

## THE REVELATION OF THE UNKNOWNABLE GOD IN COPTIC Gnostic TEXTS<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. THE-ONE-WHO-IS

In several Gnostic texts of the Nag Hammadi collection, God is designated or—in prayers and hymns—addressed as ‘The-One-who-is’, ‘You-who-are’. For instance, in the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* it is stated that ‘The-One-who-is’ is ineffable.<sup>2</sup> In *Allogenes*, God is addressed as ‘You are The-One-who-is’.<sup>3</sup> In the first *Apocalypse of James*, Christ exhorts James to cast away the bond of flesh that encircles him, and continues:

Then you will reach The-One-who-is. And you will no longer be James; rather you are The-One-who-is.<sup>4</sup>

This passage renders the gist of Gnostic soteriology: the Gnostic should cut the bond with the material world; then the inner self will be able to return to its origin and be united with ‘The-One-who-is’, the transcendent God.

Was this designation for God inspired by the book of Exod 3:14, where the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob speaks to Moses from

<sup>1</sup> A slightly different version of this essay is included in G.P. Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 58), Leiden/Boston 2006, chap. 9, 108–16.

<sup>2</sup> *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (Nag Hammadi Codex [NHC] III.4), p. 94.5 (cf. Berlin Codex [BG] 3, p. 83.5). See the parallel passages in *Eugnostos* (NHC III.3), p. 71.13f. and NHC V.1, p. 2.8f.

<sup>3</sup> NHC XI.3, p. 54.32f.; cf. *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI.6), p. 61.15f. In the *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII.5, p. 119.25), the prototypical Seth addresses Adam (‘Adamas’ or ‘Geradamas’) as ‘The-One-who-is’.

<sup>4</sup> NHC V.3, p. 27.7–10; cf. 24.20, 23; 25.1, 3; 26.27; 27.15; 29.18f.; 36.10f. Cf. *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I.3), p. 28.13; *Tractatus Tripartitus* (NHC I.5), p. 91.6; 114.15; 130.29f; *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III.2), p. 66.16, 21; 67.26; *Authentic Teaching* (NHC VI.3) 25.29; *Treatise of Seth* (NHC VII.2) 67.18f.; 68.12; *Apocalypse of Peter* (VII.3) 84.6; *Silvanus* (VII.4), p. 101.24; *Zostrianos* (VIII.1), p. 16.6; *Marsanes* (NHC X.1), p. 7.5f., 24f.; 13.17; *Allogenes* (NHC XI.3), p. 49.26f., 35f. Note that the Coptic language has no neuter gender and therefore does not distinguish between ‘he who is’ and ‘that which is’.

a burning bush? Or should we rather understand it in the light of Greek philosophical theology? In the Septuagint version, God says to Moses:

Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν.

And God charges Moses to say to the people:

Ὁ ὢν ἀπέσταλκέν με πρὸς ὑμᾶς.<sup>5</sup>

This is not the place to discuss the question of the extent to which this is a correct translation of the Hebrew original.<sup>6</sup> After all, if Gnostic authors were familiar with the words spoken to Moses—directly or through second-hand sources—they knew them in Greek, most probably the Greek of the Septuagint. We are more interested in knowing how the biblical designation for God as ὁ ὢν was understood at the time when our Gnostic texts were written.<sup>7</sup>

Since the first century of our era at least, Jewish and Christian authors have been convinced that Moses' conception of God as ὁ ὢν, 'The-One-who-is', agrees with Plato's doctrine of true being (see the papers by Burnyeat and Geljon in this volume). Sometimes this view of the correspondence between Moses and Plato was supported by a reference to the *Timaeus* passage (27d–28a) where Plato speaks of τὸ ὄν αἰεί, 'that which always is' (see also Burnyeat, this vol., §4).

In Plato's philosophy, τὸ ὄν αἰεί means the unchangeably perfect reality—accessible only to pure reason—in contrast with the transient world of 'becoming'. Later pagan as well as Jewish and Christian philosophers insisted that Plato's eternal being is not an intellectual abstraction from the visible world but a primary being, and as such the source of all things.<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, for instance, in his answer to the

<sup>5</sup> Ὁ ὢν also occurs in Wisdom of Solomon 13:1 (τὸν ὄντα) and Rev 1:4 (ἀπὸ ὁ ὢν!), 8; 4:8.

