

THE Gnostic MYTH: PROTOLOGY

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Resum

L'estudi presenta les característiques essencials de la protologia gnòstica. En fer-ho, es presenten les tendències de la recerca actual, les quals miren d'evitar generalment el terme «Gnosis», i volen entendre la correlació dels fenòmens com indicis del primitiu judaisme o del misticisme del primer cristianisme.

Paraules clau: Protologia; Apochryphon de Joan, Primera mística jueva, misticisme del primer cristianisme.

Abstract

The study presents essential characteristics of Gnostic protology. In doing so, it discusses currents of present Gnosis research which generally try to avoid the term "Gnosis" and want to understand correlating phenomena as traces of early Jewish or early Christian mysticism.

Keywords: Protology, Apochryphon of John, Early Jewish mysticism, Early Christian mysticism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The following study on the characteristics of the Gnostic idea of the origin of the cosmos is divided into three sections. At first, the terminological and methodical problems one gets confronted with when analyzing this topic area

are outlined (2). A proper concept of Gnostic protology should then be outlined, namely the corresponding parts of the Apocryphon of John (3). Against this background, the relationship of Gnostic concepts to further contemporary ideas of the origin of the world should finally be discussed (4).

2. METHODOLOGICAL PREPOSITIONS

This essay is supposed to deal with Gnostic protology, with Gnostic Ideas of the creation of the world. Because of this it is necessary to focus at first on the question how far it is possible to define the term “Gnosis” or “Gnosticism”. There are trends in research that generally avoid the usage of the term “Gnosis” for quite some time now. It’s more appropriate to understand so-termed Gnostic trends as facets of ancient Jewish and Early Christian history of religion. These trends are Jewish or Christian developments of tradition which are most notably featured by an adaptation of contemporary platonic or platonian-middle discourses and which had been branded as Gnostic-heretical in retrospect.¹ The power of this trend in recent Gnostic studies entails in taking methodical problems, which are connected to the usage of the terminology “Gnosis”, “Gnosticism” or “Gnostic”, seriously. A central problem is, that due to the usage of the terms “Gnosis” and “Gnostic” in recent concepts of characterization categories are kept, which had been mostly coined by antignostic authors.²

1. Cf. M. WILLIAMS, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”. An argument for dismantling a dubious category*, Princeton 1996, 29-54 bzw. 263f.; K. L. KING, *What ist Gnosticism?*, Cambridge 2003, 235f. *In regard to the methodological problems of a distinction between the terminology “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism”, which was formulated on the Messina-Congress (1966) cf. C. COLPE, Vorschläge des Messina-Kongresses von 1966 zur Gnosisforschung* (BZNW 37), Berlin 1969, 129-132; K. RUDOLPH, Art. “Gnosis, Gnostiker”, in: *Der neue Pauly* 4 (1998), 1117-1125; C. MARKSCHIES, “Die Gnosis” (C. H. Beck Wissen in der Beck’schen Reihe 2173), München 2001, 21-24 and R. VAN DEN BROECK, Art. “Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion”, in: W. J. HANEGRAFF (Hg.), *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esoterism*, Vol. I, Leiden 2005, 403-416, 405: “... the terms ‘Gnosis’ und ‘Gnostic’ are applicable to all ideas and currents, from Antiquity to the present day, that stress the necessity of esoteric knowledge. The term Gnosticism, however, should be used with respect, to the gnostic systems of Antiquity only”.
2. In regard to the use of the term ‘Gnosis’ within ancient text cf. G. FILORAMO, *A History of Gnosticism* (translated by A. Alock), Cambridge 1994, 7-12; J. HOLZHAUSEN, “Gnostizismus, Gnosis, Gnostiker. Ein Beitrag zur antiken Terminologie”, in: *JbAC* 44 (2001), 58-74, 58ff.; M. SMITH, “The History of the Term Gnostikos”, in: B. LAYTON (Hg.), *The rediscovery of gnosticism*. Volume 2: *Sethian gnosticism* 2 (StHR 41), Leiden 1981, 796-807, 796ff.

Especially trendsetting is the use of the term, which occurs in the anti-gnostic writings of Irenäus.³ He conventionalizes “Gnosis” as a collective term for different doctrinal traditions, which he tried to describe in his monumental opus *Adversus Haereses*. At the same time Irenäus stated that only one of the described traditions named themselves “Gnostics”: to be exact the Karpokratians (Haereses II, 25,6). Because of this the question comes up whether a neutral and historical orientated description should use such a polemically loaded term, which had been used almost exclusively by antignostical authors.

