

# TWO COSMOLOGICAL GNOSTIC TRACTATES

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Gnosis, esoteric knowledge that provides the key to the salvation of the individual and is obtainable only via revelation, was a central component in the worldview of various sects that flourished during the first centuries of the Christian era. As such, Gnosticism takes up where the Dead Sea Scroll community left off.<sup>1</sup> The gnostic ideas of these sects were challenged by Church Fathers such as Irenaeus,<sup>2</sup> the rabbis of the Talmud,<sup>3</sup> and pagan philosophers such as Plotinus.<sup>4</sup> Other groups, though not referring to themselves as “Gnostics” nor called such by their contemporaries, might also be included under the same rubric, based on similarities of belief or outlook. Whether a given notion is considered genuinely gnostic, pre-gnostic, or gnostic-like, depends, of course, on how general a definition of Gnosticism each particular author chooses for himself.

The most important source today for knowledge about these sects is the relatively recent discovery of thirteen volumes of writings at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt.<sup>5</sup> These texts, written in Coptic, were translated from (for the most part) lost Greek originals. Some of the fifty-two tractates that were unearthed are clearly Gnostic, in that they appear to describe those Christian heresies fought against by the Church Fathers. Many other tractates, however, do not seem to contain Christian motifs, though they build upon the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, two of these tractates are examined. The first, *On the Origin of the World*, is an eclectic work that begins by disproving the notion that nothing existed before Chaos and goes on to describe the creation of the lower world. The second tractate, *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, declares that the Authorities are indeed real and describes a revelation on Creation. The two

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<sup>1</sup>J. M. Robinson, “Introduction,” *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 7, and Flusser, p. 637.

<sup>2</sup>In *Adversus Haereses*.

<sup>3</sup>Particularly in Tractate Avodah Zarah.

<sup>4</sup>In *Enneads*.

<sup>5</sup>For a description of the find, see W. C. van Unnik, *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings*.

<sup>6</sup>Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

works are clearly related, but the exact nature of the relation is unclear.<sup>7</sup> Both contain cosmographic, theogonic, and cosmogonic descriptions. Often, details omitted in one are supplied by the other; occasionally, the two differ on some point.

## 2 COSMOGRAPHY

The topography of the universe, according to both *On the Origin of the World* and *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, consists of five components: 1) Above, 2) a veil between Above and Below, 3) Chaos, 4) Abyss, and 5) Tartaros. Above is the abode of the immortals; the seven heavens of Chaos are under the dominion of the archons; the veil separates the two. The Abyss lies below Chaos, and hell, Tartaros, is yet further down.

*On the Origin of the World* proclaims that Chaos was not the first creation.<sup>8</sup> “After the nature of the immortals was completed,” Sophia wished the creation of the “first work,” an incomprehensibly great image that serves as a “veil” separating the immortals from subsequent beings.<sup>9</sup> This veil is (apparently) the “aeon of truth,” within which lies the “immeasurable light” and outside of which is the “shadow,” called “darkness” and “the limitless Chaos.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the shadow, Chaos, “is posterior to the first work,” the veil.<sup>11</sup> Out of Chaos, the gods came forth, and into it both “watery substance” and “matter” were deposited.<sup>12</sup> “Beneath all of the heavens” of Chaos is the “abyss,” which is also “derived from ... Pistis” Sophia.<sup>13</sup> Down from Chaos lies Tartaros.<sup>14</sup>

*The Hypostasis of the Archons* makes no mention of the creation of the veil, nor of Sophia’s role in the formation of Chaos and Abyss. It merely states that, (lqA veil exists between the World Above and the realms that are below; and Shadow came into being beneath the veil; and Shadow became Matter; and that Shadow was projected apart(rq)<sup>15</sup> In the Above dwell the “Entirety” who possess “Spirit”<sup>16</sup> while Below dwell those “Authorities of the Darkness” that “merely possess a soul.”<sup>17</sup> The *Hypostasis* also mentions that Tartaros is located “below the Abyss,” which is presumably below Chaos.<sup>18</sup> The “region of the Waters” is below, but its exact location and its genesis are not given.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>H.-G. Bethge, Introduction to *On the Origin of the World*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 161.

