

COPTICA IRANICA

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The article introduces to the Iranian motifs found in the Coptic Gnostic Library of Nag-Hammadi: themes as the coming of the future Redeemer (Saošyant-), the heavenly journey of the Soul, the links between the Gnostic Demiurge and Ahriman, and more between the Gnostic Aeons and the Iranian Zurwān.

Mother
wake and watch over me,
the dark rises over me.
Please come back
to know me,
the blood
of another seed... »
(L. Ragagnin)

In December 1945, Egyptian peasants found a pottery jar with Coptic manuscripts in a cave near Nag-Hammadi, Upper Egypt. The jar contained at least 12 codices and eight leaves of another one that were inside the front cover of what was later called Codex VI. So, the thirteen codices of Nag-Hammadi contain at least 52 texts and 46 different works, of which 40 were previously unknown (Robinson 1984). Most of the texts belong to Gnostic sects of the first centuries: probably the same tractates utilized by the heresiologists to fight the «Gnostic Hydra» (cf. Ir. *Adv. haer.* I, 30, 15), a complex phenomenon involving manifold ideological and cultic influences.

The focus of Gnosticism is on an absolute dualism between Light and Darkness, πνεῦμα and matter, a dualism that mainly serves to explain evil and mistake in this world by tracing it back to an accident that was not intentionally provoked by the true transcendent and ineffable God. The body of Adam is the prison where the divine spark of light, the πνεῦμα, lives in exile: for Gnosticism, salvation consists primarily in liberation from the body and the world, in order to regain the primordial condition in the πλήρωμα as a part of the shining God (Rudolph 2000; Couliano 1989: 77 ff.).

The contribution of Mazdaean Zoroastrianism to the evolution of Gnostic doctrine was decisive, as is shown by dualism among Light and Darkness, the identity of divine and human spiritual forces or virtues, the idea of the Soul's journey and that of the end of the world and the last judgment. These traditions passed into Gnostic texts not directly from the Iranian lore, but were already accepted and assimilated in the Judaeo-Aramaean world since the pre-Christian times (Albrile 2001: 27-54). And a few examples of this syncretistic process are to be found in the Nag-Hammadi texts.

First to be considered is the *Apocalypse of Adam*, the fifth tractate in Codex V of the Nag-Hammadi library. It purports to be a revelation given by Adam to his son Seth, «in the 700th year», that is, just prior to Adam's death (*Gen.* 5,3-5). This feature gives the document the character of a «last testament» and associates it with other testamentary literature in antiquity. Adam describes his fall in the Garden of Eden as a lapse into ignorance.

Three heavenly figures then appear to Adam, and their revelation to him becomes the subject of Adam's last testament to Seth. He describes to Seth the origin of a special race of men and their

struggle against the Creator god called Sakla, the Almighty (69, 5). Three attempts are made by the creator to destroy this race of men who possess the knowledge of the eternal God. Two of these threats are drawn from well-known Jewish traditions, but here they are given a new interpretation. For example, the biblical flood narrative is interpreted as the attempt of a wicked creator god to destroy the pure race of men that possess the special knowledge of the eternal God (67, 22 - 76, 7).

Adam describes the descent of a heavenly figure, the Illuminator of knowledge, the φωστήρ. His appearance shakes the cosmos of the Creator god and his evil host through thirteen «kingdoms». They persecute him, yet he succeeds in revealing his knowledge to the special race of men. The narrative ends with an apocalyptic scene in which those who oppose the Illuminator fall under the condemnation of death but those who receive his knowledge «will live forever» (83, 15).

The narrative breaks down into two sections that appear to be two sources harmonized by an ancient editor with appropriate redactional comments at the point of literary seams (Hedrick 1980). One source can be described as standing near the border between Jewish Apocalypticism and Gnosticism. The second source on the other hand, contains few references to Jewish traditions and reflects a developed Gnostic mythology (77, 26 ff.). The most interesting feature of this material is its close parallel with Iranian traditions (Böhlig 1968: 149-161) about *Saošyant-* (>Pahlavi *Sōšāns*), the Future Redeemer, or Helper (Messina 1932: 149-176; Messina 1935: 275-276; Cereti 1995a: 33-81). The Illuminator reveals himself and comes upon the water (77, 30 ff.). This conception has a strictly resemblance to the Iranian *Saošyant-* born from the shining and igneous seed of Zarathuštra concealed in the water of Kašaoya lake (Welburn 1988: 4756 ff.). Also, the origin of φωστήρ like the *Saošyant-* is from virgin birth (78,27-79,19). In *Yašt* 19,92 and in *Widēwdād* 19,5 there are references to the birth of the *Saošyant-* Astvaṭ.ərəta from his waters, where, according to a certain tradition, the seed of Zoroaster was preserved in order to impregnate the three virgins mentioned in *Yašt* 13, 142, mothers of the three Saošyants (*Yašt* 13, 28; 62; *Dēnkard* VII, 8, 1 ff.; Boyce 1975: 285).

