THE IDENTITY OF THE ARCHONS IN THE “APOCRYPHON JOHANNIS”

BY

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One would have thought the time had passed in which the detailed cosmologies preserved in gnostic apocrypha were liable to be passed over as incoherent, or as if they held little essential to the understanding or significance of the gnostic world-view. The complaints, it is true, at the endless genealogies, began early, and the heresiologists were inclined to expound them, if at all, only for their palpable absurdity. Their accounts have not, therefore, generally been of great help in sorting out the particularities of the gnostic cosmos and its various spiritual powers, notably the Archons who rule despotically over the material life of men. Their reticence seems even to have infected modern scholars and editors, even when they are dealing with the new texts from Nag Hammadi which offer a confusing wealth of new information. The suspicion is still lurking that confusion governs the innumerable names so scrupulously assigned to the entities by gnostic writers. In the case of the Apocryphon of John, the perplexity arises from the sheer multiplicity of names given to each Archon in its planetary sphere. In the following remarks, however, I hope to show that a clear and ordered image of the universe lies behind this variegated surface, and that this order is closely allied to traditional pictures of the cosmic economy in astrology and other occult cosmogonies.

I. THE SEVEN OF THE WEEK

The Apocryphon identifies the Archons as “Exousiai”, and assigns them a traditional number, in one list at least – seven. They are familiar from accounts of even the earliest Christian gnositcs such as Saturnilus as the “seven angels who made the world”, and as we shall see the present version is closely connected with the cosmic diagrams used by the Ophites. In a more general way, the architecture of the Apocryphon’s universe shows similarities to the Epistle of Eugnostus and related works, and is
generally accepted as being the original on which Irenaeus based his account of the Barbelognostics (Adv. Haer. 1,29,1–4). He cut short his summary, however, before he came to the survey of the planetary powers—either because he thought it too technical to concern his readers, or because it seemed unintelligible.\(^1\)

Although their names are included in other descriptions of twelve powers, the easiest general clue to the identity of the Archons lies in the sevenfold lists. These are given in the several versions of the document that have survived, in almost identical form—in the Berlin Codex version (BG 41,16) and in the Codex II version from Nag Hammadi (C II 59,26).\(^2\) In the BG version they are called “the hebdomad of the week”, which seems to invite us to read them as the planetary powers of the successive days of the week. Exactly such an account, though omitting in Manichaean fashion the Sun and Moon from among the planets, does survive in the late gnostic Pistis Sophia, where the Demiurge set five other great Rulers in every Aeon as lords over the 360 (Rulers), and over all the bound Rulers who are called in the whole world of mankind these names: Saturn, Mars, Mercury, Venus, Jupiter.\(^3\)

Yet, though it is clear that these rulers are the entities involved, this does not yet permit us to assign each name to its proper power: no significant correlations result from taking the order of the weekdays as that of the Archons. As if to proffer us a key to the sequence of the names, the writer or transcriber of the Apocryphon in the two available complete versions (C III is fragmentary just at this point) informs us that when the Demiurge or Protarchon gave the powers their names, “he began from above” (BG 43,6; C II 60,14). This suggests that we commence from the outermost sphere—that of Saturn—and work our way inwards until we reach the earth at the centre. Such a procedure might perhaps seem to be

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\(^1\) Even if we suppose, as did Doresse for example from his hasty survey, that the Apocryphon is merely agglomerative in composition, and divide a first unified section from the rest at BG 44,19, Irenaeus would still have had the lists of the twelve and the seven powers, though not of their “limb-souls”.

\(^2\) Also given, with occasional variations, in the Codex III and Codex IV versions—C III 17,22; C IV 18,18. The three Nag Hammadi versions are published together in M. Krause and P. Labib, *Die Dreif Versionen des Apokryphon Johannis*, Abhand. d. Dt. Archäol. Instituts, Kairo, Kopt. Reihe, 1 (Wiesbaden 1962). A table for cross-references (pp. 49–53) includes the BG version.

\(^3\) Pistis Sophia, 360. The names of Venus and Jupiter have also been accidentally reversed in the course of the text’s transmission.