It has long been recognized that Sethian protology and cosmology draw heavily upon both Platonizing philosophy and Jewish Scripture, in particular Genesis (LXX). In his groundbreaking study of Sethian Gnosticism and The Platonic Tradition, John Turner notes “the unmistakable impact of Platonist cosmology upon the Sethian myth of the primordial creation and anthropogony, especially from Plato’s The Timaeus, whose protological authority stood alongside, and perhaps even above, that of the book of Genesis.”² In this essay, I would like to take up this point, focusing on one Sethian writing, The Secret Revelation (Apocryphon) of John (SRJ), which has the distinction of being the first Christian work known to us to formulate a comprehensive narrative of theology, cosmology, and salvation.³ In constructing its own

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¹ The literature here referred to as “Sethian” was initially characterized by scholars as belonging to a wide range of heretical Christian literature or to a distinctive religion called “Gnosticism.” Schenke argued persuasively, however, for a more restricted grouping which included SRJ and which he called “Sethian” (Schenke 1974; 1981). While others have offered alternative methods for determining what surviving ancient materials might properly be grouped together and indeed have suggested restricting the term “Gnostic” to this group, eschewing “Sethian” as an appropriate designation (see Layton 1995; Rasimus 2009; Brakke 2010), SRJ now is widely read as part of this distinctive group of literature (for lists of the textual material included under these rubrics, see Schenke 1981, 588–589; King 2003, 157; Brakke 2010, 50–51). I prefer the term “Sethian Christianity” (see King 2013, 294–301, review of Brakke), which is also that used by Turner. All of these terminological usages are represented in the scholarly literature on SRJ cited in this essay, but this terminological issue does not impact the analysis of this study, which focuses upon the intertextual reading of Genesis and Platonizing philosophy in SRJ.


³ Composed in the second century CE in Greek, quite possibly in Alexandria in Egypt, SRJ survives in four fourth-fifth century CE manuscripts, which represent three Coptic versions
distinctive narrative, scholars have demonstrated that SRJ draws upon a variety of materials, prominent among them not only Genesis 1–9 (LXX) and Platonizing philosophy, but also the Gospel of John, Jewish Wisdom literature, and ancient astrology. In this brief essay, however, I want to focus primarily on Genesis and Platonizing philosophy, building upon and elaborating the excellent studies of Turner and others in order to illumine new dimensions of SRJ’s distinctive intertextual reading of these materials.

The earliest studies of SRJ recognized that it drew characters, images, and themes from Genesis 1–9 (LXX). The portrait of the creator God, his actions in forming the heavens and creating Adam and Eve, along with references to the trees of the garden, the birth of Seth, and the attempt to destroy humanity by flood, among other citations and allusions, show unmistakable knowledge of the primordial history of Genesis. Indeed, George MacRae wrote: “In a sense we may say that the very intention of the Gnostic myth is to provide a ‘true,’ esoteric explanation of the Genesis story itself.” Pearson nuanced this incisive point in important and insightful ways by demonstrating persuasively that SRJ’s interpretation of Genesis not only demonstrates direct knowledge of Genesis itself (LXX), but it draws heavily upon later Hellenistic Jewish traditions of Genesis exegesis, such as are seen in Philo of Alexandria and 1 Enoch.

Early studies were also concerned with the question of the nature and origin of “Gnostic dualism,” and in this light scholars explored possible con-