THE THREE FORMS OF FIRST THOUGHT (NHC XIII,1), AND THE SECRET BOOK OF JOHN (NHC II,1 AND PAR.)

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Found in only a single manuscript (NHC XIII), the treatise entitled πρωτέννοια τρίμορφος (πρωτέννοια τρίμορφος), Trimorphic Protennoia or the Three Forms of First Thought (hereafter Three Forms), is an anonymous writing that makes no reference to the real world or to known events and personalities that might allow us to situate it in some particular time or place. The only material evidence is that which can be gleaned from the Coptic manuscript itself, since its script has been dated to the first half or middle of the fourth century and its production to approximately the same period. The Three Forms evokes mythic events, ideas, and themes that are well-known from the literature of the first three centuries CE and uses a vocabulary typical of the period. Therefore, comparing this treatise with texts and contexts to which it appears to be related can enable us to situate it in its literary and historical context. The aim of this essay in honour of one of the foremost editors of the Three Forms is to examine the relationship between this treatise and another Nag Hammadi text, namely, the Secret Book of John (hereafter Secret Book), which has come down to us in two versions—one long and one short—each of which are found in two manuscripts (NHC II,1 and IV,1 for the long version, and NHC III,1 and the BG,2 for the short version).

Since 1973, the obvious relationship between the Three Forms and the Secret Book, the so-called “gnostic Bible,” has been noted. The members of the “Berliner Arbeitskreis” began their presentation of the Three Forms by affirming that this complex and imperfectly conserved writing can be better understood as an elaboration, with added material, of Pronoia’s revelation of her triple parousia found at the end of the long version of Secret Book,

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1 Editions and translations of this treatise: Janssens 1974 (editio princeps); Schenke 1984; Turner 1990; Poirier 2006.
2 Cf., for the date of the writing, Giversen 1963, 40; for the date of the binding and cartonnage, see Barns, Browne, and Shelton 1981, 4–5 and 53–58.
3 See the synoptic edition and English translation by Waldstein and Wisse 1995.
4 The expression is from Tardieu 1984, 26.
the so-called final hymn.\(^5\) The next year, in her introduction to the text’s *editio princeps*, Y. Janssens noted the numerous parallels between the *Secret Book* and the *Three Forms*.\(^6\) A simple reading of both texts confirms these first impressions. In the course of my commentary, I have highlighted all the similarities that I have observed between the *Three Forms* and the *Secret Book*. In this essay, I will revisit only those cases which prove that the two texts are related to such a degree that one likely depends upon the other.

But before we enter into the comparison of these treatises, it must be remembered that we are faced with two works that have come down to us in Coptic versions and only after a long period of transmission. This means that certain similarities between the two texts might only concern the Coptic translations and might not necessarily be traced back to the originals. Therefore, we must not assume too hastily that similar formulations in Coptic imply an analogous relationship between the lost Greek versions. In the case of the Coptic versions of *Three Forms* and *Secret Book*, particularly in its long version, the interpreter is nevertheless faced with a special situation in that the manuscripts preserving the two writings (NHC II and XIII) were copied by the same scribe. Moreover, the language used in both translations is the same.\(^7\) This permits the hypothesis that the same translator could have rendered both treatises from Greek into Coptic, meaning that the same Greek expressions and turns of phrase have likely been rendered in the same way in both texts.

1. **The Final Hymn of the Long Version of the *Secret Book of John* and the *Three Forms of First Thought***

According to its plan and structure, this hymn,\(^8\) put into the mouth of the “perfect Pronoia of the All” (II 30.12), and which Michael Waldstein has called the “Providence Monologue,”\(^9\) is strikingly similar to the *Three Forms*.

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\(^7\) Cf., on the script of the two codices, Layton 1976, 84; Layton reaffirmed later that the scribe of Codex II “is identical with the copyist of Codex XIII” (in Layton 1989, 4). On the language, cf. Funk 1995, 133–136.

\(^8\) *Secret Book* II 30.11–31.27; IV 46.23–49.8 (pp. 169–175 Waldstein and Wisse); on the final hymn, see Waldstein 1995; Barc and Painchaud 1999.

\(^9\) In my opinion, this is incorrect, since the term πρόνοια carries the etymological sense of