Another text, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, also in Codex V (NHC V, 2), is the account of a heavenly journey made by the Apostle, from the third sphere to the pleromatic circles of the Ogdoad, the Ennead, and the Decad. Paul begins his journey on the mountain of Jericho with the aim of reaching Jerusalem, that is, the heavenly Jerusalem, where the twelve apostles are gathered. On his way, Paul is accompanied by a small child, the Holy Spirit (for the Valentinian connection see Casadio 1989: 123; Rosenstiehl-Kaler 2005: 70-80), who shows him the direction and suggests how he should conduct himself when confronted with the obstacles of the spheres. The aim of the journey is the acquisition of knowledge: «Let your mind awaken, Paul, and see that this mountain upon which you are standing is the mountain of Jericho so that you may know the hidden things in those that are visible» (19, 10-15).

In the course of this journey to heaven, which at times takes on the appearance of a descent to hell, Paul glimpses the organization of the heavenly hosts, angelic and demonic, the interlocking of the spheres with their doors and their keepers, and the punishment of a wicked soul. Arriving at the seventh heaven, Paul faces a demiurgic power who questions him before allowing him to pass on to the Ogdoad. When Paul reaches the eighth heaven, he joins the twelve apostles, his spiritual companions, and with them goes to the tenth and last heaven (22, 24-24, 4).

The framework of the heavenly journey, as it is briefly sketched by the author of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, is of a literary genre common in many Jewish writings (Rosenstiehl-Kaler 2005: 34 ff.) and even more in an Iranian setting (Widengren 1955). The Gnostics frequently took up this schema to illustrate the rescue of the Soul from time and space. In Mazdaean Zoroastrianism this theme appears in a famous work called *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg*, the «Book of Ardā Wirāz», the book that narrates the visions in heaven and hell of the pious priest Ardā Wirāz, who is said to have gone, with his living body, from this world to the realm of the dead, in order to inquire about the fate of our Souls after death (Gignoux 1984). The narrative of the journey begins when in the first night Wirāz was received by Sraoša and the angel of the fire Ādur-yazd who acted as his guide during the whole journey. With the assistance of these two «angels» Wirāz passed the *Činwad puhl*, the gate of the underworld. His guides declared themselves ready to show him the pleasures

of Paradise and the terrors of Hell. The first place he came to is the abode of the Hamēstagān, the intermediate place where good and evil works are equal, a sort of Purgatory (Gignoux 2003: 637b-638a). Afterwards Wirāz arrives at four different Paradises. The first is called *Humat* «Good thought» and is in the Stars track; the second called *Hūxt* «Good speech» is situated in the Moon track and the third called *Huwaršt* «Good deed» in the atmosphere of the Sun. These are the so-called «three steps». At last Wirāz arrives in the fourth step called *Garōdmān* the «House of singing». The Souls which Wirāz met in the first three paradises are respectively sitting on thrones and shining with the radiance of the Stars, the Moon and the Sun.

The elements characterising Paul's ascent in this apocalypse are common to all heavenly journeys: viz. the passage from sphere to sphere, interrogatories by the appointed toll-collectors at the gates, passwords and signals that the soul must give in order to advance, and finally the presence of an escorting angel who helps the soul in its wanderings (Scholem 1960: 14-19).

We should note, too, that the punishment adjudged to the soul in the *Apocalypse of Paul* consists of casting it into a body prepared for her. Here we have the idea of metempsychosis, expressed also in the phrase: «the whole race of demons, the one that reveals bodies to a soul-seed». It is the demons, then, who are responsible for the new incarnation of the wicked soul. Furthermore, Tartarus, the infernal place of punishment, is situated not under the earth nor in the sublunar part of the heavens but on earth; an earth which the author does not hesitate to define as «land of the dead» or «world of the dead» (Cumont 1949: 196 ff.). So, in the otherworldly journey of Wirāz still exists an infernal opponent to the four Paradises: *Duš-humat* the place of evil thought, *Duš-hūxt* that of evil word and *Duš-huwaršt* that of evil deeds. At last, the Hell as the fourth step: a dark and gloomy place, cold and hot, full of stench and noxious creatures. After having witnessed the severe punishments which were inflicted in Hell, Wirāz is carried back to the mountain *Čagād ī daīdīg*, «right peak» below which the *Činwad puhl* is situated, into a desert and shown Hell in the earth: a topographical perspective that we find in our Nag-Hammadi apocalypse. The usual criticism against the Iranian hypothesis is the late dating of the *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg*, but this text goes back to a most ancient visionary tradition. A proof is to be found in the ecstatic accounts of Zoroaster in the *Gāθā* (*Yasna* 30, 3; Piras 1998: 163-185) in the *Bahman Yašt* (Cereti 1995b) and in the trance of Wištāsp in the seventh book of *Dēnkard* (VII, 3 [4], 83-87 = Sanjana 1915: 31-33; with relative *Rivāyat*).