<sup>8</sup>II, 97 (references are to the codex and page of the original).

<sup>9</sup>II, 98.

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>II, 98-99.

<sup>12</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>II, 99.

<sup>14</sup>II, 102.

<sup>15</sup>II, 94.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Eccl. 3, 19, “veruah ehad lakol” which can be construed as “one spirit has the all.”

<sup>17</sup>II, 87.

<sup>18</sup>II, 95 and 87.

<sup>19</sup>II, 87.

### 3 THEOGONY

Neither *Origin* nor *Hypostasis* describe the formation of the aeons above. The theogony of *Origin* begins “after the nature of the immortals was completed.”<sup>20</sup> The only detail supplied is that “Sophia flowed out of Pistis.”<sup>21</sup> *Hypostasis* presupposes the existence of the spirited aeons of the Entirety, mentioning “Incorruptibility” or “God (of the Entirety),” “Sophia, who is called Pistis,” and her daughter “Zoe,” i.e. those characters that are directly relevant to its story.<sup>22</sup> In its conclusion, “Primeval Father,” “Holy Spirit,” and “Son” also appear.<sup>23</sup>

In both texts, Sophia causes the creation of the archons: she “wanted to create something, alone without her consort and her product was a celestial thing;”<sup>24</sup> she “wished [that] a work come into being which is like the light that first existed.”<sup>25</sup> There are, however, more stages to the emergence of the demiurge Yaldabaoth in *Origin* than in *Hypostasis*.

In *Hypostasis*, Sophia created something that “assumed a plastic form molded out of Shadow.” This androgynous beast “resembling a lion... became arrogant, saying ‘It is I who am God.’” Then “a voice came forth” and said, “You are mistaken, Samael.” Later, “Zoe ... said to him, ‘You are mistaken, Sakla!’-for which the alternate name is Yaltabaoth.”<sup>26</sup>

In *Origin*, Sophia first caused the appearance of the veil which cast its shadow.

Then the shadow perceived that there was one stronger than it. It was jealous, and ... bore envy ... without any spirit in it.... Then the bitter wrath which came into being from the shadow was cast into a region of Chaos.... When Pistis saw what came into being ... she was disturbed. And the disturbance appeared as a fearful work and it fled.... Now when Pistis Sophia desired the one who had no spirit to receive the pattern of a likeness and rule over matter ... a ruler first appeared ... lion-like in appearance.... Sophia said to him, “O youth, pass over here,” which is interpreted “Yaldabaoth.” Since that day, the first principle of the word<sup>27</sup> which referred to the gods

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<sup>20</sup>II, 98.

<sup>21</sup>II, 98.

<sup>22</sup>II, 87, 94 and 95. Note that normative Judaism implicitly declares in the Aleinu prayer that “adon hakol,” God of All, is identical with the Creator; cf. Scholem, p. 27-29. Scholem’s definition of “Gnosticism” is broad enough to include any mystical esotericism. In his search for such gnostic elements in traditional and sectarian Judaism, he may be placing undue emphasis on form, rather than content.

<sup>23</sup>II, 96-97. The only Christian elements in *Hypostasis* appear in its first and last paragraphs; it has accordingly been suggested (Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 9) that these are later additions.

<sup>24</sup>II, 94.

<sup>25</sup>II, 98.

<sup>26</sup>II, 94-95. Samael is a Hebrew synonym for Satan. Sakla might be derived from the Hebrew “shakhol” (miscarriage) or “sakhel” (fool) as in Eccl. 10, 3, “veamar lakol sakhel hu.” Yaldabaoth may come from “yalda bahut” (child of chaos) as suggested by Flusser, p. 638; alternatively, it is a play on Isa. 65, 23, “yaldu labehala” (gave birth for nought).

