

Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic in Gnostic Apocalypses

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“Jewish wisdom and apocalypticism cannot be cleanly separated from one another.” This statement by George Nickelsburg inaugurating the SBL section on “Jewish Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism and Early Christianity”¹ has certainly been borne out by the work of that section since 1994. Commenting on the papers published in *Conflicted Boundaries*, the editors put it mildly: “(I)n all of these papers a neat distinction of wisdom and apocalypticism is problematized.”²

In looking at the list of papers read in the aforementioned SBL section between 1994 and 2004,³ I was struck by the absence of any paper dealing with Gnostic literature. Ancient Gnosticism is a parade example of how Jewish wisdom traditions and Jewish apocalyptic traditions are inseparably melded together in its literature. So now in what follows I want to take up for discussion the use made by Gnostic authors of Jewish wisdom traditions and Jewish apocalyptic traditions. The Gnostic literature I intend to cite belongs to that branch of ancient Gnosticism often referred to as “Sethian”⁴ or “Classic”⁵ Gnosticism, texts that are part of the Nag Hammadi “Library” of writings

¹ George W.E. Nickelsburg, “Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism: Some Points for Discussion,” in Benjamin G. Wright III and Lawrence M. Wills, eds. *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism* (SBL Symposium Series 35; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 17-37, esp. 19.

² *Conflicted Boundaries*, 9.

³ “Appendix to Introduction: Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism and Early Christianity (Papers and Respondents, 1994-2004),” in *Conflicted Boundaries*, 9-14.

⁴ See, esp. Bentley Layton, ed., *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978*, vol. 2: *Sethian Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1981). Of special importance is the article by Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism” (pp. 588-616). See also John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (BCNH “Etudes” 6; Québec: Université Laval, Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2001).

⁵ See, e.g., Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1987), 3-214.

preserved in Coptic in thirteen fourth-century papyrus codices,⁶ and in three other Coptic manuscripts.⁷ Representatives of this branch of Gnosticism were known to St. Irenaeus of Lyon in Gaul in the second century (*Adv. Haer.* 1.29-31) and to Plotinus in Rome in the third (Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 16).

My paper is divided into two parts. I shall take up first the use made by Gnostic authors of Jewish apocalyptic traditions, and then their use of Jewish wisdom traditions.

1. Jewish apocalyptic traditions in Gnostic apocalypses.

The Neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry, in his *Life of Plotinus*, gives the following account of Gnostics who were known to his master and others in Plotinus' school in Rome:

There were in his time many Christians and others, and sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy, men of the schools of Adelphius and Aquilinus, who possessed a great many treatises of Alexander the Libyan and Philocomus and Demostratus and Lydus, and produced apocalypses (ἀποκαλύψεις) by Zoroaster and Zostrianos and Nikotheos and Allogenes and Messos and other people of the kind, deceived themselves and deceiving many, alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality. Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures, and wrote the treatise to which we have given the title "Against the Gnostics";⁸ he left it to us to assess what he passed over. Amelius went to forty volumes in writing against the book of Zostrianos. I, Porphyry, wrote a considerable number of refutations of the book of Zoroaster, which I showed to be entirely spurious and modern, made up by the sectarians to convey the impression that the doctrines which they had chosen to hold in honor were those of the ancient Zoroaster.⁹

⁶ See James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). An alternative abbreviation earlier in use for the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC) is CG (Cairensis Gnosticus).

⁷ The "Sethian" tractates are as follows: *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; Berolinensis Gnosticus (BG), 2; *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V,5); *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1); *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4); *Thought of Norea* (NHC IX,2); *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III,2; IV,2); *Melchizedek* (NHC IX,1); *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC V,5); *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII,1); *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3); *Marsanes* (NHC X,1); the "Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex"; *Gospel of Judas* (Codex Tchacos, 3); *Book of Allogenes* (Codex Tchacos, 4).

⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.

⁹ Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 16, Armstrong's translation in the LCL edition, slightly modified.

