CHAPTER THREE

THE DEMIURGE IN THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN*

Summary

The very archaic Orphic myth of the demiurge Phanes, who broke the world egg and fashioned the heaven and the earth from the two halves of its shell, was perhaps already known to Plato when he wrote his Timaeus about the demiurge who makes the visible world, and certainly influenced the pre-Christian Jewish Gnostikoi in Alexandria, who produced the Codex Brucianus and the Apocryphon of John, among others, and held that the creator of this world is malicious.

In 1896, the distinguished Coptic scholar Carl Schmidt announced in the Proceedings of the Berlin Academy of Sciences (p. 839f.) the acquisition of a Coptic Gnostic Codex, Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, which contained among other writings the Apocryphon of John.

In the introduction to the first volume of the so-called Coptic Gnostic writings, a translation of the Pistis Sophia, the Books Jeu etc., of 1905, 9 years later, Schmidt promised that in a second volume the three still unpublished writings of the Codex Berolinensis, to wit the Gospel according to Mary, the Apocryphon of John and the Sophia Jesu Christi, were to follow.

As a provisional expedient Schmidt published in 1907 a comparison of the content of the Apocryphon of John with a chapter in the antitheretical writing of bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses I, 29, of which it was supposed to be the source.1 The edition of the Coptic text, which was to precede the translation in the well-known series of Greek Christian authors (GCS), was almost ready in 1912; but as so often happens in cases of irresponsible delay in publication, a pipe broke in the cellar of the printing house in Leipzig, and destroyed the whole impression. All this, of course, was sheer coincidence.

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Only shortly before his death on 17 April 1938 Schmidt started preparing an anastatic reprint after the proofs which he had preserved. After his death it turned out to be difficult to obtain his papers from his inheritance, which was in the hands of his family, Schmidt being a bachelor. In 1939 the Coptic text of the whole edition was printed in offset.

In the meantime Johannes Munck, of Aarhus, Denmark, had taken it upon himself to complete the edition, but soon abdicated. In 1941 Walter Till was charged with the same task and he indeed sent the manuscript ready for the press to the Berlin Academy. Unfortunately at that moment a war was going on, which prevented publication. Soon after the war Till understood that “a gnostic library in Coptic” had been discovered and that one of these codices, acquired by the Coptic Museum in 1946, contained two texts parallel to the Berlin manuscript. This again caused delay. In 1950 Dr. Pahor Labib most generously permitted Till to collate the Cairene manuscript and to publish the variants in the critical apparatus of his edition, which at last appeared in 1955.2

Nobody will ever say that Schmidt or Till suffered from the disease of unproductivity. And yet we must say that this long delay was extremely unfortunate, because Gnostic Studies might have taken a different turn if this text had been available at an early date. The debate on Gnostic origins would have been less fantastic and more firmly based upon the facts because, as we now see, the Apocryphon of John is a seminal and pivotal text in many respects. But very few people then saw its importance.

An exception should be made for two outstanding scholars, who in retrospect prove to be the great geniuses in our field, and who somehow saw that this text was basic and transmitted the then almost esoteric information that it contained to a younger generation. I speak of Erik Peterson and Henri-Charles Puech. Erik Peterson used to hide his keen insights behind an obscure and laborious style. Towards the end of his life he came to think, like Franz Overbeck before him, that Christianity is essentially and from the very beginning an ascetic, life-denying religion. As witnesses for this thesis he adduced the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, which according to

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