Various forms of Gnostic mythology have found concrete shape in a number of Nag-Hammadi tractates. One of these basic texts of mythological Gnosis, to which modern scholars often attach the label «Sethian» is the *Apokryphon Johannis*, an apocryphal work dealing with the risen Christ. A Coptic version of this «secret book» appeared in Berlin Papyrus 8502, a small collection of Gnostic texts known before Nag-Hammadi discoveries (Mantovani 1990: 227a-231b; Waldstein-Wisse 1995). It was then noted that Irenaeus may have used a Greek version in his treatise *Against All the Heresies* (I,29,1-4 = Barbelognostics) written before A.D. 180. Notably, the Nag-Hammadi library contains no less than three other versions (NHC II, I,1,1-32,9; III, I, 1, 1-40,11; IV, I, 1,1-49,28) each placed at the beginning of a Codex, a fact which demonstrates the importance of this work.

The work purports to be a revelation from the risen Savior to John son of Zebedee. The Revealer pronounces terrible curses upon anyone who dares to divulge the mysteries, a customary feature of Gnostic apocalypses. The subject of the revelation is the creation both of the world and of man, as well as the origin of evil and the saving power of γῶσις.

To summarize the contents (Colpe 1976: 120-129), we note that from the Invisible Spirit there emanated twelve Aeons of light of whom the last, Sophia, wished to produce by herself a copy of the Adam of Light without the interventions of her heavenly consort. She produced only an abortion, a Demiurge named Ialdabaoth. An ἔργον, a monster with face of a lion and body of serpent (II, 10, 8-10). Guarding jealously the power that he had derived from his mother, he created the world of darkness, including Archons, powers of evil, and so forth. Thinking to produce an image of the Father, the Archons fashioned a human body. But this, being purely psychic, was

incapable of moving until Ialdabaoth was led by a ruse to breathe a particle of Light into it (II, 20, 5-30).

The man immediately showed himself superior to the frustrated Demiurge, who with his Archons then fashioned a purely material body, in which he imprisoned the man, as in a grave and covered his senses with a veil to make him forget his divine nature (Van den Broek 1981: 38-57). A long struggle then ensued between the Holy Spirit and the powers of evil, until the Savior was to come to convince men of their divine origin. We note also that the Revealer declared himself to be at once the Father, the Mother, and the Son, a typically Gnostic triad.

In the text there are some references to Iran. For instance, the Demiurge Ialdabaoth, «darkness of ignorance», may be modelled on Ahriman, the principle of evil in Mazdaean Zoroastrianism, of whom Plutarch wrote that he was like «darkness of ignorance» (*Isid. et Osir.* 46). The former says that Zoroaster taught the Persians to sacrifice to Areimanios «offerings for averting ill, and things of gloom. For, pounding in a mortar a herb called *omomi* (< Avestan *haoma*) they invoke Hades and Darkness (Benveniste 1929: 288-291); then, having mingled it with the blood of a slaughtered wolf, they bear it forth into a sunless place and cast it away». In like manner speaks a passage of *Dēnkard* (182, 6). Such a cult must have passed to the Mithraic mysteries, where dedications are found *Deo Arimano*: the idea of interpreting as Ahriman the lion-headed statues in the Mithraic cave is on debate (Duchesne Guillemin 1955: 190-195; Duchesne Guillemin 1958-1960: 1-8; Hinnells 1975: 333-369). Most probable that this simulacra are representation of the Iranian god of time Zurwān: in the age of the Persian renaissance, under the Sassanids, flourished a most ancient religious thought, the Zurvanism, that taught how the two antagonistic principles are submitted to a supreme being, the «Endless Time» (Gnoli 1984: 115-138), the Aīōn of the Mithraic mysteries (Pettazzoni 1949a: 275-299; Pettazzoni 1949b: 245-256; Pettazzoni 1954: 180-192; see also Albrile 2005: 7-8).

Further, at the very beginning of the text, a Pharisee named Arimanius insidiously suggests to John that the «Nazorean» has deceived them (II, 1, 10-15). Notably, in Greek literature the name Arimanius appears only in connection with Zoroaster. Hence it might well be symbolic in our text. Additionally, there is even explicit reference to a «Book of Zoroaster» which is said to give precise information about the role of the Angels (II, 19, 10). So, on the whole, the *Apokryphon Johannis* is a very important source both for the study of γνῶσις and the Iranian influences on primitive Gnostic mythology.

On the same «Sethian» cosmological tune is the *Hypostasis of the Archons*. This, the fourth tractate of Codex II of the Nag-Hammadi library, is a Gnostic exposition of the origin, nature, and function of angelic powers (Gilhus 1985).

In the cosmology of the document, the universe is divided by a veil (καταπέτασμα) into two mutually exclusive realms (94, 10). The primary, incorruptible, and invisible realm above the dividing veil is contrasted with its shadow, the corruptible and visible realm of physical matter and of ignorance beneath the veil. At the instigation of a heavenly and incorruptible being called Pistis Sophia («Faith in Wisdom»), the ignorant, inferior, and malevolent god of the lower realm, Ialdabaoth, organizes his offspring into a hierarchy corresponding to that found in the upper world (87, 7-11). So organized, this angelic offspring of Ialdabaoth constitutes the Archons or Rulers. Thus, the corruptible Archons of the lower realm correspond to the incorruptible Angels or Aeons of the upper.

