THE GNOSTIC THREЕFOLD PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

The Ascent of Mind and the Descent of Wisdom

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Many things in Late Antiquity come in threes: three levels of being, three periods of history, three stages of initiation into the mysteries and into the study of philosophy, three stages of the mystical ascent, even the Christian Trinity. Such triads are to be found in a number of Gnostic systems as well. Significant instances of these triads have now come to light in gnostic documents at home in the so-called Barbeloite Gnosticism of the second century A.D. Because some of these documents were read by Plotinus’ circle in Rome during the third century A.D., the question of the relationship of these documents to contemporary Neoplatonism is immediately raised. Yet these systematized triads go back a long way in Western antiquity, at least as far back as Plato. Beginning with him, and perhaps a good deal before him, the systematic tripartition of the universe into stratified levels of reality and the tripartition of the process by which one comes to know this universe becomes more widespread and increasingly dogmatic in western philosophy and religion. The pattern that emerges is what one might call the three-stage path to spiritual fulfillment, a sort of tripartite structure of spiritual paideia by which Hellenistic man might come to know himself, his world, and his place in it. This three-fold path is, of course, found in both Greek and Jewish non-gnostic literature. Specifically, however, I suggest that when gnostic literature portrays this path as a three-stage ascent of the soul to the deity, we have to do with the Platonic tradition; when it portrays this path as a three-fold descent of the deity (or some aspect thereof) to the soul in the lower world, we have to do with primarily Jewish traditions.

The gnostic documents to which I wish to call attention are five treatises from the Nag Hammadi Coptic Gnostic Library,
all of which are available in translation 1), and all of which seem to belong to a single gnostic group or sect, the so-called Barbelo-Gnostics described in book 1., ch. 29 of Irenaeus' Against the Heresies. The treatises are: the well-known Apocryphon of John (ApocrynJn) from Codex II, and the less well-known treatises Trimorphic Protennoia (TriProt) from Codex XIII, Allogenes (Allog) from Codex II, Zostrianos (Zost) from Codex VIII and The Three Steles of Seth (3StSeth) from Codex VII. Strictly speaking, two other treatises, Marsanes from Codex X, and the anonymous concluding tractate of the Bruce Codex belong to this group, since they clearly draw on the same fund of mytholegumena found in the other five treatises (e.g. Invisible Spirit, Triple Power, Barbelo, Triple Male and the Kalyptos-Protophanes-Autogenes Triad), but their position in the group seems to be derivative rather than constitutive. I begin with some observations about the contents and genealogical interrelationships of the five main Barbeloite treatises, and then turn to the question of their affinity with Platonic metaphysics.

I. The Barbeloites

Near the turn of the century Carl SCHMIDT showed that the Christian-Gnostic Apocryphon of John contained in the then recently discovered Berlin Gnostic Codex represented a version of the Barbeloite Gnostic system described around 180 A.D. by Irenaeus in his Against the Heresies (I, 29.1-4) 2). Since the Nag Hammadi find, we now possess three more copies of this ApocrynJn.