While we don't know anything about Adelphiuis, Aquilinus, Alexander the Libyan, Philocomus, Demonstratus, and Lydus, we do have some knowledge of the "apocalypses" that they collected and propagated. Four of the five personages named as authors of "apocalypses" appear in the Nag Hammadi Codices. A "Book of Zoroaster" is referred to in the *Apocryphon of John* as a source for the names of angels associated with the various parts of the human body and its passions (II 19,10). "Zoroaster" also occurs in the subscript title of *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII,1: 132,6-10): "Zostrianos, Oracles of Truth of Zostrianos, God of Truth, Teachings of Zoroaster." The tractate *Zostrianos* is undoubtedly the same apocalypse as that mentioned by Porphyry. The apocalypse attributed to Allogenes is most probably the tractate *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3). "Messos" is named as the "son" of Allogenes in *Allogenes* (50,1.19; 68,28; 69,16). Nikotheos is absent from the Nag Hammadi Codices but is named, and even quoted, in the Untitled Text of the Bruce Codex (Cod. Bruc. *Untitled* ch. 7).¹⁰

The tractate *Zostrianos* is relatively late, and is one of four Gnostic apocalypses in the Nag Hammadi corpus that are especially influenced by, and probably in dialogue with, third-century Platonists. The other "Platonizing" tractates are *Allogenes*, *Marsanes* (NHC X,1), and the *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII,5).¹¹ All four of them reflect little or no influence from Christianity, and are also much further removed from the massive Jewish influences we see evident in early Gnostic texts. Nevertheless, the use of the apocalypse genre¹² is a vestige of the influence of Jewish apocalypticism on Gnostic authors. In addition, we can see in *Zostrianos* evidence of the use of a first-century

¹⁰ For the critical edition, with translation, see Carl Schmidt and Violet MacDermot, *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex* (NHS 13: Leiden: Brill, 1978). On Nikotheos see esp. Howard M. Jackson, "The Seer Nikotheos and His Lost Apocalypse in the Light of Sethian Apocalypses from Nag Hammadi and the Apocalypse of Elchasai," *NovT* 32 (1980), 250-77.

¹¹ On these tractates see especially Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, esp. 179-220.

¹² On the "apocalypse" genre see esp. John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia 14; Missoula MT: SBL and Scholars Press, 1979). Collins and his SBL colleagues identified two main types of apocalypses, (1) apocalypses with no heavenly journey, (2) apocalypses featuring an otherworldly journey. Each of these was further divided into (a) "historical" apocalypses (*vaticinia ex eventu*), (b) those containing cosmic or political eschatology with no historical review, and (c) those with only personal eschatology (*Apocalypse*, 13-15).

Jewish apocalypse probably composed in Greek in Alexandria, namely *2 Enoch*, now extant only in Slavonic.¹³ This has been noted in an important article by Madeleine Scopello.¹⁴ Both apocalypses feature a heavenly journey (type 2 in the schema put forward by John Collins and his colleagues),¹⁵ in the case of Enoch up to the tenth heaven, in the case of Zostrianos to the regions above the perceptible world.

Two passages are singled out by Scopello as having been taken from, or at least influenced by, *2 Enoch*. In reporting his ascent Zostrianos says, “I received the image of the glories there. I became like one of them” (*Zostrianos* 5,15-17).¹⁶ Compare *2 Enoch* 22.10 [J]: “And I looked at myself, and I had become like one of his [A: the] glorious ones, and there was no observable difference.” Toward the end of the tractate Zostrianos reports that his informant said to him, “Behold, Zostrianos, you have heard all these things of which the gods are ignorant and which seem infinite to angels” (*Zostrianos* 128,15-18). Compare *2 Enoch* 24.3 [J]: “Listen, Enoch, ... not even to my angels have I explained my secrets ... as I am making them known to you today.”

One of the revealer figures named in *Zostrianos* is Youel, “she who belongs to all the glories” (53,14, et al.). The same figure appears frequently in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III,2; IV,2), and plays the leading role as revealer in the tractate *Allogenes*, where she is brought into close relationship with the “mother” figure Barbelo in the Sethian Gnostic divine triad of Father, Mother, and Son. Madeleine Scopello has shown that her name is a variant of the angelic name Yaoel, a prominent revealer figure in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and other “intertestamental” Jewish writings.¹⁷ The name of this angel is obviously based on the divine Tetragram, as is explicitly stated in the

¹³ See F. I. Andersen’s translation in *OTP* 1:91-221. The quotations that follow here are from that work.

¹⁴ M. Scopello, “The Apocalypse of Zostrianos (Nag Hammadi VIII.1) and The Book of the Secrets of Enoch,” *VC* 34 (1980), 376-85.