When the Archons of the lower world see the image of the incorruptibility that dwells above the veil reflected in the waters of their lower realm, they lust after the beautiful image and attempt to capture it by creating a copy of it out of physical matter to act as a decoy. This physical decoy is Adam (87, 12-88, 24).

At first, Adam is unable to rise from the ground out of which he was created, for while the Archons can give him somatic life, mere animation, they cannot give him what is found only in the upper world, an incorruptible soul. However, when the incorruptible Spirit above sees Adam below, it descends to the lower realm and inhabits his physical body.

The Archons then put Adam into the Garden, and while he sleeps, they take Eve from his side. In this division, the Incorruptible Spirit that dwelt in Adam remains with the part that becomes Eve. The Archons, in their lust for this spiritual entity, rape Eve and beget Cain, but before they do it, the Spirit passes from Eve into a serpent and so remains undaunted (91, 6-92, 27). It is this spiritual serpent that then teaches Adam and Eve to defy the evil Archons, to partake of the fruit of the Garden, and to gain knowledge. The Spirit then passes from the serpent into Norea, the daughter of Adam and Eve. When the Archons attempt to rape Norea, as they had done with her mother Eve, she resists and calls upon the god of the upper realm, who sends the angel Eleleth to rescue her (93, 9-13).

There are references to the primordial sexuality also in Iranian myth. The third era of Zoroastrian cosmology that began with the millennium of Saturnus-Kēwān (Panaino 1996: 235-250; see Lact. *Div. inst.* IV, 4, 10) is characterized by the abominable «mixture», the *gumēzišn*: ĩeh, the primeval whore, wake up Ahriman to have him fight the good creation of Ohrmazd and kill the first man Gayōmart. A part of his seed purified fell upon the earth, where it remained for forty years. From the Gayōmart's seed slowly grew the rhubarb plant, the stem of which developed into the first human couple Mašya e Mašyānag, the Iranian Adam and Eve. These protoplasts become Ahriman worshippers and devote themselves to indiscriminate sexual practice and cannibalism. A myth that will be reformulated by the Manichaean Gnosis. Further and, many centuries later, we find Gayōmart inhabiting the Purgatories of a Provençal version of the *Tindal's Vision* in the personage of the suffering king Cocomart (17, 2040-2054 [Jeanroy-Vignaux 1903: 101]).

Eleleth in our text teaches Norea how the first Archon, Ialdabaoth, was created out of the incorruptible Sophia, and how Ialdabaoth subsequently created the physical universe and begot the other Archons. For blasphemy against the upper realm, Ialdabaoth is finally consigned to Tartarus, and one of his offspring, the repentant Archon Sabaoth, is installed in his father's place over all the lower realms (95, 10-13). Eleleth finally reveals to Norea that she and her offspring, who possess Spirit, rightly belong to the upper realm and will be saved from the lower world and its Archons when the true Man will come into the world at a future time (96, 33-35). The treatise ends with an eschatological hymn describing the salvation of the spiritual beings and the final destruction of the Archons (97, 1-22).

The cosmogonic myth of the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is presented in an abbreviated form and must be fleshed out by comparison with other instances of the same myth, particularly with that in the fifth tractate of Codex II, *On the Origin of the World*, with which it has many close parallels. *On the Origin of the World* a.k.a. *Scriptum sine titulo* is a Gnostic tractate handed down in several copies (NHC II, 5, 97,24-127,17; NHC XIII, 2, 50, 25-34 [frag.]; British Library, Or. 4926 [1] [frag.]) and by comparison with other texts quite well preserved.

On the Origin of the World opens with a philosophical discussion about primordial Chaos, but moves at once to a description of primeval events, reviewing at first the establishment of the boundary between the upper and lower world, as well as the formation by Pistis Sophia of Ialdabaoth, the first created and the main protagonist of the upper world. The cosmogony, and later the anthropogony, seems partly inspired by the first chapters of Genesis, but also by ideas known from several writings of the pseudepigraphic literature of Judaism. Indeed, Jewish influences and background also surface in the author's angelology, demonology, and eschatology, as well as in his etymologies. However, the Gnostic interpretation of the materials at hand is different in that it ranges from a complete reassessment of the arrogance of the Demiurge and events of *Genesis*, to a relatively unbroken integration of existing Jewish thoughts and motifs, as found in the description of Paradise.

The high point of primeval events is the creation of earthly man, which must be seen in connection with the doctrine of the primeval man in *On the Origin of the World*. This teaching is difficult to understand because it utilizes different motifs and heterogeneous ideas. A primordial man is said to be created by the Archons or Rulers according to the image from high, in the likeness of the Light-Adam. This man is called «Man-of-shining-blood» (108, 22; Mantovani 1981:

143), a nickname playing on the numerous meanings linked to the Hebrew words *adām* = «man», *dām* = «blood», *ādōm* = «red» e *adāmāh* = «earth» (Painchaud 1995: 352-353).

