

Praises and Rebukes in the Gnostic Revelation Dialogues

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In literature commonly considered “gnostic” we find many examples of dialogues carried on between the (often, though not exclusively, post-resurrection) Saviour and one or more of his disciples. Such dialogues are found in the Apocryphon of James, the Apocryphon of John, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, the Dialogue of the Saviour, and the Gospel of Judas, to name only a few.

As will be seen below, these revelation dialogues have often been understood as being particularly formulaic literary products, whose almost exclusive purpose is to serve as a means – traditional and authoritative – for transmission of the esoteric information that they contain. Scholars have noted that rebukes or praises of the disciples’ behaviour are often found within these dialogues, whether delivered by the Saviour or presented by the author in the narrative, but they have not devoted a great deal of attention to such rebukes or praises in themselves. Often such assessments and critiques are passed over; often too, scholars leap quickly to the conclusion that they can read praises and rebukes as representing, in thinly veiled disguise, the author’s own point of view on the various groups within Christianity of his or her day. So for example Peter can be seen as a stand-in for the proto-orthodox church, and a critique of him may thus be read as an authorial critique of that form of Christianity; Mary may be seen as representing a suppressed proto-feminist form of gnosticism, and praise of her may be read as authorial support for that form of Christianity.

I shall argue that there is more to be said on the issue. First of all, I shall argue that these praises and rebukes, or assessments of character, are common enough to be legitimately included as fundamental generic elements of the revelation dialogues in which they are found, rather than being simply authorial tools or conduits, and that, accordingly, their general and generic function must be taken into consideration along with the specific use made of them by individual authors. Second, I shall argue that these praises and rebukes show that the moulding of the reader’s character is an essential function of these dialogues; in other words, that the revelation dialogues, through their praises and rebukes, have an eminently if little appreciated, pedagogical function. Finally, I shall comment on the value of these dialogues for reconstructing the self-image of the communities which produced them.

Praises and Rebukes in the Revelation Dialogues

As the name suggests, works of this dialogue genre feature dialogues between the Saviour and various of his disciples.¹ Its description as a literary genre has been particularly associated with two scholars, namely Kurt Rudolph, whose foundational article appeared in 1968, and PHEME PERKINS, whose book on the revelation dialogues was published in 1980.²

Rudolph associated this genre of dialogue with *erotapokriseis* literature, the catechetical and formulaic collections of “questions and answers” that were a popular means of discussing issues related to high-status literature. In his opinion, the gnostic dialogues were not “real” dialogues such as those found in philosophical writings; the sole purpose of them, including their frame stories and the interaction between characters (who are cardboard figures, “without flesh and blood,” in his view³) was to provide an excuse for the presentation of their doctrinal content.

In the wake of enthusiasm for morphological analysis of early Christian and Jewish writings in the late 1970s, PHEME PERKINS undertook to describe the genre following the example of COLLINS et al. in their work on apocalyptic literature. In her section on the narrative setting of these dialogues, she discusses typical geographical and temporal settings, the recipients, their initial mental state, the appearance of the Redeemer, his initial address, questions directed to him by the disciples, the Redeemer’s commissioning of the disciples, his ascension and any narrative finale elements that may be present.⁴

Although she does deal with the dialogues’ frame stories in considerable depth, bringing out their strong associations with the New Testament Gospel accounts, for Perkins as for Rudolph the frame stories, and thus also the characters and their interactions in works of this sort, are very standard and clichéd. The real focus of these works is implicitly or explicitly taken to be the transmission of esoteric information; the frame story (including the activities, opinions and states of mind of the disciples) is merely the means by which this transmission is accomplished.⁵

1 The reader seeking a more complete discussion of the history of research is directed to the first section of Judith Hartenstein, *Die Zweite Lehre: Erscheinungen des Auferstandenen als Rahmenerzählungen frühchristlicher Dialoge*, TU 146 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000).

2 Kurt Rudolph, “Der gnostische ‘Dialog’ als literarisches Genus,” in *Probleme der koptischen Literatur*, ed. Peter Nagel, WBUH (Halle-Wittenberg: Martin Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1968), 85-107; PHEME PERKINS, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

3 Rudolph, “Dialog,” 87.

4 See her chapter 3, “The Narrative Setting of the Gnostic Dialogue,” in *Dialogue*, 37-58.

5 *Ibid.*