<sup>6</sup> In the Revised Standard Version, the words *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* are translated as 'I AM WHO I AM'. In a note to this translation, the RSV edition adds that God's self-designation may also be translated as 'I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE'. Cf. *Traduction œcuménique de la Bible* 1988 (nouvelle éd. 1995): 'JE SUIS QUI JE SERAI', and the new Dutch ecumenical translation (2004): 'Ik ben die er zijn zal'. These translations are perhaps preferable inasmuch as they are better attempts to express that here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, God reveals himself as a covenant God who promises to be present for his people.

<sup>7</sup> Other references to God as ὁ ὢν do not occur in texts before the first century CE. We cannot decide, therefore, the LXX designation for God reflects a current theological idea.

<sup>8</sup> M. Frede rightly emphasizes that Aristotle already speaks of one divine principle

question ‘What, then, really is being?’, argues that only God can be said to be, while all other things are transitory and perishable and therefore unreal (see also Burnyeat, this vol., §2). It is interesting to read Plutarch’s explanation of the inscription of the letter E on the temple of Delphi. Plutarch suggests that E is short for Eî.<sup>9</sup> ‘You are’ (without any nominal or verbal complement), he argues, is the correct way to address God because it is characteristic of God that he ‘is’, while all other things are in the process of creation or destruction. Plutarch makes an exception for addressing God as ‘You are One’ for, he comments, ‘Being must have Unity’ whereas humans are compounded of many different factors.

Similar theistic interpretations of Plato’s real and eternal being were proposed by second-century pagan writers such as Maximus of Tyrus, Alcinous, Apuleius, and Numenius.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the theological understanding of Plato’s teaching of real being enabled early Christian philosophers to speak of God in Platonic terms.<sup>11</sup>

Philo of Alexandria combined the Mosaic title for God and the *Timaeus* passage. In *Quod deterius potiori insidiari solet* 160, he writes:

God alone has veritable being. This is why Moses will say of Him as best as he may in human speech, ‘I AM He that is’, implying that others lesser than He have not being, as being indeed is, but exist in semblance only, and are conventionally said to exist.<sup>12</sup>

Significantly, Philo uses the neuter as well as the masculine form to refer to God.<sup>13</sup> Christian writers also noticed the resemblance between

as a living and thinking being (‘Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy’, in: P. Athanassiadi & M. Frede [eds], *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, 48).

<sup>9</sup> *De E apud Delphos* 392e–393f (F.C. Babbitt, *Plutarch’s Moralia* [Loeb Classical Library], vol. 5, 242–8).

<sup>10</sup> Maximus in his treatise devoted to this question, *Who is God according to Plato?* (*Oratio* 11 edn. H. Hobein, 127–45); Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* X (see the quotation in §2 below); Apuleius, *De Platone* I; Numenius, fragments of *On the Good* and other treatises (edn. É. des Places). Cf. A.J. Festugière, *La Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 4: *Le Dieu inconnu et la gnose*, Paris 1954, 92–140; J.P. Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism: A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology*, Hanover/London 1991, 32–90.

<sup>11</sup> Athenagoras, *Supplicatio* 19 (with reference to *Timaeus* 27d 6f); Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 3: God is τὸ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ ὁσαύτως αἰεὶ ἔχον.

<sup>12</sup> Transl. F.H. Colson (Loeb Classical Library; Philo II). Cf. *De mutatione nominum* 11; *De somniis* I.231.

<sup>13</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge 1958, 61: ‘Philo’s favourite designation for God is ‘Ο ὄν or ‘Ο ὄντως ὄν. When however he turns this into the neuter and speaks of Τὸ ὄν or Τὸ ὄντως ὄν, he is deserting the Old Testament, and assimilating the God of his fathers to the impersonal Absolute of

Exod 3:14 LXX and the *Timaeus* passage. In Pseudo-Justin's *Cohortatio ad Graecos* 22 (second half of the third century) we read:

Moses said, 'He who is' and Plato, 'That which is'. But either expression seems to apply to the ever-existent God, for he is the only one who always is, and has no origin.<sup>14</sup>