A heavenly primeval man who corresponds in a certain way to the Third Messenger in Manichaeism or to the Anthrōpos of *Poimandres*, apparently goes back to a the most ancient Iranian motif of the primordial man Gayōmart, a myth interpreted in various ways. One of these narratives, registered by the Pahlavi *Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī dēnīg* (46 = Williams 1985: 683-697), tells us that Ohrmazd placed all the creations into a sort of human body, where they gestated. The perfected creations were then brought forth from the different parts of this body. This myth has been connected with the Indian Puruṣa motif (Zaehner 1955: 136-137). A comparable link between macrocosm and microcosm may be found in the *Bundahišn*, where the earth is said to have been created «in the semblance of a Man» and in *Zādspram* (30, 1), where the human body is likened to the firmament. It is probable this Gnostic idea of Anthrōpos derived certain elements from the development of Iranian conceptions. The same development, mediated through the Gnostics, will originate the Islamic notion of *al-insān al-kāmil*, the «Perfect man».

In a counter-campaign in the Light world, the Sophia (Zoe), who functions in our document as Savior and who also completes the Archons' unfinished creation of man, fashions a «spiritual» man manifested in different ways as the bringer of the γυνῶσις: as the spiritual wife of Adam, as the serpent, «the beast», and as the instructor in paradise who is viewed favorably. Fundamentally, all of these beings are the Sophia (Zoe) herself (115, 11 ff.).

In many respects, *On the Origin of the World* is a significant Gnostic work. Through this rather extensive writing, we gain insight into an educated author's thinking, working methods, and logic regarding a fundamental theme (Tardieu 1974).

Another «Sethian» text with cosmogonical aims is the *Paraphrasis of Sēm* (NHC VII, 1), one of the longer and best preserved tractates of the Nag-Hammadi library. This text is part of a small, selective group of Gnostic texts that seem of pre-Christian origins. The *Paraphrasis of Sēm* is a revelation delivered by the Gnostic redeemer Derdekeas (= Aramaic for «child, boy») to Sēm.

The revelation begins with Sēm being elevated «to the top of the world close to the Light» that is, to the Supreme Being (1,10-11). Sēm's mind is separated from his body, and he learns about cosmogony, soteriology, and eschatology. Three principles, «Light, Darkness and Πνεῦμα between them» are introduced (1,26-29). It is to be noted that the cosmology of *Paraphrasis of Sēm* closely recalls the «Paraphrasis of Seth», a Gnostic treatise refuted by Hippolytus (Bertrand 1975: 146-157; *contra* Krause 1977: 101-110). In both texts the Πνεῦμα plays a role of mediating element between Light and Darkness. Indeed, a triadic situation that is paralleled in Iranian cosmogony (Colpe 1973: 106-115): according to the first chapter of *Bundahišn* (and other texts) in the beginning Ohrmazd (< Ahura Mazda) dwelt on high, in pure Light, and Ahriman (< Anra Mainyu) dwelt in the depths, in Darkness (Kreyenbroek 1993: 303a-304a). Between them was a space called Wāy (< Vayu) the «Void», our Πνεῦμα (Bousset 1907: 116; *contra* Casadio 1997a: 42). However, according to a number of sources, there is another mediating figure watching over the two spirits. Plutarch attributed this function to Miθra, Eznik of Kolb to the Sun, and Šahrestānī to the «Angels» (Zaehner 1955: 448. 443. 433). The accounts of Eznik and Šahrestānī are essentially Zurvanite, but in the Avesta a similar function is attributed to Sraoša (> Pahlavi Srōš).

The Light knows of «the abasement of the Darkness» (2,11-13), but the Darkness is ignorant of the Light (2,16-18). So begins the cosmic drama. Darkness frightens Spirit (2,21) and becomes aware that «his likeness is dark compared with the Spirit» (3,6-7). Ignorant of the Light, Darkness directs his attention to Spirit to claim equality. From the mind of Darkness, evil is born; and from «the likeness of the Light» a son, Derdekeas, appears, whose task it is to carry up to the Light, the Light of the Spirit shut up in Darkness (3,35-4,19).

The bulk of the tractate hereafter describes a cosmogony involving the struggle among the different powers, Derdekeas' effort to liberate Light, and the events leading up to the time of consummation when «the forms of Nature will be destroyed» (45,16-17). Similar to other Gnostic eschatological writings, world history and evolution terminate with a final consummation, and the

particles of light will return to the Supreme Being and will no longer possess a material form. Derdekeas ends the *Paraphrasis of Sēm* by telling Sēm of his role; he also tells him that salvation will only be given «to worthy ones» (49,6; Wisse 1970: 130-140).

The use of the term «apocalyptic» to define a particular type of prophetic utterance is a development of Judaeo-Christian studies, in which a need was felt to mark a distinction between the ancient prophets and the pseudonymous ones who flourished mainly in the intertestamental period. In Mazdaean Zoroastrianism this distinction between early prophecy and later apocalyptic does not apply. There the prophet looks back to an eternity past, at the beginning of this world, and towards the end of Time and the eternity to come, the new Aeon. This «reality» is perceived through a «dream» (*x^vafānā* = *Yasna* 30, 3; Bartholomae 1904-1905: 1863; see also Gnoli 1994: 60), a vision open on another world, as in the tractate *Zostrianus* from Nag-Hammadi.