¹⁵ Cf. n. 11.

¹⁶ Quotations from Nag Hammadi texts in this paper are taken from *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), sometimes slightly modified.

¹⁷ M. Scopello, “Youel et Barbélo dans le traité de l’Allogène,” in Bernard Barc, ed., *Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi (Québec, 22-25 août 1978)* (BCNH “Études” 1; Québec: Université Laval, Louvain: Peeters, 1981), 374-82.

Apocalypse of Abraham.¹⁸ In the Gnostic texts Youel (also called Yoel) is a feminine being, albeit a “male virgin.”

While *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* are not identified as “apocalypses” in the titles given to them in their Coptic versions, five other Nag Hammadi tractates are so identified: the *Apocalypse of Paul* (NHC V,2), the *(First) Apocalypse of James* (V,3), the *(Second) Apocalypse of James* (V,4), the *Apocalypse of Adam* (V,5), and the *Apocalypse of Peter* (VII,3). The *Apocalypse of Paul* features a trip taken by Paul to the tenth heaven (type 2). The two James apocalypses and that of Peter feature revelations given by Jesus Christ functioning as the “interpreting angel” found in many of the Jewish apocalypses. Since these are Christian Gnostic texts, we’ll set these aside and consider the *Apocalypse of Adam*.

The *Apocalypse of Adam* is the only Gnostic text included in the standard English edition of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.¹⁹ As such it is a parade example of an apocalypse that represents “a transitional stage in an evolution from Jewish to Gnostic apocalyptic,”²⁰ and attests to the development of the Gnostic religion “from Jewish apocalypticism to Gnosis.”²¹ As I have argued elsewhere, *The Apocalypse of Adam* can aptly be regarded as an example of “Jewish Gnostic” literature.²²

The *Apocalypse of Adam* is an apocalypse of the type 1a as identified by Collins and his collaborators,²³ i.e. a “historical” apocalypse lacking a heavenly journey. In that respect it is formally comparable to such Jewish writings as Daniel 7-12, the “Animal

¹⁸ “A power through the medium of his ineffable name in me,” *Apocalypse of Abraham* 10.8; see Rubenkiewicz’ translation in *OTP* 1:681-705.

¹⁹ See George MacRae’s translation in *OTP* 1:707-19.

²⁰ See George MacRae’s introduction to the *Apocalypse of Adam* in Douglas M. Parrott, ed., *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502,1 and 4* (NHS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 152.

²¹ Birger Pearson, “From Jewish Apocalypticism to Gnosis,” in Søren Giversen, Tage Petersen and Jørgen Podemann Sørensen, *The Nag Hammadi Texts in the History of Religions: Proceedings of the International Conference at the Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters in Copenhagen, September 19-24, 1995* (Historisk-filosofiske Skrifter 26; Copenhagen: Der Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2002), 146-63.

²² B. Pearson, “The Problem of ‘Jewish Gnostic’ Literature,” ch. 7 in Pearson, *The Emergence of the Christian Religion: Essays on Early Christianity* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 122-46, esp. 135-44.

²³ Cf. n. 11.

Apocalypse” in *1 Enoch* 83-90, the “Apocalypse of Weeks” in *1 Enoch* 91-104, *Jubilees* 23, *4 Ezra*, and *2 Baruch*.²⁴ It is also a “testament,” in terms of its genre, i.e. a testamentary revelation given by Adam shortly before his death “in the seven hundredth year” (64,2-4)²⁵ to his son Seth. The “apocalyptic testament” or “testamentary revelation” is a well known category in the history of Jewish literature.²⁶ In the *Apocalypse of Adam* Adam reports to his son Seth his experience of a dream vision in which three heavenly revealers tell of the subsequent history of the world, and especially of Seth’s elect progeny (the Gnostics).

The text opens with Adam recounting his experiences with Eve after their creation. Adam says that they went about in glory because they were “higher than the god who had created us” (64,16-17). Then the creator wrathfully banished them from their glorious position, and bound them to servitude. Adam tells Seth that, thanks to the knowledge of the true God that breathed within them, he called his son “by the name of that man who is the seed of the great generation” (65,5-8). This can be taken as a reference to the heavenly Seth who, in Sethian Gnosticism, is the Gnostic savior.²⁷ Adam then recounts the revelation that he received from the three heavenly emissaries, telling of the subsequent history of the world and the elect seed. The key elements in this revelation are the end of Adam’s generation (67,22-28+); the Flood and a first deliverance (69,2-73,29); destruction by fire and a second deliverance (73-30-76,7); end-time threats and the final salvation of the seed of Seth (76,8-85,18). The revelation concludes with a statement that angelic beings will inscribe the revelations “on a high mountain, upon a rock of truth” (85,10-11).

