GENESIS TRADITIONS IN CONFLICT?: THE USE OF SOME EXEGETICAL TRADITIONS IN THE TRIMORPHIC PROTENNOIA AND THE JOHANNINE PROLOGUE

BY

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Introduction

Over twenty years ago, in 1978, a renowned panel of scholars of Gnosticism convened at Yale to discuss, among other topics, the literary relationship between a very well known text and a rather obscure one: the prologue from the Gospel of John, and a revelatory discourse from the cache of texts discovered near Nag Hammadi in 1945, the Trimorphic Protennoia.1 The topic had already been broached; as early as 1973, Gesine Schenke and the Berliner Arbeitskreis für die koptisch-gnostischen Schriften were the first scholars of Gnosticism on the international scene to note a curious phenomenon: the initially alien Trimorphic Protennoia—the sole extant version of an ancient, undated, unascribed Coptic text which Schenke had translated into German for her doctoral dissertation expanded upon an old mythic pattern, of which the Johannine Prologue formed the most reassuringly familiar example: the threefold salvific descent of God’s co-agent into the world to redeem those who were able to recognize their divine origins.2

1 The Trimorphic Protennoia is the sole extant treatise from the highly damaged NHC Codex XIII, only eight leaves of which survive. For critical editions, see Gesine Schenke, Die dreigestaltige Prottennoia (Nag Hammadi Codex XIII) (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1984); Yvonne Janssens, La Prottennoia Trimorphe (NHC XIII,1) (Laval: Les presses de l’université Laval, 1978) and John Turner, “The Trimorphic Protennoia,” Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII, ed. Charles Hedrick. The Coptic Gnostic Library, NHMS XXVIII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990). I have used Turner’s edition throughout; on occasion, my translation of the Coptic text differs slightly. For some summaries and observations on the difficulties of restoring this fragmented text, see the comments of Robert McL. Wilson, “The Trimorphic Protennoia,” Gnosis and Gnosticism. Papers read at the Seventh Annual International Conference of Patristic Studies, September 8th-13th, 1975, NHMS VIII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), 50-54.

2 Another significant text which shares the same set of traditions and patterns as the
The question of literary influence and dependency between the two texts spawned almost a dozen academic articles, as scholars argued either for or against Johannine primacy. This debate, like all others, reflected the winds of change within studies of Gnosticism and early Christianity. As the History of Religions approach to religious studies began to dislodge—or at least rattle—more theologically-engaged scholars of early Christianity, the stakes rose behind questions such as whether or not the Trimorphic Protennoia had been a gnosticizing “corruption” of a purer Johannine Christianity, whether the Prologue’s author betrayed his gnosticizing proclivities by drawing upon earlier gnostic sources, or whether, finally, the intention of the Prologue’s author had been to channel speculative gnostic traditions in his day into a new, incarnational theology.

Few academic debates in such a narrow and specialized field as Gnosticism have had the ability to break into the mainstream as this one, engaging as it did one of the most beloved passages of canonical scripture. Suddenly, an obscure non-canonical text did matter to other scholars of early Christianity. But then, almost as quickly as it began, interest in the topic waned. The conclusions of the Yale conference generated an aetiology which satisfied most scholars. George MacRae, the chair of the session on Sethian Gnosticism, summarized the conclusions of the participants; rather than sharing any direct textual relationship, the similarities could be explained by recourse to a sort of broad literary contextualization: both texts were

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Trimorphic Protennoia and the Johannine Prologue is the so-called “Pronoia Hymn” from the long recension of the Apocryphon of John. The precise relationship between all three texts remains unclear. The two scholars who have done considerable work on the problem, Roelof van den Broek and Michael Waldstein, concur that the Hymn presents an earlier re-formulation of Wisdom traditions which were then adapted and “masculinized” to fit the motif of a male Redeemer as the Logos. See R. van den Broek, “Von der juidischen Weisheit zum gnostischen Erlöser: Zum Schluf hymnus des Apokryphons des Johannes,” in idem., Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity, NHMS XXXIX (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 86-116; Michael Waldstein, “The Providence Monologue in the Apocryphon of John and the Johannine Prologue,” JEC 3:4 (1995): 369-402. I have largely neglected discussion of the Pronoia Hymn here not because it is not worthy of further discussion, but because it is beyond the scope of the present study.

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