

THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN:  
A CASE STUDY IN LITERARY CRITICISM

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Last Summer I told one of my colleagues working on the Gnostic texts that the literary critics seem to think that the ancient literary world was like a garden. In this garden there was a redactor hiding behind every bush. When an unsuspecting author strolled through the garden, manuscript in hand, the redactor would spring forth, seize the manuscript, and proceed to rewrite it. This approach to the literary history of a document is nowhere more dramatically illustrated than in the criticism of the *Gnostic Apocryphon of John*. Since a study of this document does not carry the emotional overtones associated with the criticism of Scripture, it affords us an excellent case history. Conclusions drawn from this case history cannot be discounted as being radically influenced by the students' attachment to the theology or religion presented by the *Apocryphon*.

The *Apocryphon* has been known in modern times for nearly seventy-five years, ever since Carl Schmidt announced the discovery of the manuscript known as BG 8502 in 1896.<sup>1</sup> However, the text itself was not published until 1955.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, the Nag Hammadi discovery gave us three more variant texts of the *Apocryphon* (in Codices II, III, and IV). The first of these was published, along with other material, in a photographic edition by Pahor Labib in 1956.<sup>3</sup> All three were edited and published with German translations by Martin Krause and Pahor Labib in 1963.<sup>4</sup> Without going into full bibliographical detail on the *Apocryphon* one ought also to mention two dissertations with English translations of the text: Soren Giversen, 1961,<sup>5</sup> and Andrew Helmbold,

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1. "Ein vorrenaissche gnostisches Originalwerke. . . ." *Sitzungsberichte des kgl. preussischen Akademie des Wissenschaft*, (1896), pp. 839-847.
2. Walter Till, *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen papyrus Berlinensis 8502, herausgegeben, ubersetzt und bearbeit* (TU 60), Berlin, (1955).
3. Pahor Labib, *Coptic Gnostic Papyri in the Coptic Museum at Old Cairo*, Vol. I, Cairo (1956). For a full discussion of the Nag Hammadi corpus see the author's *The Nag Hammadi Gnostic Texts and the Bible*, Grand Rapids, (1967), and James M. Robinson, "The Coptic Gnostic Library Today," NTS 12 (1968), pp. 356-401 and "The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity: The Coptic Gnostic Library," NTS 16 (1970), 185-190 for latest information on progress on publication and translation of the corpus.
4. *Die drei Versionen des Apokryphon Johannis im koptischen Museum zu Alt-Kairo: (ADAIK, Koptische Reihe, Band I)*, Wiesbaden, (1962[3]).
5. *Apocryphon Johannis: The Coptic Text of the Apocryphon Johannis in the Nag Hammadi Codex II with Translation, Introduction and Commentary*, Copenhagen (1963). Cf. A. Helmbold, "The Apocryphon of John," JNES, XXV (1966), pp. 259-272 for an extensive review.

1961,<sup>6</sup> and the French translations of BG, Codex III and the long version (L=Codex II and IV) by Rodolphe Kasser.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, the publication of these editions and translations has opened the gates, not for a flood, but at least for a stream of interpretive, linguistic, and analytic articles.

Although disagreeing on details, most scholars who have studied the document have seen therein three major subjects discussed within a revelational frame story. The following outline covers the major divisions of the treatise, following the content and pagination of Codex II.

- I Opening Frame Story, 1,1-2,25
- II Cosmogony, 2,25-14,15
  - A. The Ineffable, Supreme Being, 2,25-4,21
  - B. The Light-World emanated by this God, 4,21-9,24
  - C. The Fall of Sophia, the lowest Emanation, and the begetting of Yaldabaoth, 9,25-10,19
  - D. The Creation of this World of Darkness by Yaldabaoth, 10,19-13,13
  - E. The Repentance and Pardon of Sophia, 13,13-14,15
- III Anthropology, 14,15-22,9
  - A. The Creation of Man, 14,15-20,5
  - B. The contest between Light and Darkness for dominion over man, 20,5-22,9
- IV Soteriology, 22,9-31,25
  - A. Dialogue, in interrogative style, between John and Christ concerning Man's future state, 22,9-30,11
  - B. The Hymn of the Redeemer celebrating her (his) descent into the netherworld of darkness (in longer version only), 30,11-31,25
- V Concluding Frame Story, 31,25-32,6
- VI Explicit, 32,7-9

The shorter version also follows the same outline, but omits two major sections: (1) the discussion (under III,A) of the creation of the various parts of the body and the various passions by assorted *daimons*, and (2) the Hymn of the Redeemer which is reduced to a few, garbled sentences in BG 75,10-76,9 and interwoven with portions of the conclusion.