The opening passage in the *Apocalypse of Adam* shows some close parallels to texts from the Jewish Adam literature, especially the *Life of Adam and Eve* and the

²⁴ See Collins’ discussion of these in *Apocalypse*, 30-36.

²⁵ I.e. after Seth’s birth when Adam was 230 years old, according to Genesis 5:3 (LXX). Adam died at the age of 930 according to Gen 5:4.

²⁶ See the section devoted to Testaments (often with apocalyptic sections) in *OTP* 1:773-995. See also George W. E. Nickelsburg’s discussion of the various Jewish “testaments” in *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

²⁷ See, e.g., B. Pearson, “The Figure of Seth in Gnostic Literature,” chapter 4 in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 52-83.

Apocalypse of Moses. In the *Apocalypse of Adam*, Adam says to Seth, “Listen to my words, my son Seth. When god had created me out of the earth along with Eve your mother ...” (64,-5-8). And compare the following passages in the *Life of Adam and Eve*: “Listen my son, and I will pass on to you what I heard and saw. After your mother and I had been driven out of Paradise ...” (25.1-2). “Listen to me, my sons. When God made us, me and your mother ...” (32.1). George Nickelsburg posits the existence of a Jewish apocalyptic testament of Adam as a common source utilized by the Gnostic *Apocalypse of Adam* and the *Life of Adam and Eve*.²⁸

The Syriac *Testament of Adam* should also be mentioned here.²⁹ The prophetic section of that work (ch. 3) consists of a prophecy given by Adam to Seth of future catastrophes of flood and fire, and the coming of a savior who will deliver the elect posterity of Adam. G. J. Reinink has drawn attention to the correspondences between the Syriac *Testament of Adam* and the Coptic *Apocalypse of Adam*, and has posited the existence of a common source document for both.³⁰

It is in any case clear that the *Apocalypse of Adam* is closely related to the Adam cycle of Jewish revelatory literature, for which an early date can be posited. Josephus was acquainted with such literature, and may in fact be relying on an early “testament” of Adam (or Seth) when he tells of predictions of flood and fire, and the erection by the progeny of Seth of inscribed steles of stone and brick for preservation of their lore.³¹

Of course, it should be stressed that the *Apocalypse of Adam* is a Gnostic text. As such, it reflects a far different point of view in its interpretation of Jewish Adam and Seth traditions from that of the Jewish or non-Gnostic Christian Adam literature. The opening passage already cited is a case in point: Adam gives an account of his and Eve’s misadventures after their creation. Whereas in the *Life of Adam and Eve* the two protoplasts are repentant after their banishment from Paradise, in the Gnostic text they

²⁸ G. Nickelsburg, “Some Related Traditions in the *Apocalypse of Adam*, the Books of Adam and Eve and *I Enoch*,” in Layton, *Rediscovery* (cit. n. 4), 2:515-39.

²⁹ See S. E. Robinson, *The Testament of Adam: An Examination of the Syriac and Greek Traditions* (SBLDS 52; Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1982). Robinson’s translation is published in *OTP* 1:989-95.

³⁰ G. Reinink, “Das Problem des Ursprungs des Testament Adams,” *OrChrA* 197 (1972), 387-99, esp. 397-98.

³¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.67-71.

see themselves as naturally “higher than the god who had created us” (64,16-17) as a result of the “knowledge that breathed within us” (64,27-28). The biblical creator is depicted as acting against Adam and Eve out of jealous wrath, quite like the Devil in the *Life of Adam and Eve*, banished from heaven because of his refusal to worship the newly created Adam (chs. 12-17). The Gnostic author of the *Apocalypse of Adam* intends to tell the Gnostic elect the “real truth” about past, present, and future, and about the transcendent “God of truth” (65,11) who is above and beyond the creator god whom ordinary Jews ignorantly “serve in fear and slavery” (65,20).

