THE MYSTERY OF THE FIVE SEALS: Gnostic INITIATION RECONSIDERED

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Three apparently related texts from Nag Hammadi, the Apocryphon of John in its long recension, Trimorphic Protennoia, and the Gospel of the Egyptians, refer in rather enigmatic fashion to "the five seals." What exactly are these "five seals"? The context and language used would appear to suggest some kind of initiatory rite or formula, involving the granting both of knowledge and of protection from death and ignorance. Thus in the hymnic passage which concludes the long recension of the Apocryphon the saviour figure, Pronoia, in her third and final descent, after awakening and enlightening the sleeping Gnostic, raises him up and seals him (σφαγιζειν) "in the light of the water with five seals (σφαγιες) that death might not have power over him from now on." No less an authority on matters Gnostic than George MacRae thought that the best way to account for this hymnic passage was as a Gnostic liturgical fragment probably recited at a ceremony of initiation much in the manner of a Christian baptismal homily or hymn. And J.-M. Sevrin, in his exhaustive and detailed discussion of the so-called Sethian baptismal dossier of texts, develops this further. Although the usage may still be purely metaphorical, he argues that here we have in all probability a rite of quintuple baptism.

Now the evidence of Trimorphic Protennoia does seem to confirm such an interpretation of the five seals. In the third descent of the Saviour/Protennoia figure (cf. the Pronoia of the Apocryphon), she describes the process of salvation of the Gnostic in terms of stripping, investing in a garment of light, robing, spring baptism, enthroning, glorifying and rapture, followed by reception of the five seals from the Light of the Mother so that he partakes of the mystery of knowledge and becomes a light in light. A page later the five seals are equated with the ordinances of the Father, the glories higher than any glory: those who possess the five seals of these particular names have stripped off the garments of ignorance and put on a shining
light. Finally on the next page Protennoia asserts that she proclaimed to the elect the ineffable five seals that she should abide in them and they in her. The editor of the text in the Nag Hammadi Studies series, J.D. Turner, refers to the suggestion of an earlier editor, Gisela Schenke, that at each stage of the Sethian baptismal rite a divine name was invoked and the person being baptised was provided with a seal, but he himself thinks it more likely that the five seals “are a single baptismal rite consisting of the five stages of enlightenment noted above: investiture, spring baptism, enthronement, glorification and ecstatic rapture.” On the other hand, Yvonne Janssens, in her edition, conjectures that the five seals represent anointings of the five sense organs.

Does our final witness, the Gospel of the Egyptians, cast any more light? Certainly its even more allusive references to the five seals might appear to offer some support to these interpretations of the “five seals” as part of a rite of initiation. Thus the passage introducing the final hymnic section does refer, at least in the Codex III version, to the five seals in the context of baptism, invocation, renunciation and freedom from experiencing death. But the Codex IV version omits the number, and earlier on the five seals appear as heavenly figures alongside the triad of Father, Mother and Son as apparently produced by the Father, and as associated with the saving missions of Pronoia and heavenly Seth. Thus the editors of the text in the Nag Hammadi Studies series, Böhlig and Wisse, prefer to interpret the five seals not primarily as sacramental (here they allude to the five sacraments some have claimed to find in the Gospel of Philip), but as the figures of triple-male child, Youel and Esephech, five images of the primal triad of Father, Mother and Son. The references to “five seals” as sacramental are therefore to be seen as secondary.

However, Sevrin rightly stresses the liturgical, baptismal character of the entire work, and he ingeniously reconciles the two interpretations: the five seals are primarily baptismal, but have been given archetypes in the Pleroma. It is more a matter of the five seals being dependent on baptismal representation than the reverse, the rite as reconstructed by him involving five-fold immersion rather than insignation. But despite some similarities in language, seal being, as he notes, a “classic designation of Christian baptism,” he is led to deny the Christian character of the rite he finds underlying all three texts, precisely from the five seals and the apparent lack of any mention of unction. He ascribes the rite to a Barbelo-Sethian baptising sect of Jewish origin, while candidly admitting that it has nothing in common with Judaeo-baptist practices.