

# Tensions between Gnosticism and Early Egyptian Christianity Reflected in Christian Copto-arabic Manuscripts

by

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The Nag Hammadi Library was almost certainly used by monks who inhabited caves cut into the face of Gebel el-Tarif, 3,3 miles from Chenoboskeia where the third Pachomian Monastery was located. Some of them had probably been monks at the monastery of Pachomius until their religious thought departed from the mainstream of official Christianity and monastic discipline and caused them to be excommunicated or to form a community of their own.

The radical departure from the church and its hierarchy is reflected in the *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII, 3, 79):

“... there shall be others of those who are outside our number who name themselves bishop and also deacons as if they have received their authority from God. They bend themselves under the judgment of the leaders. Those people are dry canals ...”

It is well known how fathers of the orthodox mainstream, from the second century onwards, opposed and refuted Gnostic ideas. In the fourth century Epiphanius, bishop of Cyprus, who may have read part of the literature preserved in the Nag Hammadi library, continued this heresiological tradition. Among the heresies which he and other Christian authors ascribes to various gnostic groups are docetism and spiritualized ideas of the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection.

These tendencies are in fact attested in the

Nag Hammadi library. The Sethian idea reported by Epiphanius (*Against Heresies* 39.3.5) that Seth visited men in the guise of Jesus, implying that Seth was incarnate in Jesus, is quite explicit in the Gospel of the Egyptians (NHC III, 2 and IV, 2), in which the great Seth comes from the heavens, puts on Jesus as a garment and accomplishes his work of salvation. A similar discontinuity between Christ and his body is apparent in The Letter of Peter to Philip. In this tractate, Christ repeatedly refers to his incarnation in phrases like “I was sent down in the body” (VIII, 2, 136, 18) or “when I was in the body” (VIII, 2, 138, 2).

Straightforward docetism is attested in the *Apocalypse of Peter* in codex VII:

“He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one in whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being as his likeness. ...”

In this tractate, the radical division of spirit and flesh, divine and human, reduces the suffering of Christ to mere imagery, significant in a mythological sense and pointing to the condition of man in this world, but certainly less real than the laughing spiritual Christ.

A similar spiritualized understanding is applied to the resurrection of Christ in *The Treatise on Resurrection* in codex I: The Saviour, it is said, swallowed up the visible by the invisible

and transformed himself into an imperishable aeon (NHC I, 45, 15-24). The tractate acknowledges the words of the apostle (Romans 8, 17; Eph. 2, 5-6): "We suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him", but considers the suffering as an illusion. Resurrection is nothing but the lifting of that illusion, Truth as it is when illusion is gone. (NHC I, 48, 5-29) Thus, the resurrection of man, who participates in the resurrection of Christ as beams in the sun, is a spiritual act swallowing up the psychic and the fleshly (NHC I, 45, 40). In the Apocalypse of Peter, the interpretation of the docetist resurrection as a reunification of the spiritual body of Christ with the intellectual light of the heavenly Pleroma (NHC VII, 83, 5-15) may perhaps be intended as exemplar of similar spiritual exercises.

It was against such spiritualizing tendencies that the international orthodox Christian mainstream defined itself. But how did the early Egyptian church react to these tendencies? Is it possible on a more local Egyptian basis to identify and characterize more closely the dogmatic tensions which, after all, must have lead to the preservation of the Nag Hammadi library in a desert 3 miles from the monastery of Pachomius, who seems to have warned his monks against reading such books?

The Coptic Museum in Cairo possesses a number of Coptic and Arabic manuscripts that may at least help us to imagine the tensions between the users of the Nag Hammadi library and the early Coptic Church. The theological stand made against the spiritualized christology of the Nag Hammadi library may to a very large degree be inferred from the writings of Archbishop Athanasius against the Arians. His refusal to accept "that God dwelt in the man whose name was Jesus" covers also the Gnostic ideas of incarnation exemplified above. It may be worth while to quote *in extenso* one of his ar-

guments from another Arabic manuscript, *The Confessions of the Fathers of the Coptic Church* from A.D. 1544:

"St Athanasius also said, in the homily which he wrote on the creed: "These last came to be among those of little faith because of their question: By what likeness (*shibh*) or by what proposition (*maqal*) does God become man? And instead of the incarnation, they contrived for themselves a doctrine that the Lord indwelt (*halla fi*) the man, and that the locus of the union and the connection between them was a human activity. And instead of the one hypostasis of Christ, they believed in two hypostases and persons. And instead of the necessary confession of the Holy Trinity, they believed in a Quaternity with the activity of this last. In this there is contradiction without utility or consistency, because they bound the man to the God and reckoned the slave with the Lord and counted the creature with the uncreated persons. And in a contradictory manner they add to the Trinity a fourth, strange person, the best of all rational spirits, and it pleased them to worship the fourth kind in the place of the Trinity."