<sup>27</sup>= Logos (?).

and angels and men has appeared.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, more detail is given in *Origin* regarding Yaldabaoth's numerous offspring and their many names. First, only three sons are mentioned. Then, the next paragraph describes seven beings ruling over the seven heavens of Chaos, the seven are Yaldabaoth, alias Pronoia Sambathas, and six androgynous offspring, with two names each. Their names are presented as collected from the works "The Archangelike of Moses the Prophet" and "The First Book of Noraia."<sup>29</sup> In *Hypostasis*, Yaltabaoth is said to have had seven offspring, with only the favored one, Sabaoth, mentioned by name.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, these two works disagree as to the number of Yaltabaoth's offspring.<sup>31</sup> Another discrepancy between the two works is in who rebukes Yaltabaoth. In *Origin* it is Pistis that says, "You err, Samael," and then shows her own likeness to him.<sup>32</sup> In *Hypostasis*, Incorruptibility is quoted instead,<sup>33</sup> and then Sophia introduces "Light into Matter."<sup>34</sup>

According to *Hypostasis*, When Yaltabaoth sees the splendor of his son Sabaoth, he envies him and his "Envy engendered Death; and Death engendered his offspring" who also go unnamed.<sup>35</sup> In *Origin*, we are told that "he was jealous of him and when he was angry, he begot Death from his death." The treatise goes on to name Death's descendents, as well as Sabaoth's.<sup>36</sup> In both treatises, Sabaoth is joined by Zoe and builds a four-faced chariot.<sup>37</sup>

## 4 COSMOGONY

There are several significant differences between *Origin* and *Hypostasis* in their treatments of the creation of man. Man is made in different images in the two works and for different motives.

In *Hypostasis*, the archons attempt to capture the image of Incorruptibility by modelling Man "after their body and [after the Image] of God that had appeared in the Waters."<sup>38</sup> They hoped, in that manner, to tempt feminine Incorruptibility with its male counterpart in order to "seize it with the form that [they had] modelled."<sup>39</sup> But Man had only soul and "they could not make him arise" until the "Spirit came forth ... and came to dwell within him."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>II, 99-100.

<sup>29</sup>II, 101-102.

<sup>30</sup>II, 95. Sabaoth is Hebrew for "hosts."

<sup>31</sup>Six and seven both appear elsewhere, see Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup>II, 103.

<sup>33</sup>II, 87.

<sup>34</sup>II, 94.

<sup>35</sup>II, 96.

<sup>36</sup>II, 106-107.

<sup>37</sup>II, 95 and 104-105, as in Ezekiel's theophony.

<sup>38</sup>II, 87. Oddly, the reason given for Incorruptibility having looked down into the Waters was so that "she might bring the Entirety into union with the Light."

<sup>39</sup>II, 87-88.

<sup>40</sup>II, 88.

The treatise goes on to describe the naming of the animals, Paradise, the Tree of Knowledge, Cain and Abel, and Noah and the deluge, much in the biblical sequence and often in the same words as Genesis.<sup>41</sup> Adam is put into a sleep of ignorance and his side is “built as a living woman” possessing the Spirit. The archons are enchanted by her; the Female Spiritual Principle evades their attempted rape by turning into a tree, leaving carnal Woman behind. She goes into the Snake, the Instructor, and teaches Eve and Adam to taste the fruit “from [the tree] of recognizing good and evil,” thus introducing Spirit into them.<sup>42</sup> Eve has a daughter, Norea, whom the Forces do not succeed in defiling.<sup>43</sup> When Norea calls to the God of the Entirety for help, Eleleth, the great Angel, answers.<sup>44</sup> Eleleth then gives a summary of the genesis of the Authorities.<sup>45</sup>

The role played by Incorruptability in *Hypostasis* is played by Sophia in *Origin*. In the latter, it is Sophia’s likeness that the First Father, Yaldabaoth, sees in the waters.<sup>46</sup> His female name, Pronoia, saw the human likeness, Light-Adam, cast in the waters from the eighth heaven (above Chaos) and became enamored of him.<sup>47</sup> Unlike in *Hypostasis*, where man is created to seduce Incomprehensibility with whom the archons became enamored, in *Origin*, Man is created by the archons in an attempt to protect themselves from the power of Light-Adam, so that “whenever that one sees his likeness he may become enamored of it.” Then “he will not be able to destroy [their] work” and his offspring will be their servants.<sup>48</sup>

In *Origin*, man is created from the semen of the archons. (This is a common greek mythological theme.) The blood of the female plays a parallel role.<sup>49</sup> In general, it is the female in these texts that is spirited, while the forces of darkness are androgynous.