Nonetheless, a complete prevention of the terms “Gnosis” and “Gnostic” can arouse other methodical problems. Without a reflected use of this terminology it is hardly possible to describe the peculiarities of these groups and traditions which not only Christian authors spoke against but also prominent contemporary supporters of Platonism or Stoicism.⁴ In my opinion this issue is clearly recognizable by the sketch of protological concepts within Gnostic conceptions of the world. To my mind especially in the notion of the cosmos and life one can see that the Gnosis or Gnostic groups represent a factor in ancient cultural history which can not be understood as a facet of other religions or philosophy. But before I can condense this working hypothesis into a proposition, I have to explain in which way I use the terms “Gnosis” and “Gnostic”. I pursue typological description models developed by later Gnosis studies, which aim for an account of Gnostic traditions without the use of

3. These heresiological expositions can of course not be regarded in any way as neutral description of different Gnostic schools. Cf. B. MUTSCHLER, *Das Corpus Johanneum bei Irenäus von Lyon: Studien und Kommentar zum dritten Buch von Adversus Haereses* (WUNT 189), Tübingen 2006, 497 in regard to the polemics of Irenaeus against Valentinus and the so-called Valentinian School: “Tatsächlich reduziert er (sc.: Irenaeus) sie (sc. the spectrum of different gnostic schools) zugespitzt auf einen Hauptgegner: die Valentinianer. Auch diese werden wiederum reduziert und typisiert, obwohl Irenäus gelegentlich verschiedene Richtungen erwähnt ... Man brauche jedoch nicht das gesamte Meer auszutrinken, um zu wissen, dass sein Inhalt salzig sei, bemerkt er im zweiten Buch zur Erklärung.” (so in regard to Iren., *Haer.* II,19,8: *Nec enim oportet, quod solet dici, universum ebibere mare eum qui velit discere quoniam aqua eius salsa est* [cf. A. ROUSSEAU – L. DOUTRELEAU, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les Hérésies, Livre II. Édition critique* par A. Rousseau et L. Doutreleau, (SC 294), Paris 1982, 196, 143-145]). Concerning different theological profiles within in the Valentinian Schools cf. E. THOMASSEN, *The Spiritual Seed. The Church of the “Valentinians”* (NHMS 60), Leiden 2006, 133ff.
4. In regard to Plotin, *Enneaden* II,9 cf. K. ALT, *Philosophie gegen Gnosis: Plotins Polemik in seiner Schrift II 9* (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur/Mainz; Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse; Jahrgang 1990; Nr. 7), Stuttgart 1990, 15-20; C. TORNAU, *Plotin: ausgewählte Schriften: herausgegeben, übersetzt und kommentiert* von C. Tornau (Reclam’s Universal-Bibliothek ³1815), Stuttgart 2001, 394f.

preconceived definitions. The following observations refer to such a description model, which had been developed by Christoph Marksches.⁵ According to Marksches a concept has to show eight characteristics to be termed “Gnostic”:

1. The experience of a completely other-worldly, distant, supreme god;
2. The introduction, which among other things is conditioned by this, of further divine figures, or the splitting up of existing figures into figures that are closer to human beings than the remote supreme God;
3. The estimation of the world and matter as evil creation and an experience, conditioned by this, of the alienation of the gnostic in the world;
4. The introduction of a distant creator God or assistant: within the Platonic tradition he is called “craftsman” —Greek *demiurgos*— and is sometimes described as merely ignorant but sometimes also as evil;
5. The explanation of this state of affairs by a mythological drama in which a divine element that falls from its sphere into an evil world slumbers in human beings of one class as a divine spark and can be freed from this;
6. Knowledge (“Gnosis”) about this state, which, however, can be gained only through a redeemer figure from the other world who descends from a higher sphere and ascends to it again;
7. The redemption of human beings through the knowledge of “that God (or the spark) in them” (Test Ver, NHC IX, 3, 56, 15-20), and finally
8. A tendency towards dualism in different types which can express itself in an concept of God, in the opposition of spirit and matter, and in anthropology.

After I positioned myself in view of the attempts to describe the development of Gnostic traditions, I will focus on the next methodical problem that caused controversies in the history of Gnostic research especially concerning the topic area of protology.

