The Frame Narrative: Authorship and Narrative Voices

In the extant manuscript witnesses of the Apocryphon, the title is placed in the colophon, as a conclusion to the text: the Apocryphon of John, in the shorter versions (BG and NHC III), and Apocryphon according to John, in the colophon of the two copies of the longer redaction (NHC II and IV). The departure from what appears to be a common practice among the copyists of Nag Hammadi codices occurred in NHC III, where the title occurs also in the beginning, and in NHC II, where an attempt has been made to clarify the meaning of the word ‘apocryphon’.

The teaching [of the savior and] the [revelation] of the mysteries [which] are hidden in silence [and which] he taught to John, [his] disciple. (NHC II 1:1–6)

The term apocryphon signifies here “that which is hidden” or “concealed”—some intimate secret shared only by the chosen few. Secrecy (“mysteries . . . hidden in silence”) and exclusiveness (John as a single privileged recipient) stand, however, in clear contrast to the familiarity of the dramatis personae, John and the Savior, and point to the revisionary character of the Apocryphon of John—to its dependence on the Gospel tradition which is, at the same time, viewed as incomplete, unsatisfactory, and therefore subject to revision. Thus, from its very beginning, the text exploits what the early Christian heresiologists viewed as a typical ‘Gnostic’ dichotomy. On the one

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1 On the range of meanings covered by the term ‘apocryphon’ and on the history of its usage in late antiquity and Middle Ages, see, e.g., Böttrich (1992) 58 ff., Hennecke-Schneemelcher (1968), and Santos Otero (1996).
hand, there are exoteric teachings—viz., sayings, parables, and miracles—of the earthly Jesus, such as are preserved in the Gospels, transitory images of some higher, hidden truth, conferred but never explained to the masses. On the other hand, there are esoteric, ‘apocryphal’ traditions, elucidating the figurative language of Scripture, revealed to some privileged few by the resurrected Savior, Christus redivivus.

For, even those who promulgate the contrary opinions about the Father assert that Scripture said nothing about their conceptions clearly and indisputably; they say that the Savior taught this not to all people, but only to some among the disciples who were able to grasp it (dicentes in absconso haec eadem Salvatorem docuisse non omnes, sed aliquos discipulorum qui possunt capere), understanding what was signified by him [i.e. by Jesus in the Gospels] through signs, riddles, and parables. (Iren. Adv. haer. 2.27.2)

Similar passages from the ‘Gnostic’ literature, both from original works and from second-hand heresiological summaries, amount to an extensive dossier—bearing witness to the distinctively ‘Gnostic’ flavor of the opening lines of the Apocryphon and to their utterly conventional character. The savior as a heavenly messenger, the secrecy of his paradosis, the small number of privileged recipients (apostles or other companions of Jesus), the inspiration drawn from the Gospels and, simultaneously, revisionary emulation with the scriptural tradition, are commonplaces exploited, among many others, by the Gospel of Mary and the Wisdom of Jesus Christ (both in BG), by the Ophites and Basilides. The purpose of these commonplaces is always the same—to lend authority to the ‘Gnostic’ paradosis and to surround it with the aura of novelty and exclusiveness. The same, too, seems to be their ultimate source. It is in the Gospels, more precisely in Luke (24:13–53), that the pattern was clearly established: Christ appearing to some from among his followers (to the unidentified

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2 Cf. Clem. Al. Exc. Theod. 66: “The Savior taught the apostles, first in a figurative and mystical way (τοπικῶς καὶ μυστικῶς), then in parables and riddles (παραβολικῶς καὶ ἦνηγμένας), and thirdly, clearly and directly in private (σαφῶς καὶ γυμνῶς κατὰ μόνας).” See also Quaest. Barth. 1.1–2: “After the resurrection from the dead of our Lord Jesus Christ, Bartholomew came to the Lord and questioned him, saying, ‘[Lord,] reveal to me the mysteries of the heavens’. And Jesus replied saying to him, ‘If I put <not> off the body of the flesh, I shall not be able to tell them to you’.” The best discussion of various Gnostic speculations concerning the career of Christus redivivus is Orbe (1976) 2:489–534 and (1987) 2:851–81.