THE AUTHENTIKOS LOGOS: A NEW DOCUMENT OF CHRISTIAN PLATONISM

BY

R. VAN DEN BROEK

The Authentikos Logos is the third treatise of Codex VI of the Nag Hammadi Library (pp. 22–35). By now, it is known through a facsimile edition and two critical editions of the Coptic text, an English, a French and two German translations, and a commentary. It contains, in the words of G. W. MacRae, “an exposition of the origin, condition and ultimate bliss of the soul.” Among the scholars who have studied this text there is a general consensus that it does not show typically Jewish or Christian features and that it is a Gnostic writing or at least presupposes certain general Gnostic ideas. Moreover, it has been said that it has very little in common with the treatises on the soul of Christians such as Tertullian or pagans such as Porphyry and Iamblichus, the principle difference being that it is “almost totally non-philosophical in its style of thought and even in its terminology.”

The present article first aims to show that the Authentikos Logos presents a doctrine of the soul which is not Gnostic but thoroughly Platonic, in particular in its terminology, and, second, that its author and the people to whom he addressed his work knew the New Testament and were Christians.

I. PLATONIC ELEMENTS

1. Rational soul – spiritual soul – material soul

The Authentikos Logos presupposes a coherent doctrine of the soul of which the following elements are mentioned. The soul which comes from the “invisible and ineffable worlds” is called “the invisible soul of justice (psyche ñahoratos ñte tdikaiosynê)” (22,11–15). Even when the soul is in the descent (tkatabasis) it is not separated from these worlds “but they see it and it contemplates them through the invisible Logos (plogos ñahoratos)” (22,18–22). The incarnation of the soul is compared with the
marriage of a man and a woman who both have children. The children of
the man call those of the woman “our brothers” but, in fact, they are not
brothers at all: “In this very way, the spiritual soul (ipsychê ἰπνευματικῆ),
when it was cast into the body, became a sister \(^5\) of desire (tepithymia),
hatred and envy, and a material soul (ipsychê ἅθυλικῆ). So therefore, the
body came from desire (tepithymia) and the desire (tepithymia) came from
the material substance (tousia ἅθυλικῆ). For this reason the soul (ipsychê)
became a sister of them” (23,1–22). The soul which has left knowledge
behind has fallen into bestiality (24,20–24). But “the rational soul
(ipsychê ἑπιλογικῆ) which wearied itself in seeking has received knowledge
of God” (34,30–35,2). In finding this knowledge the soul is helped by the
Logos, which is secretly given to the soul by its bridegroom (pesnymphios):
“He presented it to its mouth, to make it eat it like food, and he put the
Logos (plogos) upon its eyes as a medicament to make it see with its
mind (pesous) and know its kinsmen (nessyggenês) and receive knowl-
dge about its root” (22,22–30). The Adversary spreads out before the
body all kinds of passions and pleasures of the flesh in order to make the
mind of the soul (hêt ūpsychê) incline towards them (31,8–14). But the
soul which has realized that sweet passions are transitory, enters into a
new conduct (politeia), strips off the world, “while its true garment clothes
it within and its bridal clothing is placed upon it in beauty of mind (hêt),
not in fleshly pride” (31,24–32,8). The evil forces which, “wishing to strike
down the invisible soul (ipsychê ἄναροτος)”, had shaped the body of this
soul “did not realize that it has an invisible spiritual body (ousóma ἰπνευματικὸν ἄναροτον)” (32,24–32). Knowledge of its origin and a life
in continence are the indispensable conditions for the soul’s ascent to the
world of God: “We have nothing in this world, lest the authority of the world
that has come into being (texousia ἰπκοσμος ἔππασθοπε) should
detain us in the worlds that are in the heavens, those in which universal
death exists, surrounded by the individual ... [following lines missing]”
(26,26–33).

For a correct understanding of the Authentikos Logos it should be
realized that the terms “spiritual soul” and “rational soul” do not refer
to the same psychic entity but that the ψυχὴ πνευματική serves as a body
to the ψυχὴ λογική and, therefore, has to be identified with the σῶμα
πνευματικὸν.

The distinction between the “spiritual” and the “rational” soul is
well-known from Porphyry’s De regressu animae of which fragments have