CHAPTER FIVE

SETH IN Gnostic LITERATURE

Long before the discoveries of the gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi the significance of Seth in gnostic circles was known.¹ But after the publication of summaries of the various treatises and of several of the volumes themselves there was an even greater awareness of the importance attached to Seth.² The name “Sethians” was even given to the gnostics responsible for a number of these writings.³ This name had already been used by Christian anti-heretical authors.

In this chapter we shall go into the subject of Seth in gnostic literature. The chapter is divided into three main parts. In the first we shall deal with the Sethians and Archontici, according to Christian sources. In the second part those Nag Hammadi texts in which the name of Seth is mentioned will be discussed. Finally, in the third section, we shall say something about Mandaean sources and various occasional passages in other writings.

A number of questions must be answered, for example, can we really speak of a particular gnostic sect which called itself “Sethian”,


³ In the present work the members of the sect are called “Sethians” and the generation of Seth “Sethites”.

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is it possible to speak of a pre-Christian sect whose members honoured Seth to such an extent that they named themselves after him; are we dealing with one group of ideas related to Seth in Gnostic writings or with a number of more or less isolated themes; if a Jewish influence is to be assumed, is it possible to define its background, and what is in accordance with and what is different from the Christian ideas about Seth?

Most of these questions have been touched on in various other studies, but non in a very systematic way.

a. The Sethians and Related Groups

Pseudo-Tertullian provides us with the earliest known description of the sect known as the Sethoitae, who are mentioned after the Ophites and the Cainites.4

It is obvious that the author possessed a minimum of information about this sect. He begins by saying: *sed ille haeresis processit, quae dicitur Sethoitarum*, which shows that he did not intend to write about the relationship between this sect and the previously mentioned Cainites. He then goes on to give the following description of their ideas.

Two men were created by two different groups of angels, Cain and Abel. These angels were at odds with each other. Not a word is said about the creation of Adam and Eve. The word *constituere* used to describe Cain's and Abel's coming into existence shows that they were really the first creatures, and that they were not born from human parents.

As in the biblical story, Abel is killed. Then, *ob hanc causam illam virtutem, quae super omnes virtutes esset, quam mater pronuntiant*, she wanted *loco Abelis*, Seth to be conceived and born (*concipi et nasci*). This means that Seth replaced Abel but it is not clear by whom he was to be conceived and born.

The reason for the birth of this *semen mundum* was *ut evacuarentur* the angels who created (*condidissent*) the two men, Cain and Abel. This means that the lower forces, being angels, were thwarted by the Mother who brought her creation, Seth, into the world.

The writer continues: *permixtiones . . . angelorum et hominum* took place and because of this the Mother caused the flood. She