This essay explores the possibility of an intertextual dialogue and a shared history-of-religions background and context for two late first and early second century sectarian movements: Johannine Christianity and Sethian Gnosticism, an early Gnostic movement presently attested in no less than eleven of the fifty-two treatises contained in the fourth-century Coptic codices from Nag Hammadi as well as in several patristic sources. In particular, I suggest that both movements may have originated as non-Christian baptismal sectarian movements that became Christianized during the second half of the first century and gradually came to sustain an increasingly polemical relationship to one another throughout the second century.

Since it is the less-well-known of the two, I begin first with a sketch of the nature and history of the Sethian movement and then move to a discussion of the Apocryphon of John and the Trimorphic Protennoia as the two Sethian treatises that most clearly sustain close literary contacts with the Johannine gospel and letters. Since the intertextual contacts between these two treatises and the Johannine corpus become most obvious in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, I then turn to an exploration of points of closest contact between them, namely the Trimorphic Protennoia and the Pronoia monologue concluding the Apocryphon of John. The remainder of this essay is devoted to a discussion of two other distinctive aspects of the relationship of these two movements, namely the practice and theory of baptism and their common characterizations of revelatory media, which leads to the concluding suggestion that the Apocryphon of John was in part intended as a concluding sequel to the Fourth Gospel, and that the Sethian and Johannine movements shared a parallel and interrelated history of development.¹

¹ For a recent, similar but different discussion of this relationship, see Rasimus 2009.
1. Sethian Gnosticism: Character and History

Most scholars who have touched upon the topic of the intertextual and history-of-religions relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the Apocryphon of John have focused attention upon the striking set of conceptual parallels between the Gospel and the Pronoia monologue concluding the longer version of the Apocryphon, parallels that are also shared with another Nag Hammadi treatise, the Trimorphic Protennoia. In my view, these parallels strongly suggest that these two Nag Hammadi treatises were originally composed in the same environment of late first and early second century Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom speculation as was the Fourth Gospel. These two Nag Hammadi treatises are part of a corpus of eleven Coptic treatises from the Nag Hammadi codices that, together with various patristic testimonies, scholars have classified as “Sethian” or “Classical” Gnostic. This corpus of writings, which share a number of common mythemes, dramatis personae, metaphysical and soteriological doctrines, and ritual and contemplative prescriptions, is sufficiently cohesive as to imply the existence of a sectarian movement of the second through fourth centuries that I and others have called Gnostic Sethianism, owing to the prominent role that the figure of the biblical Seth eventually came to play in their religious thought.

2 These include the Apocryphon of John (also in the Berlin Gnostic Codex [BG] 8502), the Trimorphic Protennoia, the Apocalypse of Adam, the Hypostasis of the Archons, Thought of Norea, Melchizedek, and the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit (also called the Gospel of the Egyptians), and the four Platonizing Sethian treatises Zostrianos, Allogen, the Three Steles of Seth, and Marsanes. In addition to these, one should also add Cod. Bruc. Untitled, and from the recently published Tchacos Codex, the Gospel of Judas and perhaps the Book of Allogen.

3 Schenke 1981, 588–616. Although some scholars doubt the existence of a Gnostic community who called themselves “Sethians,” there is in the Nag Hammadi library an abundant literature consistently characterized by sufficiently invariant and coherent set of mythologumena symbolizing the sacred history, rituals, spiritual and worldly experience and polemics with other groups which was written and read by persons who considered themselves to be the contemporary offspring of an ideal “race” or “seed” of Seth, as to warrant the positing of an actual community who habitually identified with the symbolic universe of these treatises. Although it was their opponents rather than the proponents of these views who identified them as “Sethians,” this designation is nevertheless heuristically useful. See in general Turner 2001.

4 See Klijn 1977, passim; Pearson 1981, 472–504; Stone 1981, 459–471; Stroumsa 1981, 808–818; Stroumsa 1984, 49–53, 73–80; and Turner 1998a, 33–58. Indeed, the factitive verb phrase of Gen 4:25 “appointed for me” (שת־לי) was etymologized into the Mandaic name Shitīl (שתיל) son of Adam, the “Perfect Plant,” or planter of his “plant” (i.e., his seed; cf. the “plant” of the Gospel of the Egyptians III 60,15–18 and the “fruit-bearing trees” of the Apocalypse of Adam 76,15).