The Paraphrase of Shem is the first of the five tractates contained in Codex VII, which is the best preserved of all the codices of the Nag Hammadi Library. It is made up of almost 50 pages of Coptic text (1, 1-49, 9) which, except for a few pages where the bottom line is partly missing, is in an excellent state of preservation.

The meaning of the title is not immediately apparent. The reason is that the actual "paraphrase" does not begin until page 32, 26, and concludes already at 34, 16. For after a formal ending of the main section of the tractate, the phrase "this is the paraphrase" occurs (32, 36), followed by a commentary, which defines in terms of the preceding myth the roles of the some 20 or more personages just listed in a "memorial" or "testimony" revealed by Derdekeas to Shem 1) (31, 4-32, 5), and recited later (46, 4-47, 7) 2) by Shem on leaving the body when his "time was completed." The paraphrase thus serves the function, stated rather explicitly at its conclusion (34, 16-32), of permitting the Shemites to understand the mythological implications of memorized lists of names to be recited at one's final ascent.

The tractate has two speakers, the recipient of revelation, Shem, and the revealer-redeemer, Derdekeas. After the title and sub-title ("The Paraphrase which took place about the unbegotten Spirit"), Shem tells about an ecstatic experience during which his mind was separated from his body as if in sleep, when he was caught up to the top of creation close to the supreme being, the Light. This ecstatic scene conforms closely to the general framework of apocalyptic literature, particularly apocalypses which describe a rapture into heaven such as Slavonic Enoch 3) and the Apocalypse

1) The actual spelling is consistently Sëem.
2) There is a major dittography in this section: 46, 10-20 and 46, 20-29.
of Paul 1). The first treatise of the Corpus Hermeticum, the Poi-
mandres 2), is a parallel of particular significance for the under-
standing of both the framework and the tractate as a whole.

Shem, although frequently directly addressed by Derdekeas,
does not recur as the speaker until near the end of the revelation,
when he "awakens" from his rapture (41, 21-30). However, this
closing scene of the rapture is followed by more revelation, which
can only have been spoken by Derdekeas, although there is no
noticeable transition of speakers. A few pages later Shem is speak-
ing again, telling us about the ecstatic experience when his "time
was completed." This is followed by a vision of the spheres, which
the tractate calls clouds, through which Shem will ascend after
having come forth from the body. Finally, without an identifiable
transition, the speaker changes again to Derdekeas, who brings
the tractate to a close.

This confusing ending suggests that the apocalyptic framework
of ecstatic ascent and return, at the beginning and end, may be
secondary. The same is true for the many uses of the name Shem
in the vocative case throughout the long revelation by Derdekeas.
How clumsily the name Shem is added is visible in 4, 12, where it
stands in apposition to the first person singular, although the
context leaves no doubt that Derdekeas is speaking. Actually
even the title of the work is incorrect. The paraphrasing is not
done by Shem but by Derdekeas himself (cf. 33, 18 ff. and 34, 16 f.).
We must return to the implications of the secondary nature of the
framework at a later point.

In order to present a background for the redeemer figure, and
to bring out the non-Christian nature of the tractate, a brief sum-
mmary of the content is called for. It should be kept in mind that
this summary does not follow the flow of the tractate, since the
revelation does not follow a chronological pattern, but rather
frequently back-tracks, repeats 3), expands, changes terminology
and generally tends to confuse and obscure.

As often in gnostic literature, the revelation is not presented as
new material, but as knowledge that Shem's root once possessed

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1) Hennecke-Schneemelcher, New Testament Apocrypha II (Philadel-
2) Nock-Festugière, Corpus Hermeticum I, 1 (Paris: Société d'Édition
3) For a clear case of a doublet cf. 12, 16-28 and 16, 36-17, 10.