There are different methodical approaches to illustrate Gnostic protology. One of the most solid accesses is certainly to give a summary of literary passages on concepts, which Gnostic source is certain. But the problem of differences between literary passages on Gnostic cosmogonies remains. Respectively the question arises to which extent an overlap of these different protological conceptions, which is common for different Gnostic schools like the Valenti-

5. Cf. C. MARKSCHIES, *Gnosis: an introduction* (translated by John Bowden), London 2003, 16f.

nians, the Sethians or the so-called Barbelo-Gnostics, can be elaborated that represents the root of a Gnostic protology. But this approach can possibly lead to an artificial conception that cannot find an analogy in concrete historical traditions of Gnostic history of religion. In addition this approach can lead one to the danger of an argumentative circle. The problem in hand is the selection of literary works, which should be included in the studies. This selection prejudices the conclusion of studies.

Considering this methodical dilemma I will follow a strategy, which I believe is more solid. I will choose one representative text of a Gnostic protology as a primary reference. Starting from this basis of discussion characteristics of other Gnostic drafts can be explained and borders between Gnostic and Non-Gnostic concepts can be suggested.

3. THE INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS OF CREATION IN THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN AS A REPRESENTATIVE EXAMPLE OF GNOSTIC PROTOLOGY

In regard to the description of Gnostic protology the Apocryphon of John is informative in more than one aspect. On the one hand this work gives one of the most detailed interpretations of the biblical creation narrative found in Gnostic evidences.⁶ On the other hand the Apocryphon of John is referred to various texts which had been found in Gnostic archaeological evidences (NHC II,1; NHC III,1; NHC IV,1 und BG 2).⁷ Some of the addressed representatives of Gnostical research postulate, particularly in matters of Gnostic reformulations of biblical accounts of creation, that the Apocryphon of John

6. Because of this the protology of the Apocryphon of John is a "für die Ontogenese und Chronologie der Gnosis... hochbedeutsames Zeugnis". Cf. K. RUDOLPH, "Ein Grundtyp gnostischer Urmensch-Adam-Spekulation", in: DERS., *Gnosis und spätantike Religionsgeschichte*. Gesammelte Aufsätze (NHS 42), Leiden 1996, 123-143, 123; S. PÉTREMENT, *A Separate God: the Christian Origins of Gnosticism*, London 1991, 387ff.
7. In regard to the development to the different versions of the Apocryphon of John cf. K. KING, "Approaching the variants of the Apocryphon of John", in: J. D. TURNER – A. MCGUIRE (Hg.), *The Nag Hammadi library after fifty years. Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature commemoration* (NHS 44), Leiden – New York – Köln 1997, 105-137, 105ff.; M. TARDIEU, *Codex de Berlin, Sources Gnostiques et Manichéennes* (TU 60), Berlin 1972, 26ff.; M. WALDSTEIN, "Das Apokryphon des Johannes (NHC II,1; NHC III,1; NHC IV,1 und BG 2)", in: H.-M. SCHENKE, *Nag Hammadi Deutsch* (hrsg. durch die Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, eingeleitet und übersetzt von Mitgliedern des Berliner Arbeitskreises für Koptisch-Gnostische Schriften; hrsg. von H.-M. Schenke – H.-G. Bethge – U. U. Kaiser) Koptische-gnostische Schriften 2: NHC 1,1-5,1, GCS N. F., Bd. 8, Berlin; New York 2001, 98f.

is an idea that is already presented in some Jewish Alexandrien conception.⁸ I can only be contrary to this estimation. In my opinion the cosmology of the Apocryphon of John is a conception, which cannot be counted among ancient Jewish religious idea. It's a Gnostic evidence that uses ancient Jewish conceptions to explain a different world view to its readers.