It is not possible here to discuss in any detail the other Gnostic apocalypses that are preserved in Coptic.³² However, I do want to take up for brief discussion the most important of the “Sethian” Gnostic tractates, the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG,2).

The *Apocryphon of John* is extant in two recensions, a shorter one (in NHC III and BG) and a longer one (in NHC II and IV).³³ In its extant form, it is an apocalypse containing a revelation given by the risen Christ to his disciple John, son of Zebedee. Within the apocalypse frame at the beginning and end of the document there are two main sections, a revelation discourse and a revelation dialogue that includes a commentary on Genesis 1-7. The commentary has been editorially modified into a dialogue between Jesus and John. A number of sources seem to be reflected in the text. I have contended elsewhere that the basic mythology in the two main sections represents a

³² See Francis T. Fallon’s chapter, “The Gnostic Apocalypses,” in Collins, *Apocalypse*, 123-47. In his survey of Gnostic apocalypses he discusses the following texts that belong to type 1 (no otherworldly journey): *Apocalypse of Adam*, *Allogenes*, (*Second*) *Apocalypse of James*, *Melchizedek* (NHC IX,1), *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III,4; BG, 3), *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG, 2); *Gospel of Mary* (BG, 1); *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4); (*First*) *Apocalypse of James*; *Apocalypse of Peter*; *Letter of Peter to Philip* (NHC VIII,2); *Hypsiphron* (NHC XI,4); and *Pistis Sophia* (in the Askew Codex) (*Apocalypse*, pp. 126-36). He discusses the following apocalypses that belong to type 2 (including a heavenly journey): *Paraphrase of Shem* (NHC VII,1); *Zostrianos*; and *Apocalypse of Paul* (*Apocalypse*, pp. 136-39). He also discusses Gnostic revelatory writings that have features in common with the Gnostic apocalypses (*Apocalypse*, 139-47).

³³ See Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2* (NHMS 33; Leiden: Brill, 1995). NHC II and III are very fragmentary; their versions of *Ap. John* can safely be ignored here.

non-Christian form of Jewish Gnosticism that has been secondarily Christianized with the addition of the frame story at the beginning and end, and the interpolation of questions put to the savior by John.³⁴

The revelation discourse (NHC II 2,26-13,13; BG 22,17-44,18) consists of a “negative theology” and a description of the heavenly world, and a cosmogony with Sophia and her son the demiurge playing leading roles. This part of the text concludes with the arrogant claim on the part of the demiurge that he is the only God, with quotations from Exodus 20:5 and Isaiah 46:9. This is a widespread motif in Gnostic texts.³⁵

The revelation dialogue (NHC II 13,13-31,25; BG 44,19-75,15) begins with an account of the repentance of Sophia, and continues with an anthropogony,³⁶ an account of Adam in Paradise, the seduction of Eve and the births of Cain and Abel, Seth and his seed, a “catechism” featuring an account of two spirits and the different classes of human beings, Noah and the flood, the story of the angels and the daughters of men, and an account in the first person of the triple descent of Pronoia (“Foreknowledge”).³⁷ The “catechism” featuring the two spirits (II 25,26-27,30; BG 64,12-71,2) is reminiscent of the passage in the Qumran *Rule of the Community* featuring the spirits of light and darkness (1 QS iii.14-iv.16), and a Jewish apocalyptic source can be posited as the source for that section of the *Apocryphon of John*.³⁸

The section corresponding to the account in Genesis 6:1-4 of the descent of the “sons of God” is undoubtedly dependent upon *I Enoch* 6-11 (+15), which itself is part of

³⁴ “Problem of ‘Jewish Gnostic’ Literature” (cit. n. 22), 126-34. Cf. also B. Pearson, “Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature,” ch. 2 in Pearson, *Gnosticism* (cit. n. 27), pp. 29-38.

³⁵ See Nils Dahl’s seminal study, “The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia: Jewish Traditions in Gnostic Revolt,” in Layton, *Rediscovery* 2.689-712.

³⁶ The version in the longer recension includes a lengthy account of the fashioning of man’s “psychical” body by 365 angels.

³⁷ This part of the text is absent from the shorter recension.