Zostrianus is the first and major tractate in Codex VIII of the Nag-Hammadi library. The name is linked with the Iranian prophet Zoroaster by means of a second colophon to the tractate (cf. Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* I, 52). The work is likely to be the apocalypse of Zostrianus referred to by Porphyry (*Vit. Plot.* 16, 4-7). The text of *Zostrianus* is poorly preserved. Since only the opening and closing sections are relatively intact, a lucid translation is difficult.

The book recounts a heavenly journey by Zostrianus. He is called from this world, ascends into the heavens, and learns from various revealers a secret γνῶσις. The content of that knowledge consists largely of the names of the mythological beings in the heavens and of their interrelationships. Attention centres on an intermediate realm called the Barbelo Aeon (Sieber 1981: 788-795). This Aeon in turn contains three constituent Aeons (Kalyptos or Hidden, Protophanes or First-Visible, and Autogenes or Self-Begotten), each of which possesses four Illuminators or Lights (14, 6 ff.). Knowledge of these heavenly beings provides the key for escape from the physical world. When the journey is over and the revelations are complete, Zostrianus is pictured as descending to this world, where he writes down his γνῶσις and exhorts his readers to escape from their bondage to matter (131, 1-10).

Zostrianus is an apocalyptic heavenly journey format (Rosenstiehl-Kaler 2005: 179) similar to *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg*, but the contents of the revelation are totally dissimilar. It intends to show that its mythological γνῶσις are at the crossroads of Iranian, Jewish and Platonic doctrines (Colpe 1977: 149-159).

The visionary experience of Zostrianus finds a real accomplishment in another Nag-Hammadi Gnostic prophet called Marsanes. His name is also the title of a long but very fragmentary Gnostic apocalypse that forms Codex X of the Nag-Hammadi library.

The Gnostic prophet Marsanes is also a figure acclaimed in the *Untitled Tractate* from the Bruce Codex on Marsanes and Nicotheos (chap. 7) and in Epiphanius *Pan. haer.* 40, 7, 6, on Martiades and Marsianos, as experiencing an ecstatic trip to the heavens and receiving glory from the heavenly powers. Such a description of Marsanes fits the present tractate as well, since here the author, in the first person, lays claim to visionary revelations and writes a «revelation», or apocalypse, which may resemble not only the apocalypse of Nicotheos alluded to in the Bruce Codex but also the apocalypses of Zoroaster, Zostrianos, Nicotheos, Allogenes, Messos, and others mentioned in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* 16 (Albrile 2002: 35-36).

Marsanes on the heavenly ascent describes the thirteen seals, or levels of existence, from the first and lowest «worldly» levels to the last and highest level of the supreme God, the «Silent One who has not been known» (4, 20-23). The author claims that he – Marsanes – has true knowledge. Through his ascent beyond the limits of this world, he has attained knowledge of the «entire place» and has reached the conclusion (so striking in a Gnostic context) that «in every way the sense-perceptible cosmos is [worthy] of being completely saved» (5, 24-26). The topic of salvation leads Marsanes to introduce the descent, work, and ascent of the Savior Autogenes, the «Self-begotten One» who «descended from the Unbegotten One» and «saved a multitude» (6, 2-17). While raising several basic questions about the nature of existence and probing their implications, Marsanes himself rises to an awareness of the «supremacy of the silence of the Silent One» and offers praise

(7, 20-22). Further revelatory disclosures follow, and it is shown that as the «invisible Spirit» ascends back up to heaven, so also the Gnostics achieve bliss by ascending with him to glory.

After several very fragmentary pages, the tractate preserves portions of a fascinating section on the nature and function of letters, sounds, and numbers, which are linked to the powers and capacities of angels, deities, and souls. Reflecting contemporary astrological, magical, and grammatical themes, this long section seeks to instruct the reader in the proper way of calling upon or conjuring the angels, so that the soul might eventually reach the divine. In the words of *Marsanes*, such a knowledge of the alphabet will help Gnostics to «be separated from the angels» and to «seek and find [who] they [themselves] are».

The *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII, 1) is one of the most representative «Sethian» Gnostic texts in which the triadic doctrine is formulated (Turner 1986: 63-69; Casadio 1997a: 29). This short Coptic text (sixteen pages of papyrus) forms a small booklet, clearly detached from a larger whole and slipped inside the leather cover of Codex II. The triadic process is the foundation of the Mazdaean cosmogony developing through four ages of 3000 years each, three times (*bundahišn*, *gumēzišn*, *wizārišn*) that begin from the second age, and three Saošyants that shall come at the end of the fourth age (Panaino 2004: 17-26).

