
The *Apocryphon of John* has often been called the exposition of the “classic Gnostic myth”, due to its comprehensive and coherent elaborations of cosmogonical teachings. It has been preserved in four Coptic manuscript, three in the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC II 1–32, NHC III 1–40, NHC IV 1–49) and one in the codex *Berolinensis Gnosticus* (BG 19–77). The versions of codices II and IV are virtually identical. They present the longest edition of the text and contain material not found in the two shorter versions of codex III and the BG, which in turn only show small divergences between each other.

In 2006 two monographs concerning this text have been published. One by Karen King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, and the other the publication at issue here, by Zlatko Pleše. The book is a rewriting of the author’s Yale doctoral dissertation. Pleše chooses to see the *Apocryphon of John* as a unitary whole, a strategy which proves both fruitful and well argued.

The first chapter, ‘Narrative and Composition’, consists of a close (inter-)textual reading focusing on the narrative aspects and literary genres of the text. It shows how the different rhetorical strategies are paralleled in philosophical treatises, biblical scripture and ancient romances. This situates the *Apocryphon of John* in the context of the immensely diverse cultural and intellectual milieu of Hellenistic Egypt and shows the author’s impressive knowledge of the contemporary philosophical and literary sources. As Karen King also argues, Plato’s *Timaeus* is seen as one of the prime texts for the understanding of the *Apocryphon of John* and Pleše convincingly shows how the author of the text uses a Platonic style when he follows Plato’s order of exposition in his cosmogonical account. In Plato this is: ‘What is, was, and will be’, while in the *Apocryphon of John* it is: ‘What is, what has come to be, what will come to pass’. This is organized in two greater structures within the text. ‘What is’ belongs to the ‘Realm of Being’, while the two others belong to the ‘Realm of Becoming’, ‘What has come to be’ being the cosmogonical part and ‘What will come to pass’ being the soteriological part of the texts (pp. 46–47). Plato is thus seen as the narrative and rhetorical framework in which to understand the cosmogonical narrative and the general literary style of the text. However, the general function of the text is seen as a critical response and explanatory commentary to the Gospel of John: ‘One of the primary functions of the *Apocryphon of John*, therefore, is to supply, in the form of a narrative (στοιχεῖα), the interpretive key for the enigmatic content of the Fourth Gospel, and to make up for its communicative weakness and polemical shortcomings’ (pp. 23–24).
The second chapter, 'The Realm of Being', is an analysis of the Saviour's appraisal of the First Principle, the Unknown God. Again the *Timaeus* is the key text for the understanding of this part of the text and Plešč shows how the Platonic account of creation is seen as the most sublime way of praising god. Writing about cosmology is thus seen as a sublime hymn to the creator, making this highest form of philosophy the proper act of worship (p. 75). The monologue by the Saviour in the *Apocryphon of John* is shown to present a similar pattern as found in the cosmological section of the *Timaeus*. They both employ a wide specter of the available and acknowledged rhetorical strategies suitable for hymns of worship. This does not imply that either the *Timaeus* or the *Apocryphon of John* are texts of poetry, but shows the literary context to which they belong. Albeit the deep connection of the *Apocryphon of John* to the middle-Platonist rhetorical styles, represented here especially by Alcinous, Plešč demonstrates how the *Apocryphon of John* moves beyond the Platonic concept of the ineffable god being graspable by the intellect and denies every possibility of comprehending the First Principle through the rhetorical use of apophatic discourse prevalent in the text.

The final and longest chapter, 'The Realm of Becoming' deals with the cosmogonical ('What has come to be') and soteriological ('What will come to pass') parts of the *Apocryphon of John*. A large part of the chapter is devoted to the examination of the role of Sophia in the narrative, a role which is explained by reference to Philo's account of the ‘fall’ of the soul. Plešč’s argument is convincing. It is unfortunate however, that the reader almost lose track of the *Apocryphon of John* itself in the intertextual references. It is a recurring problem of the book that the focus on intertextuality takes such large proportions, even if the extraordinary depth of the textual examinations counterbalances it.

The author manages convincingly to show how the *Apocryphon of John* can be seen as a fully unified narrative incorporating a traditional folktale scheme of initial situation-violation—lack—quest—restoration of initial situation. At the same time Plešč shows how the author of the *Apocryphon of John* was acquainted with various philosophical doctrines, primarily Platonism, Stoicism and Philo, and the literary genres of folktales and romances. To describe the result of this conglomeration of styles Plešč makes an analogy with ‘mannerism’. This anachronistic analogy is explicitly used for heuristic purpose and whether one approves it or not is a matter of taste.

Generally, the book is a virtual tour de force in the intertextuality of the philosophical and literary landscape of Late Antiquity. This is of great value since it gives a hitherto underdeveloped view of the context of the *Apocryphon of John*, but on the other hand the reader tends to get lost in the very long