

# CRITICAL GNOSTIC GENESIS RECEPTIONS

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This essay discusses the biblical Paradise story as it is explained and rewritten in two Gnostic Christian texts, the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Testimony of Truth*. Special attention will be given to the historical context and the possible purpose of these Gnostic interpretations.

## 1. *The Apocryphon of John*

No less than three of the 13 codices of the Nag Hammadi collection of early Christian writings open with the *Apocryphon* (or *Secret Book*) of *John*, a document which in scholarly literature is sometimes referred to as ‘the Gnostic Bible’<sup>1</sup>. A fourth copy is included in the so-called Berlin Codex<sup>2</sup>. The Coptic texts are fourth-century translations of a lost Greek original, probably dating from the second half of the second century (Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons summarized passages from an early Greek version in his *Adversus Haereses*, ca. 180 C.E.<sup>3</sup>).

In the first main part of the *Apocryphon* (BG 19.6-36.15), the Gnostic Christ reveals to his disciple John the eternal reality of a completely transcendent God and his hypostasized thoughts or qualities, referred to as God’s aeons. In the third and last part (BG 44.19-77.5), Christ teaches John the Gnostic truth about the creation of man and the earliest history of humankind. This part of the *Apocryphon* is replete with quotations from – and allusions to – the Septuagint version of the first chapters of Genesis. The remarkable thing is that time and again the information of Genesis is corrected and revised, if not refuted altogether. More than once the correction of Genesis is introduced by Christ with the formula: ‘it is not as Moses said (then a Genesis text is quoted) but (followed by a Gnostic interpretation of what allegedly happened)’<sup>4</sup>.

In what can be seen as a transition from the first to the last part (BG 36.16-44.19), Christ relates the tragic story of Sophia (‘Wisdom’), one of God’s eternal aeons. Christ blames her for the coming into existence of an inferior Godhead, called Yaldabaoth, who turns out to be the Creator and Ruler of the present physical world. As such he is identified with the Creator God of Genesis. Of course, this identification had far-reaching consequences for the Gnostic interpretation of Genesis.

We read how the inferior demiurgical God – whom Christ describes as a demonic figure, having the appearance of a lion-faced serpent – from his position outside the divine world of light, generated various other cosmic powers and angels. Christ concludes this section of his mythological teaching with the following ironical statement:

(BG 44.9-19; cf. NHC II 13.5-13) And he (the demiurgical God) saw the creation and the numerous angels around him, who had sprung from him. And he said to them: ‘*I am a jealous God* (cf. Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9); *there is no other God apart from me*’ (cf. Isa 43:11; 44:6,8; etc.). But by stating this he indicated to the angels who attended him that another God does exist. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tardieu 1984, 26: ‘la Bible gnostique par excellence’; cf. Williams 1996, 8 and 198.

<sup>2</sup> The Berlin Codex is abbreviated as BG (*Berolinensis Gnosticus*). See the synoptic edition of the four Coptic copies in Waldstein and Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John*.

<sup>3</sup> *AdvHaer* I 29. This part of Irenaeus’s work survives in a Latin Translation.

<sup>4</sup> BG 45.9; NHC II 13.20 (God’s Spirit moving upon the waters); BG 58.17; II 22.22; III 29.5 (Adam’s sleep); BG 59.17; II 23.3; III 29.22 (Adam’s rib); BG 73.4; II 29.6; III 37.23 (the redemption of Noah).

<sup>5</sup> Biblical quotations are *italicized*. Very similar references to these self-proclamations of the biblical God can be found in various other Gnostic writings (*TestTruth* NHC IX, 48.4f [cf. below]; *Hypostasis of the Archons* NHC II, 94.19-21; *OrigWorld* NHC II, 103.11-14; *Gospel of the Egyptians* NHC III, 58.24-59.1; *Treatise of Seth* NHC VII, 64.19-26; *Trimorphic Protennoia* NHC XIII, 43.35-44.2; *Excerpta ex Theod* 28; Irenaeus, *AdvHaer* I, 5.4 (Valentinians); I 29.4; 30.6 (Ophites); Hippolytus, *Ref VII*, 25.3 (Basilides). In all these writings, the proclamations of the biblical God are quoted without their original context. It can be doubted therefore that the Gnostic authors in question had first-hand knowledge of the biblical texts. We might be dealing with a Gnostic topos, a frozen tradition handed over from one generation of Gnostics to the other. See Tröger 1981, 91.