The *Trimorphic Protennoia* is a kind of hymn of revelation, and its tripartite division broadly corresponds to the three modes of the manifestation of Protennoia, although the latter are not so sharply distinguished (in fact, the first section already introduces the threefold aspect of Protennoia). Like the Revealer in the *Apokryphon Johannis*, Protennoia is at once the Father, the Mother, and the Son. She descends on three occasions from the World of Light, each time in a form corresponding to the sphere that she comes to save: «Among the angels I manifested myself in their likeness, and among the powers as one among them, and among the sons of men as a son of man» (49,15-20). She is life, has produced the All, and lives in all. Her second coming had as its aim to put an end to fate (43,4-27). Accordingly, she put breath into those who were her own but ascended back to heaven without her «branch» (45,29-34). In the final segment, the Logos comes to enlighten those who are in darkness (46,30-33) and to teach the decrees of the Father to the Sons of Light. Protennoia puts Jesus on the cross, then takes him down from the cross and establishes him in the dwelling places of his Father. Finally, as she declares, her «seed» shall be established in the Holy Light, in an inaccessible Silence (Evans 1980-1981: 395-401).

The work is much more complex than this summary might induce to believe, apparently having undergone several reworkings. Related not only to the *Apokryphon Johannis* but also to other Coptic Gnostic texts now rediscovered, it presents additionally literary contacts with other «Sethian» materials such as the *Three Stelae of Seth* (NHC VII,5). This text recalls the Iranian tradition of the three Saošyants that are Uxšyaṭ_ərəta, Uxšyaṭ_ṇomah, and Astvaṭ_ərəta (*Yašt* 13, 128-129; Boyce 1987: 872a-873a); the Pahlavi writings speaks of Ušēdar, Ušēdarmāh and Sōšāns, threefold eschatological time as stages of terrestrial salvation history or threefold advent of the Saviour (Colpe 1981: 540-552). They are the offspring of Zoroaster, miraculously conceived from the seed preserved in water, at the end of each millennium before the end of the world, the ultimate event of universal eschatology.

The *Three Stelae of Seth* is a series of hymnic prayers and blessings, each of which is addressed to a person of the Gnostic divine triad (Father, Mother, and Son) in conjunction with a communal liturgical practice. A short prologue (118,10-24) introduces Dositheos, the revealer of the three stelae. Whether or not this Dositheos is the disciple of John the Baptist, a Samaritan sect founder (Isser 1976), and a kind of forefather of the Gnostic schools, is unclear (Pseudo-Clement, *Rec.* 1,54-63 and 2.8; *Hom.* 2,15-25; Origen, *Comm. in Ioh.* 13,27).

The short tractate is subdivided into three sections consciously structured to parallel each other. The subdivisions also correspond to the «Sethian» threefold nature of God and the stages of visionary ascent and descent. The tractate concludes with a description of the practice: «from the third they bless the second; after these the first. The way of ascent is the way of descent» (127,18-22). The background of this descent-ascent may reflect aspects of the baptismal rite, spiritualised (Turner 1986: 83-84). The transmission of these three didactic hymns to the community serves to

provide a vision of the heavenly world to the Gnostic community and to support the individual believer in elevating himself to the *πλήρωμα* through prayer. The tractate ends with a scribal note, a colophon, in all likelihood intended to apply to the whole codex (127, 29-33).

The importance of Seth to Gnosticism as well as Seth's relationship to religious and philosophical currents of the day make the *Three Stelae of Seth* most appealing (see also Casadio 1997a: 25-32). Here, we find a syncretistic reinterpretation of Aggadic myths where the identity Seth = Saošyant gives a new meaning to the development of religious history of the world.

The Nag-Hammadi text entitled *Melchizedek* (NHC IX, 1) deals with the mysterious priest Melchizedek who is mentioned in the Old Testament (*Gen.* 14, 18-20; *Ps.* 110, 4) as well as in the New (*Hebr.* 5,10-7,28). This tractate may be described as a Gnostic apocalypse which contains revelations given to Melchizedek by a heavenly messenger (Pearson 1975: 200-208; Gianotto 1984: 224-228).

The first revelation (1, 1-14,15) concerns Jesus Christ and the future high-priestly role to be played by Melchizedek. The second revelation (18,7-27,10) then depicts Melchizedek transported into the future: here Melchizedek is also called «Man-of-Light» = ἄνθρωπος φωτεινός, a «saoshyantic» feature that resembles the epithet of Παράλημπωρ «Light-bearer» or more exactly «Light-collector» (Albrile 2000: 491), applied to Melchizedek in the *Pistis Sophia* (I, 25 [Schmidt-MacDermot 1978: 34, 13-21; 35, 10-24]; II, 86 [Schmidt-MacDermot 1978: 194, 24-195,20]; III, 112 [Schmidt-MacDermot 1978: 291, 14-23]).

Traces of Iranian influences we find also in another little Nag-Hammadi text called *Hypsiphron*, «She of High Mind». It occupies the final four pages of Codex XI (69,21-72,33). Hypsiphron is described in the company of her brothers, and she proceeds to deliver a revelatory discourse concerning her katabasis from the place of her virginity into the world (70,20-21) and her conversations with Phainops, the «Bright-eyed one». The name of this personage recalls the teachings of the Zoroastrian Magi about the *gyān wēnišn*, the «Eye of the soul», the *illuminatio matutina*, that is the «Inner vision» of Pahlavi texts (Gnoli 1979: 419 n. 162). This concept, according to the *Proemium* of Diogenes Laertius, evokes the doctrine of the εἰδωλα, typical of the Democritean-Epicurean mentality (Brillante 1986: 30 ff.).