To illustrate this issue it is necessary to explain the composition of the Apocryphon of John at first. The Apocryphon of John has a clear and thought-out structure of composition:⁹

1. Frame Story: John and Arimanios; John and Jesus.
2. First Main Part: Theogony und Cosmogony.
 - 2.1 Upper Theology: The Triad of Father, Mother und Son.
 - 2.2 Upper Cosmogony: The Universe.
 - 2.3 Lower Theogony: The Wisdom (Sophia) and her Son Yaltabaoth.
 - 2.4 Lower Cosmogony: The World of Yaltabaoth.
3. Second Main Part: The Development of Gnostic Soteriology and Anthropology in the Form of a critical Midrash on Gen 1-7.
 - 3.1 Regret and Renewal of Wisdom (Commentary on Gen 1,2).
 - 3.2 The First, Psychic-choische (?) Adam (Commentary on Gen 1,26f.).
 - 3.3 The Second, Pneumatic Adam (Commentary on Gen 2,7).
 - 3.4 The Paradise (Commentary Gen 2-3).
 - 3.5 Yaltabaoth creates the Sexual System (Gen 4-7).
 - 3.6 Catechetical Insertion of Seven Questions about Gnostic Soteriology.
 - 3.7 Salvation through Cognition.
4. Frame Story: John and Jesus.

In the background story of the Apocryphon of John Jesus appears to his "favourite" disciple John and he teaches his real esoteric message. The Apocryphon sees itself as the "secret Gospel of John", which should be handed over

8. Cf. R. VAN DEN BROECK, "The creation of Adams' physic body in the Apocryphon of John", in: DERS., *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrien Christianity* (NHMS 39), Leiden – New York – Köln 1996, 67-85, 70: "AJ's account of the creation... is a curious mixture of Plato's analysis of the structure of the human body, a planetary melothesia, and the doctrine of the soul's astral body, all based on a Jewish, Alexandrien interpretation of the biblical story of the creation (...)."
9. Cf. M. WALDSTEIN, "Das Apokryphon des Johannes (s. NF 7)", 95ff.

only to a few Christians that deserve the message (so the reference at the end of the text).¹⁰

The Apocryphon of John contains an extensive Gnostic cosmogony myth, which is based on a differentiation between the higher world of the true God Metropator and a lower world of the Demiurge Jaldabaoth. This differentiation can be understood as a basic motif, as a *genus proximum* for all Gnostic schools. The specific differences between those schools can be explained in regard to the specific descriptions of the upper world and the lower god, for instances in regard to the names of the emanations of the highest god, in regard to the names of the lower god or in regard to the differentiation between different classes of human beings.

The esoteric doctrine of Jesus within in the Apocryphon of John is subdivided into two main parts. The first part is a detailed explanation of a Gnostic idea of theogony and cosmogony. The second part shows the resulting consequences for the understanding of the biblical story of creation (NHC II,1 p. 13,13-30,11). There are further sections in this reformulation of Genesis 1-7 which deal with the main features of Gnostic soterology. The major concern of the first main part is an explanation of the cause, which led to a contrast between a higher and a lower world. According to a myth Sophia, who belongs to the fourth eon, made a mistake while the creation of the higher cosmos took place (NHC II,1 p. 9, 25ff.). She created a thought or a picture without the permission of the highest god or her male partner. The lower Demiurge Jaldabaoth developed from the imperfect emanation of her own nature (NHC II,1 p. 10, 1ff.). Sophia tried to hide her mistake by hiding her son from other gods and the higher world. But quickly Jaldabaoth started to create his own world with compliant archons:

And because of the invincible power which is in her, her thought did not remain idle and a thing came out of her which was imperfect and different from her appearance, because she had created without her consort. And it was dissimilar to the likeness of its mother for it has another form. And when she saw (the consequence) of her desire, it had changed into a form of a lion-faced serpent. And its eyes were like lightning fires which flash. She

10. Cf. T. NAGEL, "Zur Gnostisierung der johanneischen Tradition. Das 'geheime Evangelium nach Johannes' (Apokryphon Johannis) als gnostische Zusatzoffenbarung zum Evangelium", in: J. FREY – U. SCHNELLE (Hg.), *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums. Religions- und traditions-geschichtliche Studien* (WUNT 175), Tübingen 2004, 675-694, 675ff., who characterizes the Apocryphon of John as "das Geheime Evangelium nach Johannes" (Ibid., 675); accordingly P. J. LALLEMANN, *The Acts of John: a Two-Stage Initiation into Johannine Gnosticism* (Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 4), Leuven 1998, 110-123.

cast it away from her, outside that place, that no one of the immortal ones might see it, for she had created it in ignorance. And she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it except the Holy Spirit who is called the mother of living. And she called his name Yaltabaoth. This is the first archon who took a great power from his mother. And he removed himself from her and moved away from the places in which he was born. He became strong and created for himself other aeons with a flame of luminous fire which (still) exists now. (NHC II,1 p. 10, 1ff.).¹¹

The biblical story of creation, which is reformulated in the ongoing development of the Apocryphon of John, mainly deals with the cosmogony of the lower Demiurge. This means, that the whole biblical story of creation is read in an opposite direction. Accordingly all other Theologumena that are established in biblical texts as name or self-predication of Jahwe are now conferred on Jaldabaoth. An impressive example of this issue documented in the following text-example.