Remarkably enough, the self-proclamations of the biblical God are quoted just to expose the inferior qualities (jealousy, ignorance, arrogance) of the Creator and Ruler of the world. This highly critical use of biblical texts sets the tone for the subsequent interpretations and rewritings of Genesis stories. In effect, the Paradise story has been transformed into a story of doom and foreboding:

(BG 55.18-56.6; cf. NHC II 21.16-21) The Chief Ruler took him (Adam) and placed him in Paradise. And he said to him: ‘Let it be a delight for him<sup>6</sup>, but actually (he said this) in order to deceive him. For their (the cosmic powers’) delight is bitter and their beauty is depraved (...).’

Subsequently, the tree of Life in Paradise is interpreted allegorically as the counterfeit spirit who allegedly was created by the cosmic powers in order to lead human beings astray:

(BG 56.10-57.8; NHC II 21.24-22.2) As for their tree, which they planted (claiming), ‘It is the tree of life’, I shall teach you (plur.) about the mystery of their (the cosmic powers’) life. It is the counterfeit (ἀ[?]τιμίμος) spirit from within them, in order to lead him (Adam) astray, so that he might not know his perfection. That tree is of this sort: Its root is bitter, its branches are shadows of death, its leaves are hatred and deception. (...) The underworld is the dwelling place of those who taste it.

In contrast, the tree of knowledge (*gnosis*) is conceived as a materialization of the good female spirit of the transcendent God, Epinoia, who, as the Christ of the *Apocryphon* explains, time and again revealed to Adam and his progeny the divine truth about the transcendent God, about the real nature of the Demiurge and his powers and about the origin and destination of spiritual humanity. It supposedly was because of Epinoia’s presence in this tree, that the demiurgical God and his powers forbade the first humans to eat from it.

(BG 57.8-19; NHC II 22.3-9) As for the tree which they call, ‘The tree of knowledge of good and evil’, which is the reflection (Epinoia) of the Light, about whom they gave the commandment not to taste, that is, not to obey her, because the commandment was being given against him (Adam) in order that he might not look up to his perfection and recognize that he was stripped of his perfection.

Eating from the tree of knowledge is explained allegorically as hearing to the voice of Epinoia. If Adam listened to her, he would be reminded of his divine origin and nature (his ‘perfection’).

This Gnostic interpretation of the two trees in Paradise ends rather unexpectedly with Christ’s disclosure that it was he himself who prompted Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. And when John asks him, ‘Was it not the serpent who did this?’, Christ smiled and said that the serpent taught Eve about sexual desire, about pollution and destruction because these are useful to him<sup>7</sup> (here the serpent acts as a servant and ally of the Creator-God), obviously because by means of sexual reproduction the spiritual substance in the first humans is further divided and spread in the physical world. (In another passage of the same book, Christ reveals to John that it was not the serpent but the Creator-God himself who planted the sexual desire in the first human beings.<sup>8</sup>)

## 2. The Testimony of Truth

Whereas in the *Apocryphon of John*, the serpent is presented as a helper of the Creator-God and therefore as an evil figure, in the *Testimony of Truth* from Nag Hammadi Codex IX (Pearson 1981, 122-203), dating from the end of the second or the beginning of the third century, the serpent is described as the Creator-God’s opponent and therefore as a positive figure. Small alterations of the biblical text contribute to this favourable picture.

First of all, in a subtle way, the serpent is upgraded. It is not a beast of the earth (ἑρπίς [?] τῆς γῆ [?], cf. Gen 3:1 LXX) but an animal (ζῷον [?]) in Paradise (46.1). More

<sup>6</sup> The idea of Paradise as a place of delight/τρυφή stems from the LXX version of Gen 3:23.