³⁸ Cf. Pearson, “Gnosticism,” in the *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 1:313-17, esp. 315.

a commentary on Genesis 6:1-4.³⁹ This myth, part of the oldest part of *I Enoch*, the “Book of Watchers” (*I Enoch* 1-36), provides a basis for the Enoch author’s interpretation of the origins of evil in the world. It also promises a resolution of evil in the coming judgment. The version of the myth in the *Apocryphon of John* is a classic case of the inversion of values in Gnostic interpretation of biblical and Jewish lore. It can be summarized as follows: 1. The “chief archon” sends his angels down to copulate with the daughters of men. Unsuccessful, they create a “counterfeit spirit.” 2. The angels change themselves to resemble the women’s mates, and fill them with darkness. 3. They then instruct people in metallurgy and lead them astray. 4. The entire world becomes enslaved, dominated by the counterfeit spirit. The “chief archon” is elsewhere in the *Apocryphon of John* given the names Yaldabaoth, Saklas, and Samael (II 11,15-22),⁴⁰ and is obviously a demonized version of the biblical Creator. He is functionally the equivalent of the chief of the “watchers” in *I Enoch*, Shemihazah.

It is to be noted that the angels’ descent follows upon the Flood, rather than preceding it (as in Genesis and *I Enoch*). Also, the angels’ taking on the form of the women’s mates is not found in *I Enoch*, and probably comes from another Jewish version of the myth, such as that found in the *Testament of Reuben* (ch. 5). Even so, there can be no doubt that the author of the *Apocryphon of John* knew and utilized *I Enoch*.⁴¹ *I Enoch* and the *Apocryphon of John* are among the most important texts of Jewish apocalypticism and Gnosticism respectively. Taken together, they represent paradigmatically the transition from Jewish apocalypticism to Gnosticism.

2. Jewish wisdom traditions in Gnostic apocalypses.

Sophia, the feminine manifestation of divine wisdom in the Bible (Proverbs 8, Sirach 24, Wisdom of Solomon) and in Hellenistic Jewish literature (notably the works of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria), plays an absolutely central role in Gnostic literature. Of

³⁹ See my article, “*I Enoch* in the *Apocryphon of John*,” in David Hellholm and Tord Fornberg, eds., *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts (in honor of Lars Hartman)* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 355-67.

⁴⁰ On these names see B. Pearson, “Jewish Traditions in the *Testimony of Truth* from Nag Hammadi (CG IX,3),” in Pearson, *Gnosticism*, 39-51, esp. 47-49.

⁴¹ For a more detailed discussion see my article cited above (n. 39).

course, she undergoes a rather dramatic transformation in the Gnostic sources. For one thing she is split into a number of manifestations at different levels of the basic Gnostic myth. For another, she is represented as a fallen being whose culpable action provides the starting point for the creation of this world in which human souls are imprisoned. Her “repentance” provides her with the possibility of restoration to her former place in the heavenly “Fullness” (Pleroma), and is paradigmatic of the salvation of the elect Gnostics. Despite the remarkable innovations found in the Gnostic versions of her story, there can be no doubt that the Gnostic Sophia arises out of Jewish wisdom materials and Jewish traditions of scripture interpretation. This has been shown conclusively by George MacRae,⁴² and much of the following discussion is based on his seminal work. In his article, MacRae listed and discussed fifteen parallels between the Jewish Wisdom and the Gnostic Sophia, and concluded that “use of the Jewish Wisdom figure lies at the source of the Gnostic myth”⁴³ He then went on to argue, again conclusively, that the Gnostic story of Sophia’s fall is based on the Genesis account of the fall of Eve. Sophia is seen as a heavenly projection of Eve; the Eve-Zoe of Genesis is taken as a “copy” of her celestial counterpart, Sophia.⁴⁴

Since the *Apocryphon of John* contains the most important version of the basic Sethian Gnostic myth, we turn again to that tractate for further discussion, using as a basis the longer version as found in Nag Hammadi Codex II.⁴⁵ As already noted, the first main part of the tractate consists of a revelation discourse, which begins with an account of the unknown Father of all, also called the Invisible Spirit (2,25-4,26). There follows a series of emanations in the divine world, beginning with his “thought”: “And [his thought (ἐννοια) became] actual and she came forth.” The Father’s “thought” is given several other epithets such as “forethought” (πρόνοια), “first thought,” the Father’s

⁴² G. MacRae, S.J., “The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth,” ch. 12 in MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, (Good News Studies 26; Wilmington DL: Michael Glazier, 1987), 184-202; first published in *NovT* 12 (1970), 86-101.