We should mention at last *Noēma* or *The Concept of our Great Power* (NHC VI, 4), an apocalyptic tractate dating from the mid-fourth century or shortly thereafter and influenced by Jewish speculations, biblical or apocryphal, slightly tinged with Gnosticism. The aim of the text is to describe the history of the world in its fundamental stages: creation, the flood, the origin of evil, the coming of a Savior who descends into Hades to humiliate the Archons, the appearance of an Antichrist who rules over the world, and finally the *apokatastasis* or «second coming» and the salvation of the Elect Souls. This history is presented according to a scheme of three Aeons: the Aeon of the flesh, the psychic Aeon, and the indestructible Aeon (on the Alexandrian roots see Reitzenstein 1921: 188-192). The Great Power takes the role of speaker, and communicates to his hearers a number of revelations and teachings.

The Aeon of the flesh comes into being in the «great bodies» (38,1). During its reign the vengeance of the father of the flesh, the water, takes place. He sends the flood upon men, sparing only Noah (38,17-39,15). Then follows the reign of the psychic Aeon (39,16): «It is a small one, which is mixed with bodies, begetting in the souls and being defiled». In fact during this aeon the pollution, which had already made its appearance under the aeon of the flesh, increases, and gives birth to all kinds of evils, «many works of wrath, anger, envy, malice, hatred, slander, contempt and war, lying and evil counsels, sorrows and pleasures, baseness and defilements, falsehoods and diseases, evil judgments» (39,20-31).

A man who knows the Great Power is going to be born under the dominion of the psychic Aeon (40,24-27). He will drink from the milk of the mother, he will speak in parables, he will proclaim the aeon that is to come (40,28-32). This man «spoke in 72 tongues, opened the gates of the heavens with his words, put to shame the ruler of Hades, raised the dead» (41,6-11). His coming pro-

vokes reaction from the Archons. This man is Christ. By the treachery of Judas, the text tells us, the archons laid hold of him and brought him before the governor of Hades (41, 26-42, 2).

The Redeemer katabasis depends on the payment to the darkly ruler Sasabek of nine bronze coins. But the name Sasabek reveals an Iranian influence. In fact it is possible to explain the name as a Middle-Persian nominal compound formed from *sās*, «bug, coleoptera» (MacKenzie 1971: 74) with the addition of the adjective *ābīg*, «aqueous»; this adjective is often found in Pahlavi literature in order to appoint the zodiacal sign of Cancer, *Karzang*, according to the Greek astrological tradition which considered the Cancer an aqueous sign (Raffaelli 2001: 87 n. 9). Therefore *sās-ābīg* = Sasabek, would be the aqueous bug, a kind of abominable beetle, a Gnostic Charon flowing in the waters of hell-river.

The coming of Christ is followed by a series of signs that mark the end of the psychic Aeon: «The sun set during the day; the day became dark; the evil spirits were troubled, the aeons will dissolve. But those who would know these things... will become blessed, since they will come to know the truth» (42,15-43,29). The signs of the end are brought on by the dissolution of the Archons: the destruction of cities, the shaking of the mountains, a trembling of the earth, the death of animals (43,32-44,13) mark the transition from the realm of the Archons to the kingdom of the Logos. These signs are typical of eschatological times, and are found in similar form in the Jewish pseudepigrapha and more in Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition. An imitating spirit is sent by the Archons to combat a divine child come to his maturity (44,31-45,4). His coming will also be marked by signs of the end (45,31-46,5). Positive signs on the contrary will accompany the coming of the Great Power who will protect the elect, who are clothed in holy garments (46, 8-24). These will return to an «immeasurable light» (46, 8-9), the *asar rōšnīh* of the Pahlavi texts. The treatise ends with the redemption of the souls, and the fact that the elect have come to be in the unchangeable Aeon.

So, the Gnostic ideas display such an enormous variety that is impossible to reduce them to one coherent system (Hellenic, Jewish, Syro-Mesopotamian, Iranian and more). Therefore the heritage of Mazdaean Zoroastrianism represents one of the explanations and hypotheses: in the *Gospel of Truth* the Aeons are often called «space», and are known as emanations of the Father (NHC I, 27, 11). These two meanings are an original feature of the Pahlavi word *gāh* «Place» and «Time» (Boyce 2001: 253a-254a). The Aeons are aspects of the Ineffable God, but at the same time they are also forms of Time and Space (Casadio 1997b: 45-62). Also, there is a Gnostic reception of the Iranian Zurwān akanārag (< Avestan Zrvan akarana), the «Endless Time» (Gnoli 1984: 115-138) from which the opposed god Ohrmazd and no-god Ahriman have come forth. According to Eudemos of Rhodes (a source of 4th century B.C.) this first principle was called both «Place» and «Time» (Frg. 150 Wehrli VIII, 71; see also Gnoli 1988: 283-288). Another clue towards a definition of a more complex Iranian-Gnostic crossroad.

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