The sovereign, who is weak, has three names. The first name is Jaldabaoth, the second is Saklas and the third name is Samael. He is outrageous in the arrogance he contains because he said: "I am God. There is no other God but me". (NHC II,1 p. 13, 8f.).¹²

This text piece is interesting in more than one way: A declaration was put into Jaldabaoth's mouth, which can be understood as a reformulation of Jes 45,5 and, in the broader sense, Ex 20,3. These texts are traditions important for the old testamental development of a monotheistic notion of god.¹³ In the context of the Apocryphon of John this conclusion is turned into its antipode, into a parody of Jaldabaoth, who is very limited in his self-awareness.¹⁴ We can already ask how far we can understand such a notion of God as a facet of ancient Jewish religious history. From my point of view it is rather a repre-

11. In regard to the translation cf. F. WISSE, "The Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; and BG 8502,2)", in: J. M. ROBINSON (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Leiden etc. 1977, 104-123, 110.

12. Cf. F. WISSE, "The Apocryphon of John (s. FN 11)", 112.

13. Cf. E. E. POPKES, *Das Menschenbild des Thomasevangeliums: Untersuchungen zu seiner religionshistorischen und chronologischen Verortung* (WUNT 206), Tübingen 2007, 316f.

14. With this subtle polemic goes another part of the Apokryphon of John, in which the name of Jaldabaoth is explained as a corruption of Jahwe and Zebaoth. Cf. W. BOUSSER, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (Neuausgabe der Auflage von 1907) (FRLANT 10), Göttingen 1973, 14f.

sentative for a Gnostic adoption of Jewish traditions helping to convey a given conception, which could also be explained without a Jewish background.¹⁵

The whole following reformulation of the biblical story of the creation in the Apocryphon of John can be understood in the same way. The present creation is declared a totally bad creation of the demiurge. And the physique of human existence is the fetter in which the demiurge wants to keep men imprisoned. For example for such an interpretation we can read the next three text-examples:

And he said to the authorities which attend him, "Come, let us create a man according to the image of god and according to our likeness, that his image may become a light for us". (NHC II,1 p. 14, 33f.).¹⁶

This text is of course the adaption of Gen 1,26f., the motif, that Adam is created to the likeness of god, in this case to the likeness of Yaltabaoth. According to the Apocryphon of John the intention of Jaldabaoth's creation of the first human being was not fulfilled.¹⁷ Jaldabaoth formed Adam because he wants to create a model of the enlightened image of the highest god, which has been revealed at the sky of his world. But his Adam is just a dead body without any enlightenment. Because of this Jaldabaoth is inspired by the upper gods to transcend his own spirit into Adam. Because of this the Gnostic protology combines the motif of Gen 1,26f. with the motif, that god gives the live to Adam by blowing his pneuma into the body of the first human being (Gen 2, 7).¹⁸ This aspect is a key passage for a Gnostic anthropology. From the moment on the human beings are in between the lower world of Jaldabaoth

15. This could be shown, if the protology of the Apokryphon of John is compared with the protology of the text, Zostrianus' (NHC VIII,1). Even if the protology of these texts is quite comparable, they have a totally different framework. According to Zostrianus its main character is a family member of Zarathustra, who has a vision of a Gnostic myth. According to the Apocryphon of John Jesus appears to his "favourite" disciple John and teaches his real esoteric message. But even if both texts deal with different religious backgrounds within their framework, their contents of the Gnostic myth is quite similar.

16. Cf. F. WISSE, "The Apocryphon of John (s. FN 11)", 113.

17. In regard to the importance of this conception within the history of Gnostic anthropology cf. A. H. B. LOGAN, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: a Study in the History of Gnosticism*, Edinburgh 1996, 198 Anm. 26: "The interpretation of Gen 1:26 in AJ ... represents the fundamental type of Gnostic anthropology." For comparable estimations cf. H.-M. SCHENKE, *Der Gott Mensch in der Gnosis: ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Diskussion über die paulinische Anschauung von der Kirche als Leib Christi*, Göttingen 1962, 34-43; J. JERVELL, *Imago Dei. Gen 1,26f. im Spätjudentum, in der Gnosis und in den paulinischen Briefen* (FRLANT 58), Göttingen 1960, 122f.

