CHAPTER SIX

THE PILLARS OF SETH: SETHIANIZATION OF OPHITE AND BARBELOITE MYTHS

This chapter, which concludes Part II (Myth and Innovation), shifts focus from Ophite to Sethian material. In the preceding chapters, four important themes of the Ophite mythology were examined, and in all four cases, a clear difference between the Ophite mythology and Schenke’s “Sethian system” was detected. Texts in my Ophite corpus, including those with Sethian features (with the occasional exception of Ap. John) treated the four themes in a fairly coherent and specific manner, whereas the remaining texts in Schenke’s Sethian corpus treated the same themes in a clearly different manner. In addition, we saw that texts with moderate or significant Barbeloite features often stood apart from the other documents. Here, I will examine the role of Seth, and address the questions raised in Chapter 1, that (a) Schenke’s “Sethian system” may, in fact, consist of two originally independent forms of mythological speculation, Barbeloite and Sethite; and (b) there occurred a later Sethianization of earlier Gnostic myths. Speculations concerning Seth and his “seed” have been suggested by several scholars to be a later addition to Barbeloite material,¹ and even to Ophite, by some.² These suggestions mainly rest on the following facts: (a) there are texts in Schenke’s Sethian corpus that do not speak of Seth; (b) whereas Ap. John speaks of a heavenly Seth and his seed, Irenaeus’ two chapters (Adv. haer. 1.29–30) that generally parallel Ap. John, do not mention these concepts; and (c) even though Seth is mentioned in passing in Adv. haer. 1.30, he does not seem to play an important role there. Schenke himself, nevertheless, thought that Seth had always been part of the (heavily Barbeloite) “Sethian system.” However, as pointed out above, speculations about the Biblical Seth (or the paradise story, for that matter) are formally distinct from Barbeloite ones concerning the first principles, and both forms of speculation are also attested independently of each

² See Logan 1996, 1–56; and now also Turner 2007.
other in Schenke’s Sethian corpus. Furthermore, certain peculiarities can be detected in texts where Seth occurs within the Barbeloite divine hierarchy, and these may betray secondary reworking of the material.

In this chapter, I will first examine Sethian and Jewish traditions about Seth since the latter are often considered to lie in the background of the Sethian speculations. I will also examine the role(s) Seth plays in texts that have Ophite features. In accordance with the familiar pattern, a clear difference in the interest in Seth between the Ophite texts, including those with Sethian features, and the remaining texts of Schenke’s Sethian corpus will be demonstrated. Second, I will attempt to explain the origins of the Classic Gnostic speculations about Seth. The clear parallels to certain Jewish Seth traditions, the apparent self-designations, such as “seed of Seth,” and the polemical tone of many Sethian texts that appeal to Seth as guarantor of special knowledge, provide clues about the background of these speculations. I will also discuss Logan’s suggestion concerning a secondary Sethianization of Barbeloite and Ophite materials under Valentinian influence and due to the “great church’s” accusations of novelty. It will be argued that there did occur a Sethianization of Ophite and Barbeloite mythologies but that this happened as a result of Jewish accusations of forgery and novelty; this then led also to counterreactions by the heresiologists and even by some advocates of the Ophite mythology. This takes us to the third objective of this chapter, namely, the attempt to explain why the formally and typologically distinct Sethite, Ophite and Barbeloite mythologies were sometimes combined with each other in the sources.

6.1 Sethian, Jewish and Ophite Traditions about Seth

As Williams has pointed out, *Holy Book* is a text with perhaps the most “Sethian” emphasis, in that the amount of speculation about Seth is by far the largest within Schenke’s Sethian text corpus. Let me briefly summarize what the author says of Seth and his seed. Close to the summit of the (Barbeloite) divine hierarchy, there is a figure called Christ, also apparently identified as the incorruptible child Telmael Telmael Eli Eli Machar Machar Seth (IV 59,13–21). Then, on a lower level come into

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3 M. Williams 2005, 40.