On the fortieth day, Sophia Zoe breathes a soul into Adam; the next day she raises him up with life.<sup>50</sup> In *Hypostasis*, this role is played by the created Eve who has received her spirit from Adam. The same story of the attempted rape of Life-Eve (not because they were enamored, but again to prevent her ascension), her escape in the tree, and the rape of the material Eve, follows.<sup>51</sup> Eve conceives seven children from the archons; the spirit has departed from both Adam and Eve and they are forbidden the fruit of the tree within which the Spirit dwells. An instructor (no mention of a Female Spiritual Principle within) convinces them to eat from the tree, and the impotent rulers curse them. The

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<sup>41</sup>II, 88-92. One must bear in mind that the original has undergone translation from Hebrew to Greek to Coptic to English.

<sup>42</sup>II, 89-90.

<sup>43</sup>See Pearson for Jewish parallels.

<sup>44</sup>II, 92-93.

<sup>45</sup>II, 93-97.

<sup>46</sup>II, 107.

<sup>47</sup>II, 108.

<sup>48</sup>II, 112-113.

<sup>49</sup>II, 108-109 and 111.

<sup>50</sup>II, 115-116.

<sup>51</sup>II, 116-117.

reason why Adam names the animals is given in this work: it is a test of Adam's knowledge after having eaten of the fruit.<sup>52</sup>

## 5 DISCUSSION

Quispel states,<sup>53</sup> (IqGnostic doctrine in general should be considered as a mythical expression of self-experience. The centre and starting point of every system is man, his predicament in this world and his awareness of salvation. (rq In the works here considered, man's predicament does not seem to be all grim; his ultimate salvation appears assured.

Despite the very similar content of *On the Origin of the World* and *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, there appears to be a fundamental difference in the mood the two convey. The latter is much more optimistic. We have already seen how *Origin* portrays the archons as attempting to resist the higher aeons and enslave mankind. Regardless of the reassuring note that man's creation "came to pass according to the foresight of Pistis," the overall tone is negative. The archons are evil rulers.

On the other hand, *Hypostasis* portrays the archons as constantly becoming overwhelmed in their amour of Incorruptibility. They appear as grotesque, helpless creatures, unable to forego their dominions, yet totally within the control of the superior powers that lie beyond their reach.

Time and again, the reader is assured that all that occurs is with the consent of those above, and that everything transpires according to their plan.<sup>54</sup> For example: "Now all these [events] came to pass by the will of the Father of the Entirety;"<sup>55</sup> "But it was by the will of the Father of the Entirety that they all came into being-after the pattern of the things Above."<sup>56</sup> Those above come to the aid of man: "And the Spirit came ... to dwell within him.... A voice came forth from Incorruptibility for the assistance of Adam."<sup>57</sup> When the archons try to prevent man from eating of the tree of knowledge, they are actually enticing him as per the wishes of the above: "They did not understand ... that he might eat." What more, the Spirit joins the Instructor to teach man to eat of the fruit.<sup>58</sup> Norea's cry for help is answered immediately.<sup>59</sup>

In *Hypostasis*, man has hope. He possesses the spark, is approached by those Above, and is sent a redeemer. Though mention is made of "dying Mankind," the reader feels himself one of the "deathless" among them.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>II, 118-120.

<sup>53</sup>"Genius and Spirit," p. 155.

<sup>54</sup>There is in fact no real dualistic conflict over the leadership of the world between the forces of Light and Darkness. The archons are just marionettes; it is only in their imagination that they have any power.

<sup>55</sup>II, 88.

<sup>56</sup>II, 96.

<sup>57</sup>II, 88.

<sup>58</sup>II, 89.

<sup>59</sup>II, 93.

<sup>60</sup>II, 96. This is somewhat reminiscent of Dan. 12, 2. This last section of the work, which is perhaps a Christian addendum, has elements borrowed from Isaiah: "Holy-Holy-Holy" is

Man is in fact safe. Awaiting the ultimate victory of Light over Darkness, he plays the games of the gods.

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from the theophony in Is. 6, 3. The whole dialogue with the angel recalls that chapter; "Then I said, 'Sir, how much longer'" is a quotation from verse 11.