Eusebius explains the supposed agreement between Moses and Plato with reference to the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher and exegete Aristobulus (second century BCE) who claimed that Plato borrowed many of his teachings from Moses (see also Burnyeat, this vol., §1).<sup>15</sup>

It is generally assumed in recent scholarship that the second-century philosopher Numenius of Apamea had some direct or indirect knowledge of the Greek Bible.<sup>16</sup> One of the surviving fragments of his treatises suggests that he used the Septuagint title ὁ ὢν as well as more Platonic terms (e.g. αὐτοόν, 'being itself') to refer to his 'First God' (see, extensively, Burnyeat, this volume).<sup>17</sup> The correspondence between the Mosaic and the Platonic conception may have confirmed him in his view that Moses taught essentially the same truths as Plato.<sup>18</sup> Hence Numenius' remarkable statement, quoted approvingly by Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius: 'What is Plato but Moses talking Attic (τί γάρ ἐστι Πλάτων ἢ Μωσῆς ἀττικίζων)?' (see Burnyeat, this vol., §1).<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to decide to what extent Gnostic authors were aware of the biblical connotation of the title 'The-One-who-is'. But even if they were familiar with the Exodus text, they are likely to have

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the Platonists'. Cf. J. Whittaker, 'Moses Atticizing', *Phoenix* 21 (1967), 197, who adds: 'This identification of the supreme deity with Platonic reality constitutes the cornerstone of Philo's system and no doubt of Alexandrian Jewish theology in general'.

<sup>14</sup> 22.2 (edn. M. Marcovich, 53).

<sup>15</sup> *Praeparatio Evangelica* IX 6.6; cf. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* I.165; II.168, 257; Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 40.1; 41.1f.; Clement, *Stromateis* V, chap. 14 (97.7); Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.19 with H. Chadwick's comment, 'That Plato and the Greek philosophers plagiarized the Hebrew prophets and Moses was a commonplace of Jewish apologetic, taken over by Christian writers' (*Origen: Contra Celsum*, Cambridge 1965, 332 note 3). Cf. J.G. Gager, *Moses in Graeco-Roman Paganism* (SBL Monograph Series 16), Nashville/New York 1972, 76–9.

<sup>16</sup> M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 2, Jerusalem 1980, 206–16; G. Rinaldi, *Biblia Gentium*, Rome 1989, 264f.

<sup>17</sup> Frg. 13 des Places (22 Leemans) and frg. 17 des Places (26 Leemans).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. frg. 1a des Places (9a Leemans) and the discussion by Whittaker, 'Moses Atticizing', 199.

<sup>19</sup> Clement, *Stromateis* I, chap. 22 (150.4); Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* IX 6.9; XI 10.14 (frg. 8 des Places, 10 Leemans).

understood this designation for God in basically the same Platonist way as their contemporaries. In that case, ‘The-One-who-is’ is a biblical term with a typically Greek-philosophical meaning.

## 2. A GOD BEYOND BEING AND COMPREHENSION

At the same time there was a tendency to stress God’s transcendence to such a degree that he was believed to be elevated above—and prior to—any form of being.<sup>20</sup> This idea was also inspired by Plato’s texts. In their discussion of monism and pluralism, the dialogue partners in Plato’s *Parmenides* reach the conclusion that the One (τὸ ἓν) cannot be known and is beyond being.<sup>21</sup> Cf. Socrates’ statement in the *Republic* (509b 9): ‘the Good is not a being but still beyond being (ἐπέκει ἵνα τῆς οὐσίας)’ (see also Burnyeat, this vol., §3). Later Platonists applied both notions of transcendence to the divine: on the one hand God was regarded as the only real Being, on the other, as the One beyond being. The strong emphasis on God’s transcendence induced philosophers to avoid positive descriptions of the Divinity and, instead, to use the *via negationis* (see also Geljon, this vol., §1 and end of §2). In particular, the method of abstraction (*aphaïresis*) developed by Aristotle became a mode of dealing with what is beyond the senses.<sup>22</sup>

One classic example is chapter X of Alcinous’ philosophical textbook, the *Didaskalikos*. I shall quote section 4, and the beginning of section 5 (in the translation by J. Dillon). Although Alcinous expresses himself in negative-theological terminology, he holds to the idea that God is ‘graspable by the intellect’:

(4) God is ineffable and graspable only by the intellect, as we have said, since he is neither genus, nor species, nor differentia, nor does he possess any attributes, neither bad (for it is improper to utter such a thought), nor good (for he would be thus by participation in something, to wit, goodness) nor indifferent (for neither is this in accordance with the concept we have of him), nor yet qualified (for he is not endowed with quality, nor is his peculiar perfection due to

<sup>20</sup> For the following see R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 1: *The Rise and Fall of Logos* (Theophaneia 30), Bonn 1986; Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism*; A.P. Bos, ‘Immanenz und Transzendenz’, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 17 (1996) 1041–92.

