Steles* and Hermetism, but Professor Claude finds much stronger links to the philosophy of the third century neoplatonist Plotinus. He isolates six features of its thought that link it to that of Plotinus, but is careful to leave open the possibility that some of these features could be the result of gnostic influences on both Plotinus and our text: “Plotin n'a peut-être jamais été gnostique, mais on ne peut oublier qu'il fut disciple de Numénius qui, lui, le fut certainement” (p. 27).