In the brief period since the publication of these texts at least three

6. *The Apocryphon of John: A Text Edition, Translation, and Biblical and Religious Commentary*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dropsie College, Philadelphia, 1961.
7. "Bibliothèque gnostiques," I, II, III, IV: "Le Livre Secret de Jean," RThPh, XCVII (1964), pp. 140-150, XCVIII (1965), pp. 129-155, XCIX (1966), pp. 163-181, C (1967), pp. 1-30.

critical questions have emerged. First, is the document a unity? Second, which text or recension (BG, III or L) is the earliest! Third, which text is closest (or truest) to the original? To these questions we now turn.

### I THE UNITY OF THE *Apocryphon of John*

Most scholars feel that the basic document of the *Apocryphon of John* (the *Grundschrift*) is the cosmogonic section (4,21-13,9) which ends with Yaldabaoth's blasphemous claim: "I, myself, am a jealous God, and there is no other God except me."<sup>8</sup> This section is evidently the source used by Irenaeus, *adv. Haer.* I,29 in his description of the Barbelo-agnostics.<sup>9</sup> Critics believe this section was originally "non-Christian" and that the anthropological and soteriological sections were later additions.<sup>10</sup> Then the Hymn of the Redeemer was attached, telling of the Saviour's descent to redeem man.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the Christian revelation frame story was added, probably to secure a reading public for the document.<sup>12</sup> These are the broad lines of the conclusions reached by literary analysis of the book.

However, not all scholars have agreed with this analysis. For example, Alv Kragerud, in a little-known article,<sup>13</sup> analyzes the work quite differently. While agreeing on the existence of a third person ("John, he") frame story, he sees an inner frame story in the first person ("I, we," etc.) which extends from BG 20,3-71,14ff. (II, 1,17-28,5ff.) (*NTT*, LXVI, 1965, p. 17). He views the anthropological-soteriological sections as the basic document (p. 38) because these sections are a continuous commentary on Genesis, stretching from BG 39,1-75,10 except for BG 64,13-71,2 which he thinks is an interpolation because it contains no Genesis material. The *Apocryphon of John* commentary on Genesis, Kragerud thinks, is not typical of either Valentinian or Heracleonian exegesis, nor is it like the exegesis of the Habakkuk *peshet*, but rather it resembles the *Book of Jubilees* or the *Genesis Apocryphon*. He concludes that the exegesis is primary and the cosmogony and frame story are secondary.

8. Based, of course, on the statements in Exodus 20:5, Isaiah 45:5.

9. Cf. Hans-Martin Schenke, "Nag-Hamadi Studien I: Das literature Problem des Apokryphon Johannis," ZRGG XIV (1962), pp. 63f, and Jean Doresse, "Trois Livres gnostiques Inédits," VC II (1948), p. 159 and *Bulletin Academie Royale de Belgique* . . . , XXXV (1949), p. 440 for discussion of the independent existence of the section used by Irenaeus.
10. Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, New York, (1960), p. 210f, cf. p. 208. However, Kasser, RThPh XCVII (1964), p. 146 thinks the anthropology and soteriology are earlier and the cosmogony and eschatological dialogue later additions.
11. Jean Doresse, *Secret Books*, p. 208. He thinks the descent is of the Mother (not Christ), and that this is an archaizing motif, p. 211. Cf. Kasser, "Le Livre Secret de Jean' dans ses differentes Formes Textuelles Coptes," *Le Museon*, LXXVII (1964), p. 15, and RThPh. XCVII (1964), p. 145.
12. Cf. Kasser, RThPh. XCVII (1964), p. 146; R. McL. Wilson, "Gnosis, Gnosticism and the New Testament," *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. by U. Bianchi, Leiden (1967), p. 512, and Doresse, *Secret Books*, p. 211.
13. "Apocryphon Johannis: En formanlyse," *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift*, LXVI (1965). I am indebted to Dr. Birger Pearson of U. of California, Santa Barbara, for an English summary of this article.

I would suggest that the cosmogony (BG 26,21-47,15) is a substitute for instead of an exegesis of Genesis 1:1-25. One may note in this section two remote Biblical allusions: (1) "What is it, to stir?" (cf. Gen. 1:2, "the Spirit *moved*.") and (2) "You think that (it is) as (Kata) Moses said, 'Over the waters.'"

Kragerud believes the primary document was originally a tract, and that with the accretions of the cosmogony and frame story, it was finally presented as an apocalypse. However, the fact that the dialogue style of the *Apocryphon* is also characteristic of apocalypse in general (and especially of Nag Hammadi apocalypses) would argue against such dissection of the text.