⁴³ “Jewish Background,” 193.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 197-202.

⁴⁵ That is the version that is found in the *Nag Hammadi Library in English*. I shall also have occasion to cite variants in the other versions.

“image” (εἰκόν), “First Man,” “Mother-Father,” “thrice male”; and she is named Barbelo (4,26-5,13).

While Barbelo is not given the name Sophia in this passage, it is clear that Barbelo is a Wisdom figure,⁴⁶ and her role can be read out of Jewish wisdom sources. She is the Father’s first emanation and his companion (Prov 8:22, 30). She is also his “image” (εἰκόν, cf. Wis 7:25-26).⁴⁷ Her role as his “thought” could be read out of the Greek version of Proverbs 24:7 (Σοφία καὶ ἔννοια).⁴⁸ Barbelo is the highest and most exalted manifestation of Sophia, whose lower manifestation as the last of twelve aeons is associated with the creation of the world. It has been suggested that the doubling or even pluralization of Wisdom in Gnostic sources could be read out of a Hebrew word used for Wisdom in Proverbs. As Deirdre Good puts it, “The strange (plural) form twmkj iin Proverbs 1:20; 9:1; 14:1; 24:7 might have suggested to Gnostic readers of Wisdom passages that there were many Sophias.”⁴⁹

In the myth Barbelo requests from the Invisible Spirit to be given foreknowledge, and he consents. She makes additional requests, and is granted indestructibility, eternal life, and truth. These, together with Barbelo, constitute the “Pentad of the aeons of the Father” (6,2-3). The Father then looks at Barbelo with his pure light, and she conceives from him and produces a son, Autogenes (self-begotten), also called Christ. She is also given a “fellow worker,” Mind (*nous*), who glorifies Christ and Barbelo (6,10-7,4). From Autogenes are emanated four luminaries, Armozel, Oriel, Daveithai, and Eleleth. Associated with each of these are three additional aeons. The luminaries and their aeons constitute a divine duodecad. Sophia, associated with Eleleth, is the last of these aeons (7,30-8,28).

Through the will of the Invisible Spirit and Autogenes comes the “perfect Man,” Adamas, and he comes to be associated with the first luminary, Armozel. His son Seth is associated with Oriel. The “seed of Seth,” “the souls of the saints,” are placed with

⁴⁶ Deirdre J. God, *Reconstructing the Tradition of Sophia in Gnostic Literature* (SBLMS 32; Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1987), xviii-xix.

⁴⁷ Cf. MacRae, “Jewish Background,” 186.

⁴⁸ Good, *Reconstructing*, 66.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xxi; cf. p. 65, where she refers to an article by Robert Grant.

Daveithe, and the souls of those coming late to repentance are placed with Eleleth (8,28-9,24). The divine Pleroma is thus complete.

But then comes tragedy. Sophia conceived from herself, “without the consent of the Spirit” and without her consort. What came out of her was imperfect, and became a lion-faced serpent. Sophia cast it away from her, “for she had created it in ignorance. And she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it except the holy Spirit (=Sophia) who is called the mother of the living. And she called his name Yaltabaoth” (9,25-10,19). The ultimate result of Sophia’s folly will be the creation of the cosmos.

Sophia’s involvement with the creation of the world in Gnostic mythology is derived from Jewish wisdom traditions (Prov 3:19; 8:27-30; etc.). But what in the Jewish wisdom texts is Sophia’s glory, i.e. her cooperation with God in the creation of the world, is her shame in the Gnostic version of her story. We can also see in the passage in the *Apocryphon of John* we have just discussed details that also derive from Jewish wisdom traditions. She is identified with a “holy spirit” (Wis 7:7; 7:22-23; cf. 9:17). She dwells in a cloud (cf. Sir 24:4; LXX Bar 3:29), where she situates her abortive son on a throne. The latter detail is reminiscent of Sophia’s association with God’s throne in Jewish wisdom (Wis 9:5; Sir 24:4).⁵⁰ Her epithet, “mother of the living” reflects what is said of Eve-Zoe in Genesis 3:20. In the Gnostic myth, Sophia’s desire to produce offspring by herself, without the Father’s consent, can be contrasted with the behavior of her higher counterpart, Barbelo, whose emanations came forth with the cooperation of the Father.

