SPIRIT AND PROPHECY IN THE EPISTULA IACOBI
APOCRYPHA (NHC 1,2)

BY

J. VAN DER VLIET

Et ma tête surgie
Solitaire vigie
Dans les vols triomphaux
   De cette faux

Comme rupture franche
Plutôt refoule ou tranche
Les anciens désaccords
   Avec le corps
S. Mallarmé, Cantique de Saint Jean

The Coptic Letter of James from Nag Hammadi (hereafter: EpJac) makes puzzling reading. Not the least among its oddities is that it demands its readers to become filled with the Spirit while at the same time denying them the possibility to prophesy. As J. Reiling, in his book on Hermas and Christian prophecy, points out: “this use of the concept of being filled deserves a treatment of its own”. The present study seeks to fill this need. It will be concerned mainly with EpJac’s attitude towards Christian prophecy. First, however, something must be said about the context in which the unknown author presents his ideas on prophecy and about his concept of the spiritual underlying them.

EpJac 2-7: unity and coherence

Although EpJac claims to be a letter to an unknown addressee, its form is essentially that of a dialogue between the risen Christ and two of his disciples: James, the pretended author of the letter, and Peter. Their conversation takes place immediately before Christ’s ascension which is situated here on the 550th day after his resurrection. On this day Christ appears to the Twelve who are writing their memoirs. He announces his return to heaven. The disciples are invited to follow him. Jesus points out, however, that whether or not they will enter the
Kingdom of Heavens does not depend on an order from his part, but on their own inner preparation alone: if they enter the Kingdom, it will be on account of their being full (2: 30-33). Then Christ takes James and Peter apart "in order to fill them" (2:35). A long speech of Christ follows, interrupted from time to time by questions or remarks of James and Peter. As will be seen, these serve as a literary device, introducing a new theme or giving rise to further development of a theme touched upon by Christ in passing.6

The beginning of Christ's speech (p. 2-7), which will occupy us here, divides into three sections. Although this may not be apparent at first sight, these sections are firmly connected, both formally and by their contents, and develop logically from the starting-point defined on p. 2: 'how to attain the Kingdom of Heavens'.7 This is the Leitmotiv of the entire dialogue, which appropriately ends with the ascension of Christ and a frustrated effort from the part of James and Peter to follow him (p. 15).

The first of the three initial sections (2:40-4:22) is an exhortation to spiritual perfection in rather abstract and stereotyped terms, employing pairs of oppositions.8 The same pairs are often but not exclusively found in Valentinian gnosticism.9 James and Peter—and in them the readers—are exhorted to be sober instead of drunk (3:9-10),10 to be awake instead of sleeping (3:11-12).11 Health and rest are contrasted with illness (3:25ff);12 fullness with deficiency, emptiness and diminution.13 In a complicated dialectic discourse on fulfillment and diminution, these exhortations are brought to a climax (4:3-22).14 This last passage contains two statements which determine the character of the next two sections and lead up to them: first, it is said that real fullness is a stage preceding perfection (4:13; jōk abal); second, being filled is specified as being filled with the Spirit (4:19), as opposed to 'the word' (logos) which is said to be psychical.15 Here the first section ends.

The next two sections are introduced each by a question of James. They are remarkable for presenting clear and outspoken views on two issues hotly debated in 2nd and 3rd century Christianity: martyrdom and prophecy. The transition to the theme of martyrdom may seem abrupt at first sight but is easily explained by the preceding statement on fullness leading up to perfection (4:13). In the 2nd century the perfection-terminology, expressed in Greek τελειωο, Coptic jōk ebol and their cognates, had become associated in a technical sense with martyrdom.16 In the Alexandria of Clement martyrdom was τελειωσις tout