Again, the creed he refutes as an addition to the Trinity may be both an Arian and a Gnostic idea of incarnation. The "human activity" which is the locus of the union of divine and human may refer to the Arian Christ as exemplar of moral efforts as well as to some Gnostic Christ as exemplar of spiritual exercises.

Athanasius positively stated his own belief in the incarnation as a union of God and man in the sense that the Virgin Mary, under the law of mercy, conceived and brought forth a son whose name was Jesus, that he might gain those who were under the law. Thus God became manifest in the flesh and justified in the Spirit as preached by the apostles (1. Tim.

3,16). Athanasius insisted on the biblical narrative as the most adequate expression of the tangible reality of the incarnation. In a similar manner he spoke about the crucifixion, addressing both Arian christology and the doctetist interpretations of e.g. the *Apocalypse of Peter* quoted above:

"They have truly crucified the body of the Son who is not divided from the father and the Holy Spirit, or transformed into an invisible one. Christ has been crucified and has swallowed up death in victory (1. Cor. 15, 54) and overcome the devil, offering himself on the cross to take away the sin of the world (John 1, 29), for the life of the world (John 6,51).

Athanasius also insisted on the miracles reported by Matth. 37, 51-53 and Luke 23, 44-45. he took them as real events and tangible signs with a definite bearing on salvation history, not as patterns for spiritual exercises.

A further testimony of the orthodox Coptic reactions against such spiritualizing tendencies is the inclusion into the already mentioned *Confessions of the Fathers of the Coptic Church* of some passages of Epiphanius, insisting on the tangible reality of the resurrection: Christ rose in incorruption, without leaving the body, and the visible was not swallowed up by the invisible as in the Nag Hammadi *Treatise on Resurrection* quoted above. Rather he stood in the midst of the disciples and showed them his hands and his feet, and he ate before them, all in fulfillment of the scripture.

This insistence on real, historical events and tangible signs *vis-a-vis* the Arian and Gnostic positions was transmitted through the centuries within the Coptic church. A manuscript of the 17th century preserves Shaikh Abu'l-Farag Abdallah ibn al-Tayib's commentary on Matthew. In his interpretation of the words of the crucified Christ we can still trace these age-

old tensions: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me" (Matth. 27, 46) is taken as an expression of the cruelty to which Christ was exposed, but also as an assertion of his human nature (since the miracles which happened at the time of the crucifixion caused perplexity about his nature). By saying "my God" and not "my Father", he attested his human nature. The commentary goes on to interpret the last cry (Matth. 27, 50) as attesting his death, "that was real and not an illusion." In sharp contrast to the Nag Hammadi *Treatise on Resurrection* quoted above, the same author provides a very clearcut and concrete interpretation concerning the resurrection of mortals: The spirits of the righteous shall rest in Paradise in expectation of the resurrection on the Day of Judgment. Then they will be returned to their bodies and presented before Jesus in his glory (Matth. 24, 30 and 25, 31-34), corresponding to the idea that the spirit of our saviour stayed in Paradise three days until the time of his resurrection. Shaikh Abu'l-Farag described Paradise as the abode of the righteous spirits, waiting in expectation of resurrection and judgment, whereas the unrighteous spirits wait outside, guarded by angels until the Day of Judgment. The Kingdom is in Heaven, with the throne of His glory attended by myriads of angels. The righteous ones will be admitted there after the resurrection.

This brief presentation of extracts from the Coptic and Arabic manuscripts of Cairo is no exhaustive study of the tensions between Gnosticism and early Christianity in Egypt. Rather it serves to whet your appetite for further studies and especially to draw attention to the relevance of the Arabic manuscripts. The evidence we have surveyed does, however, indicate with some probability that tensions between the orthodox insistence on the tangible reality and the historical significance of New Testament narratives on the one hand and the spiritualizing interpretations of the Gnostics on the oth-

er were the local background of the departure or the excommunication of the users of the Nag Hammadi library. We are thus in a position at least to imagine on a more local basis

the ancient religious and dogmatic scenario that accounts for the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in a remote and deserted site some 50 years ago.

## Bibliography

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