<sup>7</sup> BG 58.1- 7. In the other three copies, the serpent taught the (wickedness of) sexual desire not to Eve but to Adam or to both Adam and Eve.

<sup>8</sup> BG 63.1-9; NHC II 24.26-29.

importantly, the serpent did not seduce Eve but ‘persuaded’ her (46.2 and 8) and ‘informed’ her (47.1 and 4).

On the other hand, the anthropomorphous features of the biblical God are emphasized. Line 46.17: he came walking ‘through the middle of’ Paradise. Lines 46.23-24: ‘in that moment God knew’ that Adam had eaten from the tree (the subsequent comment will conclude from this passage that God had no foreknowledge). And in line 47.24 the expulsion from Paradise is presented as a conscious act against Adam: God ‘said, Let us’ throw him out of Paradise, whereas the LXX-version reports: The Lord God threw him out of Paradise (3:23).

(45.19) Why do you [err] (20) and not seek after these mysteries which were prefigured for our sake?<sup>9</sup> It is written in the Law concerning this, when God gave a command to Adam, ‘*You may eat from every tree, but do not eat from the tree in the middle of Paradise. For on the day that you eat from it you will surely die*’ (Gen 2:16-17).

*Now the serpent was wiser (46.1) than all the animals in Paradise (Gen 3:1a).*

And he persuaded Eve, saying, ‘*On the day that you eat from the tree in the middle (5) of Paradise, the eyes of your mind will be opened*’. And Eve was persuaded, and *reached out her hand (10) and took from the tree and ate. And she gave to her husband who was with her. And immediately they realized that they were naked. They took fig leaves and put them on themselves as aprons. (15) And in the [evening] God came walking through the middle [of] Paradise. And when Adam saw him he hid himself. (20) And he said, ‘Adam, where are you?’ And he answered and said, ‘[I] have gone under the fig tree.’ And in that moment God knew that he had (25) eaten from the tree of which he had commanded him not to eat. And he said to him, (47.1) ‘Who informed you?’ Adam answered, ‘The woman whom you gave me.’ And the woman said, ‘It was the serpent who informed me.’ (5) And he cursed the serpent and called him ‘devil’ (Gen 3:4-14). And he said, ‘Behold, Adam has become like one of us, knowing evil and (10) good.’ So he said, ‘Let us throw him out of Paradise lest he take from the tree of life and eat and live forever’ (Gen 3:22-23).*

This rewritten story of the events in the Paradise garden is followed by some highly critical comments relating to the biblical God:

What kind of a (15) God is this? First [he] was envious of Adam that he should eat from the tree of knowledge. And secondly he said, ‘*Adam, where are you?*’ (20) So God did not have foreknowledge? That is, he did not know this from the beginning? And later on he said, ‘*Let us throw him out of (25) this place lest he eat from the tree of life and live for ever*’. Thus he has shown himself to be a malicious (30) envier. (48.1) What kind of a God is this? Indeed, great is the blindness of those who read (this) and have not recognized him!<sup>10</sup> And he said, ‘*I am (5) a jealous God. I bring the sins of the parents upon the children for three, four generations*’ (Exod 20:5). And he said, ‘*I will (10) cause their heart to become hardened and I will cause their mind to be blind, so that they might not understand or comprehend what is said*’ (cf. Isa 6:10). These are the things he said to those who believe in him (15) and serve him!<sup>11</sup>

When and where could this critical attitude towards the God of the Jewish Bible originate and develop? In my recent book *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories*, I propose that we are dealing with a second-century Christian phenomenon and, furthermore, that the Christians who voiced this criticism of the Old Testament God had an ideological background in pagan schools of Platonic philosophy (esp. 78-81). But I should add that this is not a consensus view. The prevailing view among scholars of ancient Gnostic literature still is that this criticism of the biblical God was first worded by Jews (See e.g. Smith 2004, 44-71, and the literature mentioned there). I will briefly mention the arguments in favour of a Jewish origin or background and then add my counter-arguments.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Jews or Christians?