<sup>21</sup> 137c–142a (the ‘First Hypothesis’).

<sup>22</sup> Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 1, 125–62.

qualification) nor unqualified (for he is not deprived of any quality which might accrue to him).

Further, he is not a part of anything, nor is he the same as anything or different from anything; for no attribute is proper to him, in virtue of which he could be distinguished from other things.

Also, he neither moves anything, nor is he himself moved.

(5) The first way of conceiving God is by abstraction of these attributes, etc.<sup>23</sup>

Similar formulations occur in a variety of contemporary texts: not only texts in the mainstream of Platonist philosophy but also in Hellenistic Jewish (Philo), early orthodox Christian (Aristides), Hermetic and Gnostic writings.<sup>24</sup> The most marked and detailed instances in Gnostic literature occur in the *Apocryphon of John* (quoted directly below), *Eugnostos*, *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, *Allogenes* and *Tractatus Tripartitus*.<sup>25</sup> Note that in the opening section of Christ's revelation to John in the *Apocryphon of John*, the *via negationis* is alternated with the *via eminentiae* and that, just as in Alcinous' *Didaskalikos*, (quasi-)philosophical foundations are added to several statements:

It is not right to think of him as a god or something similar, for he is more than a god.

He is a rule over which nothing rules for there is nothing before him.

(. . .)

He is illimitable since there is no one prior to him to set limits to him;

<sup>23</sup> J. Dillon, *Alcinous: The Handbook of Platonism*, Oxford 1993, 18. Subsequently, Alcinous mentions two further ways to conceive of God: the *via analogiae*, for which he refers to Plato's Sun Simile in *Republic VI*, and the *via eminentiae*: 'one contemplates first beauty in bodies, then one turns to the beauty in soul, then to that in customs and laws, then to the "great sea of Beauty", after which one gains an intuition of the Good itself'.

<sup>24</sup> A particularly interesting parallel occurs in Aristides' *Apology*, J.R. Harris (ed.), *The Apology of Aristides*, Cambridge 1893, 35f. Cf. W.C. van Unnik, 'Die Gotteslehre bei Aristides und in gnostischen Schriften', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 17 (1961) 166–174 at 174: 'Die Gottesprädikate der philosophischen Sprache wurden Aussagen einer höheren Form des Christentums, und deshalb kann man sie (. . .) als die höchste christliche Offenbarung predigen'; R. van den Broek, 'Eugnostos and Aristides on the Ineffable God' (in: R. van den Broek, T. Baarda, and J. Mansfeld [eds], *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World*, Leiden 1988), 202–18; M. Waldstein, 'The Primal Triad in the *Apocryphon of John*' (in: John D. Turner and Anne McGuire [eds], *The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years* [Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 44], Leiden 1997), 138–53.

<sup>25</sup> *Eugnostos* (NHC III.3) 71.13–73.3 = NHC V.1 2.8–3.8; *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (BG 3) 83.5–86.6 = NHC III.4, 94.5–95.18; *Allogenes* (NHC IX.3) 61.32–67.38; *Tractatus Tripartitus* (NHC I.5) 52.2–53.5.

the unsearchable One since there exists no one prior to him to examine him;  
 the immeasurable One since no one else measured him, as if being prior to him;  
 the invisible One since no one saw him.  
 (...)
   
