“COME OUT OF YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR KINSFOLK”: ABRAHAM’S COMMAND AND ASCENT OF THE SOUL IN THE EXEGESIS ON THE SOUL (NHC II.6)

Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta

1. Introduction

Ever since Homer immortalized it in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus’ journey back home has become the symbol for the return to one’s fatherland. Probably due to the undeniable allegorical dimension of the Homeric poem, already recognized by Aristotle in the *Poetica*,¹ but certainly also due to the fact that, as the motto has it, *habent sua fata libelli*, Odysseus’ myth has been interpreted throughout history in many different ways.

Plotinus in the third century CE already focused on Odysseus’ rejection of the sensual attractions of Circe and Calypso.² For him Odysseus’ journey back home was a departure from the world of the senses, from the externalities that keep us attached to the flux of the tangible world, in order to take the flight to the Fatherland, to the place where we come from, where the Father is.

Plotinus did not exhaust all possible interpretations, however, and in the Middle Ages Dante focused not on what he rejected and regained, but on what Odysseus lost with his arrival. In fact, Odysseus’ thirst for knowledge made him abandon his beloved house and family, to die at sea far away from home.³ Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses,” in its turn, focuses instead on Odysseus’ will and capacity to deal with the obstacles in

---

¹ Aristotle, *Poet*. 1459b, which describes the *Odyssey* as ἡθηκη.
² See Plotinus, *Enn*. 1.6.8: “‘Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland’: this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso—not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.”
³ Dante Alighieri, *Divina commedia*, Inferno 26.90–105: “Quando / mi diparti’ da Circe, che sottrasse / me più d’un anno là presso a Gaeta, / prima che si Enea la nominasse, / né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta / del vecchio padre, né il debito amore, / lo qual dovea Penelope far lieta, / vincere poter dentro da me l’ardore / ch’iebbi a divenir del mondo esperto, / e degli vizii umani e del valore; / ma misi me per l’alto mare aperto / sol con un legno e con quella compagnia / piccola dalla qual non fui diserto. / L’un lito e l’altro
his path. The final verse of the poem (“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield”), properly summarizes this late romantic interpretation of the motif.\(^4\) Differently again, Cavafy’s “Ithaka,” in the twentieth century, focuses not on Odysseus or on Ithaka but on the trip itself.\(^5\)

Something similar has happened with the first verse of the section of Genesis we are dealing with in this volume. God’s command to Abraham in Gen 12:1 to leave his country, his people, and his father’s house has been allegorically interpreted in a variety of contexts. Philo, Origen, and Didymus the Blind are just some examples, and it goes without saying that in each case the interpretations imply different conceptual frameworks. As in the case of Odysseus’ myth, different authors have made use of the symbolic value of God’s commandment in order to apply a personal allegorical interpretation of the passage.

This is also the case with the text I intend to analyze, the Exegesis on the Soul (Exeg. Soul), a Nag Hammadi text that, as a matter of fact, combines the motif of Odysseus’ journey home with the commandment given to Abraham.\(^6\) A closer examination of the text’s conceptual background will help us to discover the allegorical interpretation the author is applying to the text and, at the same time, to reveal its differences when compared to other apparently parallel uses of the biblical passage. Within this purpose my exposition is organized into three sections. The first part includes an initial approach to the Exegesis on the Soul that provides a conceptual framework for our study. The second compares it with some other extant allegorical interpretations, mainly those by Philo, and the third attempts to draw some conclusions regarding the cosmological and anthropological views of our text.

\(^{5}\) C. Cavafy, Ποιήματα (1897–1933) (Athens 1989), 27.