SOPHIA, EVE AND GNOSIS

MacRae has argued that the Gnostic Sophia myth, especially what he called its “Sethian-Ophite” form, is essentially based on Jewish Wisdom speculations; and that while the aspect of Sophia’s fall cannot be derived from these speculations, it could be explained as a heavenly projection of Eve’s Fall in Gen 3. In this chapter, I attempt to show that MacRae’s suggestions, if slightly modified, fit well with most texts in my Ophite corpus, but that they do not fit very well with the majority of Schenke’s Sethian texts (MacRae wrote before Schenke’s theory was published). Whereas the Ophite texts (with the exception of Ap. John where the Ophite concept of the Godhead has been replaced with the Barbeloite one) present Sophia as a central figure, a heavenly Eve, and an important soteriological agent, the Sethian, or better, Barbeloite, Sophia is instead a somewhat marginal character, unconnected with Eve, and in need of salvation herself. The appearance of (such a marginal) Sophia is also not included in Schenke’s criteria for the “Sethian system.” Since the Ophite mythology intimately connects Sophia with salvific knowledge, gnosis, a question arises concerning this mythology’s relationship to Paul’s Corinthian opponents (in 1 Cor) and their

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3 The opposition in 2 Cor is related to different issues and probably to different people. The main issue in 2 Cor is apostolic authority (10–13). The opponents may well have been Jewish-Christians who claimed to have been (and perhaps were) sent by the Jerusalem community led by James (for various opinions, see Schmithals 1971; Georgi 1986; Lambrecht 1999, 1–13; Harris 2005, 67–87; N. Taylor 2005). That Paul could call missionaries sent by James “false apostles” (2 Cor 11:13) is possible in light of Gal 1:8: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we have proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!” (NRSV). The opponents in 2 Cor do preach “a different gospel” (11:4). Half a century later, the Corinthian church once again encountered problems in the form of boastful youths assuming leadership (1 Clem.). 2 Clem. may or may not be addressed to Corinth (see Holmes 2007, 132–135). The apocryphal 3 Corinthians almost certainly has no real Corinthian connection (see Klijn 1963; Hovhanessian 2000; Johnston 2007). It has often been suggested that both 1 Cor and 2 Cor are made up of several originally independent letters. See Conzelmann 1975, 4; Collins 1999, 1–29; Lambrecht 1999,
speculations on sophia and gnosis, likewise based on Jewish Wisdom traditions. Some scholars have argued that the Corinthians were Gnostics, although this remains doubtful. This chapter thus introduces a new theme into the discussion, namely, the nature of the parallels between 1 Cor and the Ophite mythology. In the following, I will first take a look at some of the main features of Jewish Wisdom speculations, as well as of their applications in 1 Cor. Second, I will analyze the Ophite mythologoumena of Sophia, Eve (ζωή, “life”) and gnosis. Third, the Ophite picture of Sophia will be compared to the Sethian one. With the exception of Ap. John, the texts in the Ophite corpus present a very different Sophia than do most of Schenke’s Sethian texts, especially those that have predominantly Barbeloite features. Fourth, as will be seen, Ap. John’s modifications to the Ophite myth of Sophia are sometimes striking, but in accordance with the general Sethian, or perhaps better, Barbeloite, picture of Sophia.

4.1 Jewish Wisdom Speculations and 1 Corinthians

Certain Jewish texts, including 1 Enoch 42, but especially Wis 6–10, Prov 1–8, and the writings of Philo, speak of the personified wisdom of God, Sophia. According to the apocalyptic 1 Enoch, Wisdom descended to earth, but had to return to heaven after a general rejection by humanity (42). This imagery has probably influenced the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, and parallels to the Ophite mythology can be pointed out as well (see Chapter 9). However, there are perhaps more obvious parallels to the Ophite mythology in Jewish Wisdom literature, where Sophia is, for example, God’s first-born (Prov 8:22ff.), spirit (Wis 7:7; Prov 1:22f.), his tool in creation (Prov 3:19f.; 8:27–30), a world soul (Wis 7:24; 8:1), and both an agent and goal of salvation (Wis 6:17–19; 8:17; 9:18; 15:3; Philo, Her. 313–316). Some of these texts include a soteriological model according to which wisdom (σοφία) leads to knowledge (γνῶσις), which leads to immortality, i.e., salvation; or these

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6–9; Thiselton 2000, 29–41; Harris 2005, 8ff., 64–87. Chapters 1–4, 8 and 15 of 1 Cor, nevertheless, seem to deal with same opponents, and they were likely to have been composed within a relatively short period of time.


6 Cf. MacRae 1970, 88–94.