18. Cf. G. P. LUTTIKHUIZEN, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions* (NHMS 58), Leiden 2006, 61f.: "The demiurgical God tried to copy man after a luminous archetype that was shown to him from above. In doing so, the Demiurge hoped to gain control of this

and the upper world of the true gods. The pneuma of Jaldabaoth is now imprisoned in the body of the human beings. Or as we read in the next text example:

And the power of the mother went out of Yaltabaoth into the natural body which they had fashioned after the image of the one who exists from the beginning. (NHC II,1 p. 19,31f.).¹⁹

To keep this power within his world, Jaldabaoth invents the difference between the genders, the distinction between men and women and their sexual desire for each other. This is the exact opposite towards the biblical understanding of the creation of mankind. Within the biblical creation it is gods will, that the first man and woman procreate the next generations of human beings.²⁰ Within in the Apocryphon of John this is just the attempt of Jaldabaoth to imprison his lost power within this world:

Now up to the present day sexual intercourse continued due to the chief archon. And he planted sexual desire in her who belongs to Adam. And he produced through intercourse the copies of the bodies, and he inspired them with his spirit. And the two archons he set over principalities so that they might rule over the tomb. And when Adam recognized the likeness of his own foreknowledge, he begot the likeness of the son of man. He called him Seth according to the way of the race in the aeons. (NHC II,1 p. 24,26-25,1).²¹

This is exactly the turning point within a Gnostic myth of protology. The human beings have to find the knowledge, the Gnosis, that they are imprisoned in this world of Jaldabaoth: „At the heart of the bewildering variety... lies the same basic conception: humanity is a mixture of divine and anti-divine elements, and the various, often inconsistent, anthropologies represent attempts to do justice to this insight and dilemma“.²²

light. However, something quite different happened: he did not gain the light revealed to him but, ironically, lost the light-substance in his possession.”

19. Cf. F. WISSE, “The Apocryphon of John (s. FN 11)”, 119.

20. In regard to this fundamental motif of biblical anthropology cf. T. HIEKE, *Genealogien der Genesis* (HBS 39), Freiburg i. B. 2003, 257-263; H. W. WOLFF, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments*, Gütersloh 2002, 238.

21. Cf. F. WISSE, “The Apocryphon of John (s. FN 11)”, 112.

22. Cf. A. H. B. LOGAN, *Gnostic Truth* (s. FN 17), 168. For K. RUDOLPH, *Urmensch-Adam-Spekulation* (s. FN 6), 136 this motif can be understood as the „Kern dieses Mythos, (der die) einzelnen Lehrsysteme miteinander verbindet.“

4. THE PROTOLOGY OF THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN IN CONTRAST TO JEWISH AND PLATONIC PROTOLOGY

The investigation of the protology of the Apocryphon of John could evoke a question, which is important for the understanding of the religious background of this text: Can such an idea be understood as a consistent embodiment of ancient Jewish beliefs —or, as the representatives of the latter Gnosis research would say, as a manifestation of the early Jewish mysticism? To my mind such an appraisal can only be emphatically negated. Instead this concept serves as an example of the differentiation of the central question, which was made at the beginning of this presentation. The genesis of the cosmology of the Apocryphon of John cannot be ascribed to the ancient Jewish belief. The Apocryphon of John uses the biblical creation story just to convey a given cosmological concept.