 He is neither perfection nor blessedness nor divinity but he is something far superior to them.  
 He is neither unlimited nor limited, but he is something superior to these.  
 For he is not corporeal, he is not incorporeal.  
 He is not large; he is not small.  
 He is not quantifiable, for he is not a creature.  
 Nor can anyone know him.  
 He is not at all something that exists, but he is something superior to them,  
 Not as being superior, but as being himself.<sup>26</sup>

While Alcinous states that the ineffable God is 'graspable by the intellect', this is explicitly denied in the *Apocryphon of John*: no-one can know him. Accordingly, *Allogenes* characterises the knowledge of God as 'not-knowing knowledge' and as 'ignorance that sees'.<sup>27</sup> This raises the question, how could Gnostics narrow the distance to a God beyond being and intelligibility and claim to possess this special knowledge (while denying it to others)?<sup>28</sup>

We find several answers to these questions in Gnostic literature, notably in narrations of the myth of origins. A summary of the relevant ideas in the *Apocryphon of John* may suffice here. The myth tells how the inferior creator and ruler of the physical world came into existence, how he usurped a portion of divine substance and, subsequently, breathed it into Adam's soul. When the demiurgical God realized his mistake he fashioned the human body from the four elements with a view to tying the divine core of Adam's soul to the earth.

<sup>26</sup> BG 23.3-7; 23.15-24.1; 24.9-25.1.

<sup>27</sup> M.A. Williams, 'Negative Theologies and Demiurgical Myths' (in: J.D. Turner and R. Majercik [eds], *Gnosticism and Later Platonism* [SBL Symposium Series 12], Atlanta 2000), 277-302 at 290, with reference to *Allogenes*, p. 59.28-32; 60.8-12; 61.1f.; 64.10-14.

<sup>28</sup> In the opening sections of *Eugnostos* and *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Gnostic knowledge is contrasted with the allegedly superficial theologies of several philosophical schools.

This mythical story suggests that in their inner selves, human beings are consubstantial to the transcendent God, and so are able to ‘know’ him. It is important to note that according to the *Apocryphon of John*, all Adam’s descendants belong to the supreme God<sup>29</sup> and that Gnostics are not likely to have distinguished themselves from other people because they believed they *possess* the divine pneuma, but because they claimed to *be aware* of their divine ‘power’ (and to live a life in conformity with it) while others were not.

The *Apocryphon of John*’s narration of the myth deals primarily with the origin of the present condition of humanity: given the existence of a perfect good God, why are human beings forced to live in such an imperfect and evil world? The revelation of the unknowable God is not the main topic of its teaching. The *Trimorphic Protennoia*, a closely related Gnostic text, is more explicitly devoted to this theme. Therefore I add an analysis of the *Trimorphic Protennoia*’s basic line of thought.

In the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, Protennoia introduces herself as the Thought of the Father.<sup>30</sup> The obvious implication is that God *thinks*, and therefore has self-knowledge.<sup>31</sup> his Thought is his image.<sup>32</sup> In the Greek language, the word for ‘thought’—*ἔννοια*—is feminine. This may have contributed to the idea that God’s spiritual image is a female being. Although they often addressed him as ‘Father’, Gnostics of various schools imagined their God as an androgynous entity.<sup>33</sup>

As God’s *Thought*, Protennoia is present in everything that exists outside God.<sup>34</sup> This is her first μορφή. In her second manifestation,

<sup>29</sup> See Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories* (above, note 1), chap. 7.

<sup>30</sup> NHC IX.1, p. 36.17; 42.6; cf. 48.14 and the opening lines: ‘[I] am [*Protennoia*, the] Thought that [*dwells*] in [*the Light*]’ (transl. J.D. Turner, in: Ch. W. Hedrick [ed.], *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XI, XIII* [Nag Hammadi Studies 28], Leiden 1990, 403); cf. G. Schenke’s translation: ‘[Ich] bin die Pro[tennoia, der Ge]danke, der exi[stiert] in [dem Vater]’ (*Die dreigestaltige Protennoia*, Berlin 1984, 27).

<sup>31</sup> This reminds us of the Aristotelian definition of God as a metacosmic Mind which thinks that which is best, to wit itself; see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII 1074b.

<sup>32</sup> BG, p. 27.1f., 4f., 17–19 and parallel passages: ‘he perceived (*νοεῖν*) his own εἰκόν’; ‘his Thought became actual’; ‘she is his first Thought, his image’.

