CHAPTER THREE

“IN HER NATURE SHE IS A WOMAN”:
THE FEMINISATION OF THE SOUL IN
THE EXEGESIS ON THE SOUL

1. Introduction

With a confidence now rarely found among scholars of Antiquity, Robert McL. Wilson could state in 1975 that “we today have no doubt of the original intention of Hosea, and of the meaning of his prophesies. Coming to the Exegesis on the Soul with that knowledge we are bound to regard it as something of an exegetical curiosity.” It is this “exegetical curiosity,” the sixth tractate of Nag Hammadi Codex II, entitled the Exegesis on the Soul (ὃς ἐνεργεῖ τό ψυχήν ἔχει), which is the subject of the present chapter. Using the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 2, I will here analyse Exeg. Soul’s interpretation and use of Scripture while making no claims with regard to the original intention of either the authors of the Scriptural texts or that of Exeg. Soul. itself.

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1 Horner, Sahidic New Testament.
3 Exeg. Soul is located between the tractates Orig. World and Thom. Cont. on pages 127.18–137.28 in Nag Hammadi Codex II. It is one of eight Nag Hammadi tractates to have a title at both its beginning and its end (see Jean-Daniel Dubois, “Les titres du Codex I [Jung] de Nag Hammadi,” in La formation des canons scripturaires [ed. Michel Tardieu; Patrimoines; Paris: Cerf, 1993], 221).
1.1. Outline of the Narrative

Exeg. Soul is in several ways a unique text among the Nag Hammadi tractates, especially with regard to its literary structure and composition, but also when it comes to its contents. It is a self-proclaimed exegesis, but one which is not presented in a straightforward manner. Instead we are treated to an allegorical exposition presented in the form of a mythical narrative interspersed with commentary, quotations, and more or less oblique allusions. The story focuses on the fallen soul, personified as a woman, and her repentance and redemption. In summary, the storyline


5 Allegory is here understood as an extended metaphor (i.e., a metaphor extending over several clauses), akin to Peter Crisp’s notion of allegory as a “superextended metaphor,” i.e., an extended metaphor with no direct references to the metaphorical target. Exeg. Soul does have some direct references to the metaphorical target, but still largely functions in the way described by Crisp (see Crisp, “Allegory,” 115–131).