THE JEWISH BACKGROUND OF THE GNOSTIC SOPHIA MYTH

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Some of the literature on Gnosticism seems to assume without discussion that the Sophia figure, from whose descent or “fall” from the Pleroma the creation of the material world ultimately results, is a Gnostic adaptation of the personified Wisdom of Jewish apocalyptic and Wisdom literature 1). This assumption is well founded, but it has not always gone unchallenged. For example, W. Bousset argued expressly against it, holding that the Gnostic sources were in respect to Sophia influenced by a much more ancient myth of broader Near Eastern origin 2). U. Wilckens, following Bousset in this regard, concluded his survey of the Wisdom myth in Judaism and Gnosticism with the theory that both have the same religionsgeschichtlich background but are essentially independent traditions: in the Hellenistic period there was some Gnostic influence on the late Jewish stream, but the Jewish Wisdom tradition had no influence on the Gnostic Sophia myth 3). In view of the sharply opposing views on this question—one which has an obvious bearing upon the larger problem of the Jewish factor in the origins of Gnosticism—this article will attempt in summary fashion to review some of the points of contact between Jewish Wisdom and the Gnostic Sophia and to show how the latter may have developed from the former. No effort will be made here to account for the origin of the concept of personal Wisdom within Judaism itself, but I may simply state that I believe its origin to


3) Weisheit und Torheit (Tübingen 1959), summary on pp. 193-197. In a later essay Wilckens modified this view enough to admit the possibility of reciprocal contact between the Jewish and Gnostic streams of development; cf. article σοφία, TWNT, vol. VII, p. 514.
lie in a combination of the late Jewish tendency toward the hypostatization of divine attributes ¹) and the widespread ancient myths of the female deity, especially the Isis myths ²).

In a recent article G. C. STEAD has analyzed the Sophia myth in Valentinianism, tracing its inner development and suggesting an origin in currents of thought best represented by Philo ³). The present article will not go over the same ground again, although, as will become apparent, I should give a somewhat different account of the Jewish elements in the myth. For the most part, I wish to draw on the Gnostic Sophia myth as it is found in the Coptic Gnostic writings from Nag Hammadi and to concentrate more on what we may for convenience call the Sethian-Ophite type of Gnosticism than on the Valentinian. It is clear that in some form a common myth of Sophia underlies both systems. Though it is not the purpose of this article to argue the relationship between the two types, continued analysis of the new Gnostic sources may demonstrate the more original character of the Sethian-Ophite type by virtue of its occurrence in non-Christian Gnostic contexts.

The picture of personified Wisdom in the Jewish sources is too well known to need summarizing here ⁴), and especially since BULTMANN’S essay on the Johannine Prologue in the GUNKEL Festschrift, the particular Jewish myth of the descent and reascent of Wisdom is also familiar ⁵). Likewise it is not necessary to cite at length the Gnostic form of the myth, which occurs very frequently, with many variations, in the patristic as well as the Coptic sources. Instead, this article will first discuss a list of specific similarities between Jewish Sophia and Gnostic Sophia in the Sethian-Ophite cosmogonies, secondly present some brief reflections on

¹) Cf. especially W. SCHENCKE, Die Chokma (Sophia) in der jüdischen Hyposasenspekulation (Kristiania 1913) and H. RINGGREN, Word and Wisdom (Lund 1947).


⁴) See especially Prv. viii: 12-36; Sir. xxiv:1-22; Wis. vi-x; LXX Bar. iii:9-ii:4.