<sup>9</sup> This introductory question reveals that the subsequent Paradise story is no longer addressed to Gnostics but to outsiders who allegedly do not yet have the correct understanding of the events mentioned in the Jewish Scriptures (‘the Law’).

<sup>10</sup> The Coptic text of this sentence (48.2-4) allows other translations. Kaestli 1976, 51: ‘Grand est en effet l’aveuglement de ceux qui lisent (cela) (ou: qui l’invoquent) et qui (pourtant) ne le connaissent pas!’; Koschorke 1978, 108: ‘Denn gross ist die Blindheit derer, die (zu ihm) rufen; nicht haben sie ihn erkannt (oder: die [dies] lesen und ihn doch nicht erkannt haben)’; Pearson 1981, 165: ‘For great is the blindness of those who read. And they did not know it’.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the quotation of Isa 6:10 in *ApJohn*, NHC II 22.25-28; BG 2 59.1-6.

<sup>12</sup> For the following see also King 2005, 175-190.

In the critical comments of the *Testimony of Truth*, ‘What kind of a God is this? (...) These are the things he said to those who believe in him and serve him!’, Birger Pearson, the editor of the Coptic text, recognizes an exclamation of despair of Jews who felt abandoned by their God: ‘One can hear in this text echoes of existential despair arising in circles of the people of the Covenant faced with a crisis of history, with the apparent failure of the God of history: “What kind of a God is this?” (1990, 39-51).

Pearson’s opinion is in line with a suggestion made already at the end of the 19th century (1889) by Moritz Friedländer in his *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus*. Friedländer probably was the first to advance the thesis that Gnostic doctrines developed from allegorical interpretations of the ancient Jewish Scriptures. He located this development in the Diaspora community of Alexandria. In his view, Alexandrian Jews would have become ‘heretical’ (Gnostic) – in pre-Christian times – because their allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures eventually caused them to dissociate themselves from the biblical Creator and his laws.<sup>13</sup>

For a comparatively long period, Friedländer’s suggestions were more or less completely ignored but from the mid-20th century onwards, after the discovery of many authentic Gnostic writings in the neighbourhood of Nag Hammadi his suggestions began to be taken very seriously, notably by Pearson, as is clear from his article, ‘Friedländer Revisited: Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins’. In this essay, Pearson states, among other things: ‘The evidence continues to mount that Gnosticism is not, in its origins, a Christian heresy, but that it is, in fact, a Jewish heresy. Friedländer’s arguments tracing the origins of Gnosticism to a Hellenized Judaism are very strong indeed, and are bolstered with every passing year by newly discovered or newly studied texts, the Nag Hammadi Coptic Gnostic Library providing the bulk of this evidence’ (1973, 35 and 1990, 26). Gedaliahu Stroumsa, another influential scholar of ancient Gnosticism, concludes his study of Gnostic mythology with the statement, ‘the emergence of Gnosticism was strongly related to *exegetical* problems of the first chapters of Genesis’ (his emphasis, 1984, 170). As far as I see, recent Gnostic scholarship adduces two arguments in favour of the assumption that Jews made the first steps in the process leading to the transformation of the biblical Creator into an ignorant and malicious Demiurge.

First of all, it is pointed out that the Gnostic authors under discussion applied basically the same allegorical method of Bible interpretation as a Jewish author like Philo of Alexandria did, and, furthermore, that they were familiar with various extra-biblical Jewish texts and traditions. But how valid is this argument if we reckon with the fact that the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Testimony of Truth* were written in the second half of the second century (the *Testimony of Truth* perhaps even later)?

