THREE NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF PHILIP*

Various items of the great collection of gnostic books which so unexpectedly turned up in the library of Nag Hamadi have gradually been made accessible. For the time being they pose more riddles than they solve. On first reading these products of gnostic thinking may seem disappointing because of the obscurity of their language and their abstruse way of thinking. At this initial stage of the investigation and evaluation of these documents the most urgent task is the scrutiny of details. For this exegesis one must 'prendre son bien, où on le trouve', that is to say it is not sufficient to look for parallels and comments in other gnostic writings alone, but also in other directions. The gnostic systems are extremely complicated not only by their variety, their psychological turn of mind, their often fantastic exegesis of terms, but also by their comprehensiveness in religious matters, all of which received a typically gnostic stamp. Besides that, most of the Gnostics we know so far wanted to be Christians by one way or another; so for a proper understanding of their tenets the "background" must be found in writings of other, more orthodox writers.

Let me exemplify this with three notes to some sayings in the Gospel of Philip. This book, which is now easily accessible to English readers in Dr McL. Wilson's fine translation and commentary¹, looks like a collection of stray notes without much connexion, without indication of origin. Hence comments on this book may get the form of notes as well.

I

In Saying 47 the author explains the names of the Lord: Jesus the Nazorean, the Messiah. This last word is translated into Greek by 'Christ' and it is said "Messiah has two meanings, both Christ (the Anointed) and the measured...Christ is measured". With this may be compared, as Schenke and Wilson have done², Saying 19 where "Christ" is called a "revealed name" because "his name is in the Syriac the Messiah, but in the Greek it is the Christ". In S. 47 no such explanation about the languages is given, though there in commenting upon the name "Jesus" it is said that his name is a Hebrew one, meaning "redemption", so that in this saying also the name Messiah may be considered as "Hebrew".

We may leave aside the question of the exact distinction between these two languages³, because there is no difference here as far as the point we
want to consider is concerned. It is correct to translate the Hebrew and Aramaic word "Messiah" by Christ = the Anointed One. But highly interesting and intriguing is the fact that also a second translation is given, "the measured". What is the origin of this piece of linguistic wisdom?

This is a very peculiar translation. It is not found in the Onomastica nor for all I know anywhere else in the rather few places in early Christian literature which use and explain the name "Messiah". Ever since the NT (cf. John 1:41, 4:25 and the use of "Christos") the translation is always "the anointed". Now Schenke referred to a second meaning of the root M SJ H in Syriac, namely, to measure. This is also the case in later Hebrew, as appears from the dictionaries.

But the meaning of this "measured" is not further explained. Here a text from Irenaeus may bring some light. In Adv. Haer. iv 2:4 he quotes a saying that is usually ascribed to one of the Presbyters. Speaking about the destruction of Jerusalem he argues that its time was fulfilled with the coming of the New Covenant. "For God does all things by measure and in order; nothing is unmeasured with him, because nothing is out of order." Then he continues: Et bene qui dixit ipsum immensum patrem in filio mensuratum; mensura enim patris filius, quoniam et caput eum. When we remember that mesjiha can mean either "measured" or "measure" (see note 7) this becomes clear; and there may be behind this rather bald saying of the Presbyter an explanation of the name "Christ" that was current among the early Christians.

It is a well-known fact that the title "Christ" puzzled the Greek-speaking Christians, since there was no corresponding figure to the Hebrew Messiah in Greek and Roman religion; often they replaced it by "Chrestos" which had the same pronunciation. It may be that some ingenious man discovered the possibility of the double translation.

If this is correct we must infer that this wordplay or double translation was already current in Christian circles c. 130 and that it came up in a bilingual community of Syria (Antioch?), where the Hebrew and Aramaic languages were known, but where a translation for Greeks was desirable.

II

Saying 51 runs as follows: "Vessels of glass and vessels of earthenware are made by means of fire. But if vessels of glass are broken they are made again, for they are brought into being by a breath. But vessels of earthenware, if they break, are destroyed, for they come into being without breath." In his commentary (p. 112) Dr Wilson remarks that the