<sup>33</sup> In the *Apocryphon of John*, NHC II, God is sometimes addressed as Μητροπάτωρ, ‘Mother-Father’, II.1, p. 5.6; 6.16; 14.9; 19.12; 20.9; 27.33.

<sup>34</sup> This basically pantheistic concept is somehow related to contemporary Stoic thought. Cf. C. Colpe, ‘Heidnische, jüdische und christliche Überlieferung in den Schriften aus Nag Hammadi, IIP’, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 17 (1974) 109–125 at 119. But note that the Stoics denied the existence of a metacosmic God.



Protennoia is also God's *Voice*. Although we find few traces of the demiurgical-Gnostic myth in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*,<sup>35</sup> there can be little doubt that this is the background to the idea of Protennoia's descending into the lower world in order to wake up the divine seed scattered in humanity.<sup>36</sup> Protennoia refers to the lost divine substance as part of herself.<sup>37</sup> Her Voice sounded all through the history of humanity. The third time, Protennoia descended at a certain moment in time as God's *Word*, in the likeness of a human being. This third manifestation is introduced in the following way:

The third time I revealed myself to them [in] their tents (σκηνή) as Word (Λόγος) and I revealed myself in the likeness of their shape (εἰ κών).<sup>38</sup>

We find in this passage a clear allusion to verse 14 of the Prologue of John's Gospel: Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν. But the information in the Johannine verse is reinterpreted in a Gnostic way.<sup>39</sup> This applies first of all to the different metaphorical use of the term 'tent': in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* it is a reference to the body, the temporary dwelling-place of human beings. It was in the likeness of that shape, the body of Jesus, that Protennoia revealed herself as Word. On the last page of the text, this statement is repeated in other terminology. Here Protennoia states: 'It was I who put on Jesus'.<sup>40</sup> Apparently Protennoia does not fully coincide with her third manifestation, for following on the phrase, 'It was I who put on Jesus', she discloses that she bore God's Word from 'the cursed wood' and that she established it (him) in 'the dwelling-places of his Father'.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Cf. p. 39.13–40.7 and p. 41.7–20.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. p. 36.15f.: 'I cry out in everyone, and they recognize it (i.e., the voice), since a seed (σπέρμα) indwells [them]' (transl. J.D. Turner); cf. the last lines of the text (p. 50.16–20).

<sup>37</sup> P. 40.12–15: 'I am coming down to the world of mortals for the sake of my portion (μέρος) that was in that place from the time when the innocent Sophia was conquered'; cf. p. 41.7: 'my members (μέλος)'; p. 50.18: 'my seed'.

<sup>38</sup> 47.13–16.

<sup>39</sup> J. Helderman, "In ihren Zelten . . .". Bemerkungen bei Codex XIII Nag Hammadi p. 47:14–18, im Hinblick auf Ioh i 14', in: T. Baarda and others (eds), *Miscellanea neotestamentica*, vol. 1 (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 47), Leiden 1978, 181–211.

<sup>40</sup> 50.12–13.

<sup>41</sup> The expression 'the dwelling-places of his Father' is also an echo of John's Gospel, to wit John 14:2, where Jesus says 'In the house of my Father are many *μοναί*'.

## 3. CONCLUSION

The strong emphasis on God's transcendence is a common feature of the theological literature of the first centuries of our era. We find it in pagan philosophical, Hellenistic-Jewish and early-orthodox Christian as well as in Gnostic texts. On other points, the theological ideas of the Gnostics differed considerably from those of their contemporaries (cf. Roukema, this vol., §§3.2 and 3.3).

Differently from mainstream Christians, they believed in two Gods, the true transcendent God and an inferior creator and ruler of the physical world whom they identified with the biblical God. Their mythical stories, among other things, tell how the demiurgical God usurped a portion of spiritual 'power' and how he tried to detain it in his dark world.

Differently from pagan philosophers, Gnostic and non-Gnostic Christians alike regarded the transcendent God as a merciful Father. The *Apocryphon of John*, the *Trimorphic Protennoia* and several other Gnostic writings tell how representatives of the true God descended into the world of darkness in order to inform humanity about its origin and true nature. In the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, traditions about the crucifixion and ascension of Jesus are included in the story of God's self-revelation. This document can be read as a more or less systematic attempt to explain how the completely transcendent and unknowable God reveals himself and can be known by human beings.