What follows in the myth is Yaldabaoth’s production of additional demonic beings that populate the lower spheres of the cosmic heavens. Yaldabaoth then prides himself in being the highest god (Isa 46:9).⁵¹

What follows in the myth is an account of Sophia’s repentance. She began to “move to and fro,” recalling the movement of the Spirit (ἐπεφέρετο) over the waters of chaos in Genesis 1:2. As a result of her weeping repentance she was taken up, but “not to her own aeon but above her son, that she might be in the ninth until she has corrected her

⁵⁰ MacRae, “Jewish Background,” 188.

⁵¹ Cf. discussion above, and n. 35.

deficiency” (13,13-14,13). Her ultimate return to the Pleroma is dependent upon the final salvation of the elect (Gnostics).

In what follows, Yaldabaoth’s vain claim is rebuked by a voice from heaven, saying, “Man exists and the Son of Man.” The “first man” then reveals his image, reflected on the chaotic waters. Yaldabaoth, the “chief archon” enlists the help of his demonic cohorts in creating the “psychical body” of a human being. But their product was “inactive and motionless for a long time” (14,13-19,14). We are then told that “the mother (i.e. Sophia, “mother of the living”) wanted to retrieve the power which she had given to the chief archon.” She arranges for Yaldabaoth to blow into the human’s face “the spirit which is the power of his mother.” As he does this, he becomes completely bereft of the spiritual power that he still had from his mother, and the human being comes alive (cf. Gen 2:7). The blessed “Mother-Father” above (Barbelo) then sends a “helper” to Adam (cf. Gen 2:20-21), “luminous Epinoia (thought) which comes out of him, who is called Life.” Epinoia teaches Adam about the “way of ascent” and thus serves as “a correction of the deficiency of the mother” (19,15-20,28). Adam realizes that he is “superior to all those who had made him,” and the archons then fashion for him a material body, imprison him within it, and then place him in paradise. The “Epinoia of the light” becomes “the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” Eve is then created, and Adam recognizes his “counter image” (20,28-23,19). Sophia’s identification with the “tree of knowledge” is a (corrective) reminiscence of the identification of Sophia with “a tree of life” (Prov 3:18).⁵²

We can understand the Epinoia of light in these passages to be in some respect a manifestation of Sophia (wisdom). Indeed, the revealer informs us that “our sister Sophia (is) she who came down in innocence in order to rectify her deficiency. Therefore she was called Life, which is the mother of the living. ... And through her they have tasted the perfect Knowledge” (23,20-26). Reflected here is the traditional role played by Sophia in the Jewish wisdom literature in communicating wisdom and revelation to humankind (e.g., Wis, passim). The reference to Sophia as a “sister” is reminiscent of “sister” Wisdom in Proverbs (7:4). Sophia’s salutary descent to humankind here below is also a feature of Wisdom’s role in Jewish wisdom literature (Bar 3:37; cf. *1 Enoch* 42.2).

⁵² MacRae, “Jewish Background,” 193.

We can also compare the triple descent of Pronoia (Forethought) in the Pronoia hymn that concludes the longer version of the *Apocryphon of John* (30,11-31,25). Like Epinoia and Ennoia, Pronoia can be seen as a manifestation of Sophia.⁵³

This brief survey of the role played by Sophia in the *Apocryphon of John* could be extended with reference to other Gnostic texts, not only in the Sethian corpus but in other forms of ancient Gnosticism, including Valentinianism. But what has been said here will certainly suffice to illustrate the influence of Jewish wisdom traditions upon ancient Gnostic authors.

Summary and Conclusion.

In the preceding section we noted the massive influence of Jewish apocalypticism in Gnostic apocalypses and related literature, and concluded that Gnosticism developed out of Jewish apocalypticism. In this section we noted the equally impressive influence of Jewish wisdom traditions in the *Apocryphon of John*, particularly in its presentation of the figure of Sophia. We could have extended this discussion to other Gnostic texts as well.⁵⁴

We can therefore conclude that the Gnostic evidence supports the claim made by George Nickelsburg in his inaugural paper: “Jewish wisdom and apocalypticism cannot be cleanly separated from one another.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid., 188-93.

⁵⁴ See Good, *Reconstructing*. She deals extensively with the presentation of Sophia in *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC III,3; V,1) and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (III,4; BG,3).

⁵⁵ See above, p. 1, and n. 1.