A CLASSICAL INFLUENCE ON THE GNOSTIC SOPHIA MYTH

BY

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The myth of the Gnostic Sophia that proved to be so popular in the early centuries of this era, has proven itself equally attractive to students of Gnosticism in this century. Taken as a whole, it represents more clearly than any other myth the world of thought in which the Gnostic moved. Sophia’s act of hybris and subsequent fall lie at the very heart of the Gnostic’s understanding of his own existential predicament.

The myth, often simplified in introductory accounts of Gnosticism, is neither simple nor uniformly presented in the sources. It is neither a part of every Gnostic system, nor, in those systems in which it is a part, is it everywhere the same. It is intimately connected to the Valentinian school, though its influence certainly spread much further afield. As with most Gnostic ideas, it seems to be alive in a world of syncretistic thought and imagination, forever in flux, its growth and change dependent upon the particular influences impinging upon the community and/or author. Though the basic themes remain fixed, the details show remarkable variation, and often, much of the myth is taken for granted.

Modern scholarship has worked extensively to unravel the inner development of the Sophia myth\(^1\) and to explore its \textit{religionsgeschichtlicher} background. MacRae, in his article entitled “The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth\(^2\), goes far in flashing out the dependence of the myth on the personified Wisdom of Jewish apocalyptic and Wisdom literature. This dependence had often been assumed,\(^3\) though not unchallenged.\(^4\) The problem with this relationship, as MacRae and others\(^5\) have seen, lies in the Gnostic translation of the descent of Wisdom into the fall of Sophia. MacRae argues that the hostility apparent in this Gnostic translation is to be understood “in the realization that the essence of the Gnostic attitude, as has often been stated, is one of revolt, and it is a revolt against Judaism itself.”\(^6\) He further suggests that the actual source of Sophia’s fall is to be found in the Gnostic projection of the Genesis account of the fall of Eve from the material world of men to the celestial world of the Pleroma.
The actual motivation behind Sophia’s action that leads to her fall is agreed to be her desire to imitate the Father. Stead notes that this theme no doubt goes back to Plato, while MacRae makes it dependent on Eve’s wish, expressed in Gen 3.5, to be like God. One must note, however, that the Gnostic account enlivens this desire with considerable detail that is unexplainable from either of these sources. Without denying a relationship to Gen 3.5, it is the purpose of this study to explore the details of this particular part of the Sophia myth and suggest a classical influence as the source of the Gnostic’s mythological expansion.

One must first note that Sophia’s act of hybris and its immediate results have two different means of expression in the Patristic sources. Both agree that the cause of the fall is the presumptive act committed against the Father. However, in one version, this act has a more philosophical or mental goal, while in the other the imagery is more totally sexual. In the former, Sophia’s act is presented as an attempt to penetrate the mystery around the Father. In the latter, it is understood as an effort to imitate the Father’s creative power by generating a being apart from her consort or syzygy. In the philosophical version it is Sophia’s errant thought that separates from her. It is discarded outside the Pleroma and in some way personified. In the sexual account, it is Sophia’s aborted, formless offspring, the ἐκτρωμα, that is cast out of the Pleroma and ultimately becomes the demiurge. The sexual imagery is also present in the philosophical version, though here it is not primary. Thus, there also, Sophia’s action is errant because it is committed apart from her consort and results from her experiencing a passion to emulate the Father. In this paper I will be dealing only with the sexual version, looking first at Hippolytus’ account and then at its presentation in the Nag Hammadi texts of The Hypostasis of the Archons and The Apocryphon of John.

Hippolytus states that after Sophia was brought forth, she took note of the multitude and power of the begetting aeons (τῶν γεγεννηκότων αἰώνων). She perceived that whereas all the other aeons generated in pairs (κατὰ συζυγίαν γεννώσαν), only the Father begat without a consort (ἄξυγος). Sophia desired to emulate the Father (μιμησάσθαι τὸν πατέρα) and to generate by herself without her consort (γεννήσαι καθ’ ἐαυτὴν δίχα τοῦ συζύγου). She didn’t know that the Father alone possessed the power of self-generation. As a result, her attempt was doomed to failure. She produced only what she was capable of producing, namely, a formless and unfinished substance (οὐσίαν ἄμορφον καὶ ἄκατασκεύωστον).

This led to the introduction of ignorance into the Pleroma, which