As far as Philo’s biblical hermeneutics is concerned: it can be doubted that after the first century C.E., Philo was still read and studied by Jews, while, at that time, as is very well-known, his works, notably his allegorical explanations of the Scriptures, were a rich source of learning for Christian exegetes and theologians. For the rest, the allegorical method was not invented by Philo. Gnostic authors could have become familiar with this approach to foundational texts elsewhere in the lettered world of their time (see the exhaustive study by Pépin 1958). In this connection, it is worth mentioning, too, that recent studies by Kraft 2001), De Jonge (2005) and Davila (2005) argue that early Christians not only read and copied but also rewrote and to an extent even composed several of the so-called Old Testament pseudepigrapha. It should further be noted that in the second century, the Greek version underlying virtually all Gnostic references to the Old Testament, was not transmitted and studied by Jews but by non-Jewish Christians. In sum, I do not see reasons to believe that either application of the allegorical method of interpretation or familiarity with extra-biblical traditions or detailed knowledge of the Septuagint points to a Jewish origin or background of second-century Gnostic interpretations of the book of Genesis.

Secondly, the hypothesis of Jewish roots of the critical Gnostic interpretations is based on source-critical studies of such books as the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Testimony of Truth*. For one thing, it cannot be doubted that the extant versions of these writings were written by Christians. After all, the bringer of the Gnostic revelation is Jesus Christ and his revelation is addressed to his disciple John. As to the *Testimony of Truth*: it is evident that the extant text addresses Christian readers. But it is very well possible indeed that these writings were

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<sup>13</sup> See my discussion of Friedländer’s thesis (2007, 750-2).

composed from heterogeneous materials. Now the question is, Were the hypothetical sources and earlier versions also written by Christians or rather by Jews?

As to the *Apocryphon of John*, Pearson and others argue that when we leave aside the narrative framework speaking of an appearance (or audition) of the exalted Christ to John, the remaining text – the actual teaching, that is – does not mention Jesus Christ or contain other Christian signature features. For this reason they trace the body of the teaching back to one or more pre-Christian (or at least non-Christian) Jewish sources. These texts supposedly were secondarily “Christianized” (Schenke 1981, 607; Krause 1983; Turner 1986; Pearson 1990). Likewise scholars assume that the Gnostic Paradise text of the *Testimony of Truth* was borrowed from a Jewish source<sup>14</sup>.

But this reasoning does not convince me. First of all, we should consider that early Christians did not exclusively think and write about distinctly Christian themes. Here I would like to refer once again to recent studies by Kraft, De Jonge and Davila, because these scholars demonstrate convincingly that early Christians wrote ‘Old Testament pseudepigrapha’ without alluding explicitly to Christian traditions<sup>15</sup>. Absence of distinct marks of the Christian religion in a text about the creation of man, Paradise and other protological issues does not necessarily mean that it could not have been written by a Christian author.

Note further that we do not have sources about ancient Jews speaking in such a critical, and even depreciating and disapproving terminology about the biblical God. For Pearson this is not a problem for it is part of his hypothesis that Jews ceased to be Jews when they became Gnostics by distancing themselves from their own tradition (cf. King 2003, 183): ‘it is axiomatic that once Gnosticism is present Judaism has been abandoned’ (1990, 51). This is not unimportant for at least it implies that the Gnostic thought world did not originate and developed *within* some form of Judaism.

We can approach this issue in another and more positive way. It is well-known that the meaning of individual Scriptural passages and the reliability of the Old Testament revelation as a whole were heavily debated by various groups of second-century Christians. One of the chapters in Hans von Campenhausen’s classical study, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, is entitled ‘The Crisis of the Old Testament Canon in the Second Century’. The central question in these second-century debates apparently was, What is the significance of the ancient Scriptures after – and in the light of – the new revelation brought by Jesus Christ?

Von Campenhausen discusses a whole series of second century Christian documents: texts that were regarded later as orthodox – notably the letters of Bishop Ignatius of Antiochia and writings by Justin Martyr – as well as texts which emerging mainstream Christianity designated as heretical – the Letter of Pseudo-Barnabas, Pseudo-Clementine writings, a Letter of Valentinus to Flora, and, last but not least, Marcion’s biblical criticism (1972, 62-102). Von Campenhausen deals briefly, too, with the *Apocryphon of John* and a few other Gnostic documents from Nag Hammadi<sup>16</sup>.

