THE 'DECENSUS AD INFEROS'  
IN 'THE TEACHINGS OF SILVANUS' (CG VII, 4)  

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I. Introduction: The Place of Pivotal Theologomena  
in the Higher Criticism of Nag Hammadi Texts  

The effort to "place" in literary and intellectual history each of  
the writings in the Nag Hammadi Library has many analogies to  
higher criticism of biblical literature. In the case of both, we pos-  
sess a great many texts which lack any mention of the date of  
composition, authorship, references to provenance or destination.  
Further, we encounter writings which are seemingly without echo  
in later literature, i.e., the "external evidence" accessible to the  
historian. As a result, investigators—in so many instances—must  
resort to close examination of "internal evidence" to determine  
who wrote a Nag Hammadi text, when, where, why. Such evidence  
includes style and vocabulary, allusions to datable events or  
persons, type of biblical exegesis used (if any). But of special impor-  
tance will be the stage of development reflected in important  
theologomena whose historical trajectories have been traced with  
some accuracy by past scholarship, theologomena found in such  
areas as Christology, eschatology, cosmology, theology.  

In what follows, we wish the focus attention on one such theolo-  
gomenon in the fourth treatise of Codex VII, "The Teachings of  
Silvanus" (hereafter abbreviated Teach. Silv.), viz., the "Decensus  
ad Inferos" of the Christ figure. Our procedure will be, first, to  
offer some general observations about the nature of the tractate;  
second, to present an analysis of the two Decensus accounts in  
Teach. Silv., both literary and in terms of their use of biblical  
materials; third, to examine major motifs in the Decensus tradition  
in our document within the context of the development of this  
tradition in early Christian literature; and, finally, to draw some  
conclusions about the place of Teach. Silv's. version of the tradition  
in the history of early Christian thought.
II. The Nature of the Treatise: An Up-Date

Though extensive treatment of the nature of our text cannot be offered here,¹ it will be important to an understanding of the Decensus motif in its larger context to sketch briefly some of the results of ongoing research on Teach. Silv. Increasingly, the tractate is viewed as one of the few in the Nag Hammadi Library which is not Gnostic,² even though there are gnosticizing passages and concepts in it. The existence of such tendencies makes it easier to understand the work’s inclusion in a codex otherwise devoted exclusively to Gnostic literature.

Moreover, investigation of form and content have demonstrated the writing is a piece of Gentile Christian Wisdom literature which is heavily indebted to the Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom tradition.³ Like other writings in this tradition, Teach. Silv. has proven to be


³ The author of Teach. Silv. directly cites Wisd Sol 7:25-26 in 112, 37-113, 7 and distinctly echoes both Wisd Sol and Sir in the following: 100, 30-31 (Wisd Sol 14:17); 107, 5 (Wisd Sol 6:20); 111, 32-34 (Wisd Sol 9:13); 112, 5-8 (Wisd Sol 9:16-17); 89, 20-23 (Sir 6:31); 97, 18-30 (Sir 6:6-13); 112, 27-31 (Sir 43:30-31); 112, 33-35 (Sir 24:3a). Moreover, Wisdom literary forms employed in the tractate include modes of address ('my son'-85, 1-2, 29; 86, 24; etc.; and "O foolish one"-89, 8, 90, 28; 107, 12); admonitions (positive -88, 13-15; 110, 14-16; etc.; and negative -86, 1-2; 87, 6-7, 19-21; etc.); sayings (descriptive proverbs -97, 7-10; 113, 17-20; etc.; and didactic sayings -87, 33-88, 6; 108, 27-29; etc.); wisdom poems (father-son type -88, 9-15; 91, 14-20; personified Wisdom type -88, 35-89, 12); hymns about God (112, 27-33; cf. 114, 26-115, 4); prayers (86, 16-20; cf. 111, 15-20); contrasts between the wise and the foolish (97, 10-13; 107, 9-12; etc.). See, further, W. R. Schoedel, "Jewish Wisdom and the Formation of the Christian Ascetic," in Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and early Christianity, ed. R. L. Wilken (South Bend, Indiana: U. of Notre Dame, 1975), 169-99.