There is even not a bridge between such a Gnostic protology and the protology of Philo of Alexandria. Even Philo develops an interpretation of Gen 1,26f.; 2,7 which is inspired by middle platonic discourses and that shows at first sight some affinities to the interpretation of Gen 1/2 within the Apocryphon of John. But the principles and consequences of these interpretations are quite different. I just want to mention the intention of the text “De aeternitate Mundi”, in which Philo has to struggle with the stoic concept of a *εκπύρωσις*. In this context Philo emphasizes emphatically, that the world is the good creation of a good creator and that god created the world to exist in eternity (cf. Philo, *AetMun* 8,1ff. and the appellation in the final remarks of *De Opificio Mundi*: μακαρίαν καὶ εὐδαίμονα ζωὴν βιώσεται δόγμασιν εὐσεβείας καὶ οὐσίτης χαραχθείς [Opif 172]).²³ Between this concept a gnostic differentiation between a higher god and the creator of this world lays not only a small gap, but every larger canyon. This aspect corresponds with a phenomenon that later Gnostic inventions of tradition in other cultural contexts used established beliefs to explain their philosophy. I only want to point to the phenomenon, that for example Neo-Platonic philosophers accuse the Gnostic education to use platonic traditions in an inappropriate way. This can be seen especially in Porphyrios passed on antignostical

23. Cf. D. M. HAY, “Philo’s Anthropology, the Spiritual Regimen of the Therapeutae, and a Possible Connection with Corinth”, in: R. DEINES – K.-W. NIEBUHR (Hg.), *Philo und das Neue Testament: wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen; I. Internationales Symposium zum Corpus Judaeo-Hellenisticum 1.-4. Mai 2003, Eisenach – Jena* (WUNT 172), Tübingen 2004, 125-142, 137f.; D. RUNIA, *On the creation of the cosmos according to Moses* (Philo of Alexandria commentary series 1), Leiden u. a. 2001, 1ff.

texts originally stated by Plotin (compare *Enneaden* II,9).²⁴ Plotin blames his opponents for inappropriately deriving a fundamental discreditation of physical constitution of the human existence or the cosmos from the platonic ideology. In contrast Plotin points out that neither the platonic ideology nor the idea of a representation of human existence can be seen as a reason for considering the physic constitution of human existence as deficient and something that has to be overcome (compare Plotin, *Enn.* II 8,4-5.10-12;9,6). In fact the cosmos indicates the dignity and beauty of the divine creation (cf. Plotin, *Enn.* II 8,8-10: ἐπεὶ οὐδὲ τοῦ παντός τὴν διοίκησιν ὀρθῶς ἄν τις μέμψαιτο πρῶτον μὲν ἐνδεικνύμενην τῆς νοητῆς φύσεως τὸ μέγεθος. According to this phenomenon several ecclesiastical heresiologists try to demonstrate, that the gnostic interpretation of the Platonic theory of ideas contradicts in principle to the original intention of Plato (in regard to Irenäus, *Haer.* II 14,3,27ff.; Clemens, *Str.* III 12,2f.; 17,4-18,1 etc.).²⁵

All the more one question arises, which is perhaps one of the most difficult questions of ancient history of religion: What had been the sources of the creation of a Gnostic philosophy or religion?²⁶ In my opinion a satisfying answer to this question has not been found yet. In my opinion it is only possible to explain why attempts of derivation from the ancient Judaism, the Early Christianity, from Middle- or Neo-Platonic and Stoic traditions are not persuasive. But the intellectual historical sources of Gnosis are still vague today.

24. Concerning the main topics within in the controversies of Plotinus and his gnostic opponents cf. K. ALT, *Philosophie gegen Gnosis: Plotins Polemik in seiner Schrift II 9* (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur/Mainz; Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse; Jahrgang 1990; Nr. 7), Stuttgart 1990, 15-20; C. TORNAU, *Plotin: ausgewählte Schriften: herausgegeben, übersetzt und kommentiert von C. Tornau* (Reclam's Universal-Bibliothek 31815), Stuttgart 2001, 394f. In opposition to a gnostic interpretation of the Platonic theory of ideas Plotinus emphasizes emphatically, that the Cosmos expresses the dignity of the entire divine creation.
25. Cf. D. WYRWA, *Die christliche Platonaneignung in den Stromateis des Clemens von Alexandrien* (AKG 53), Berlin 1983, 202-224. In regard to this discourse it is important to mention, that Plotin argues against persons who refer to books which are named "Apocalypse of Zoroaster" and "Apocalypse of Zoroaster". In regard to the relationship between the Zostrianus and the Apocryphon of John cf. FN 15.
26. Cf. K. RUDOLPH, *Die Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*; 4. durchges. und ergänzte Auflage (UTB 1577), Göttingen 2005, 294: "die Probleme der Entstehung... der Gnosis (können) zu den schwierigsten der Gnosisforschung, ja der spätantiken Religionsgeschichte überhaupt gezählt werden."