In my opinion, these second-century Christian debates about the interpretation and the theological significance of the Old Testament are, so to speak, the natural biotope, where the critical Gnostic attitude towards the Old Testament and its God could develop and prosper. This observation means that Pearson and others are wrong in stating that the Paradise text of the *Testimony of Truth* and the body of the teaching of the *Apocryphon of John* do not contain any traces of Christian thought: precisely the critical approach to the revelation of the Old Testament is a Christian feature.

#### 4. The ideological background of the critical Gnostic Genesis receptions

<sup>14</sup> See esp. Pearson 1990, 40. Pearson is right insofar as he characterizes the Paradise text as a *Fremdkörper* in *TestTruth* for, as already noticed above, n. 9, this passage does no longer address Gnostics but people who did not seek seriously after the meaning of the events mentioned in Genesis. But why should we assume that this hypothetical source text was written by a (non-Christian) Jewish author?

<sup>15</sup> Davila states: ‘(...) the danger of Christian works being mistaken for Jewish ones is real: Christians could write works that contained no Christian signature features whatever; Christians could be concerned primarily with exegetical issues rather than homiletic ones (...)’ (76f). Cf. Layton 1987, 21.

<sup>16</sup> The publication of these texts had only begun when Von Campenhausen finished his study (1967).

Why did Gnostic authors express themselves in this highly critical manner about the biblical God? First of all, it should be emphasized that they were not the only ones to take offence of aspects of the Paradise story and other biblical texts (Koschorke 1978, 150f; Cook 2004, esp. 72-82 and 172-174). The obvious reason was that the anthropomorphous appearance of the biblical Creator was not in accordance with a philosophical conception of God stamped by (Middle-) Platonic thought.<sup>17</sup> This philosophical theology draws a principle distinction between a completely transcendent God – who as such cannot be approached by discursive reasoning, let alone described in human language (cf. my *Gnostic Revisions*, ch. IX, ‘The Ineffable God’) – and a demiurgical God, the Creator and Ruler of the physical and perishable world.

Apparently Gnostic Christians did not hesitate to expose the supposed ignorance, the vicious character and the wrongdoings of the demiurgical God with reference to the first chapters of Genesis and to a few other biblical traditions (notably Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; Isa 6:10; 44:6). They could do so because they regarded Jesus Christ as a bringer of revelation from – and about – the fully transcendent true God.

Although the Gnostic depreciation of the biblical God was a more or less logical consequence of the theological dualism which Gnostics shared with many contemporaries, it was unavoidable that their ideas should bring them into conflict with emerging mainstream Christianity. The author of the *Testimony of Truth* had these Christians in mind where he states: ‘What kind of a God is this? Indeed, great is the blindness of those who read this (the Paradise story) and have not recognized him’<sup>18</sup>. I add that this hypothesis involves not only that the critical attitude towards Jewish Scripture and its God was not worded by Jews (or disappointed ex-Jews) but also that it was not necessarily fostered by anti-Jewish feelings or by a ‘revolt’ against Jewish oppression, as is sometimes conjectured in several scholarly studies<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> We know this conception from Philo, Plutarchus, Celsus and several other first- and second-century philosophers. See e.g. Dillon 1996; Athanassiadi and Frege 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Above, n. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wilson 1958, 188: ‘the fact that the Demiurge is frequently equated with the God of the Old Testament suggests the influence of anti-Semitism’; Jonas 1965, 288: ‘the nature of the relation of Gnosticism to Judaism (...) is defined by the *anti-Jewish animus* with which it is saturated’; Armstrong 1978, 92, n. 7: ‘(...) it might be possible to look for the origins of Gnosticism (...) among the peoples forcibly Judaized by John Hyrcanus and Aristobulus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C (...)’; Dahl 1981, 701: ‘Under the attack of strict Jewish monotheism (...), some early form of gnosticism was radicalized, and speculative, probably esoteric, Genesis interpretation was turned into a gnostic myth.’ Cf. the discussion of some of these and other studies by Desjardins 1994, and Smith 2004 (at p. 70, Smith speaks of theories providing ‘some compelling scenarios for the rise of Gnosticism from within Judaism itself’).

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