## II PRIORITY OF TEXTS

Involved with the question of unity of the text is the related one as to which text is earliest since at least two recensions (BG and L) exist, probably three (counting III as a separate recension), or perhaps even four (if Irenaeus' version comes from an independent tradition). The preponderance of critical opinion has made BG the earlier version because the sections peculiar to L are regarded as additions, and of little vital importance.<sup>14</sup> However, this is a double-edged argument: If the material is inconsequential, why would anyone take the pains to compose it and insert it into the text?

According to Kasser (*RThPh*, 1964, p. 144 f.) there were four sections added to the text of the *Apocryphon of John* in the long version.

- (1) 11,21-13,10 which interrupts the flow of thought
- (2) 15,23-19,10 admittedly borrowed from the *Book of Zoroaster*
- (3) 28,11-32, an elaboration concerning the creation of Fate
- (4) 30,11-31,28, a badly integrated Hymn.

Rather than interrupting the flow of thought, the first of these sections is needed to show the transition from the celestial world to the creation of the material world. In Kragerud's analysis this passage is part of the *Grundschrift*. It is indispensable as indicating why Yaldabaoth, "the God of this world," was despised by the Gnostics and equated with the Jewish Yahweh. At issue here is the entire Gnostic "anti-this-world" philosophy. Only an understanding of that philosophy prepares one to understand the *Apocryphon's* presentation of Yaldabaoth's arrogance and his creation of his own Aeon in imitation of the world of light. In short, the passage is vital to the understanding of the movement of thought in the Gnostic myth.

Kasser considers the long section borrowed from the *Book of Zoroaster* as an addition by a later editor. This section is devoted to the enumeration of the various *daimons* who create the different parts of

14. Cf. Kasser, *Le Museon*, LXXVII (1964), p. 15, and *RThPh*, XCVII (1964), p. 144, *contra* Doresse, VC III (1949), p. 133 f.

the body. Giversen has pointed out that 15,6-29 speaks only of a *psychic* body, while this long "added" section closes with a reference to the *psychic* and *material* body. If it were omitted (as BG 48,14-49,6 does), then there would be nothing to indicate the creation of material (*hylic*) man. The long version describes man as a very earthly being. This prepares the way for the following sections dealing with the Garden of Eden motif. BG leaps directly from the creation of a *psychic* man to the appearance of *material* man, which seems to indicate that BG has omitted a vital section. Recent research has indicated the importance given to the role of these *diamons* in Gnostic thought. Furthermore, the names of the various *diamons* are not Coptic as they do not have any *Demotic* characters in them, but do have Greek and Latin endings. The probability is that the section was present already in the Greek originals from which the Coptic translation was made.

The third section that Kasser thinks is editorial addition tells the story of the Archons creating Fate to keep man enslaved. Following his theory that the Genesis commentary is the *Grundschrift*, Kragerud feels that this section fits the Genesis chronology precisely.<sup>15</sup> Coming after the eisegesis of the Fall and the story of Cain and Abel it ties in with the story of Enoch (Gen. 5) as exegeted in *Jubilees* 4:11-33. Kragerud says late Jewish tradition viewed Enoch as a wise man and a magician whose role is controlling "periods and times and seasons" paralleled the role of Fate in the *Apocryphon of John*. The *Jubilees* passage reads as follows:

"And he (Enoch) was the first among men that are born on earth who learnt writing and knowledge and wisdom and who wrote down the signs of heaven according to the order of their months in a book, that men might know the seasons of the years according to the order of their separate months. And he was the first to write a testimony and he testified to the sons of men among the generations of the earth, and recounted the weeks of the jubilee, and made known to them the days of the years, and set in order the months and recounted the Sabbaths of the years as we made (them) known to him."

Kragerud's assessment of the passage make it an integral part of the document.

The final section which Kasser sees as an interpolation (II, 30,11-31,38) is the self-contained Hymn of the Redeemer (*Le Museon*, 1964, p. 15). Most scholars view this Hymn as an essential part of the document. Kragerud considers it a part of the "inner frame" which BG 75,10-13 misunderstood and garbled.<sup>16</sup> This view supports Puech's contention that the long version here may be the more primitive text.<sup>17</sup>

15. *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift*, LXVI (1965), p. 30.

16. Cf. Giversen, *op. cit.*, p. 279, and Doresse, *Secret Books*, p. 209. Doresse thinks the hymn was mutilated and corrupted by an earlier copyist of BG. He thinks it is an "addition" to a work already extant.

17. Henri-Charles Puech, "The Apocryphon of John," Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, Philadelphia, (1963), p. 329 f.

Jean Doresse (*Secret Books*, p. 208) has listed an additional section (25,16-27,30) as an interpolation. However, the omission of this section would greatly reduce the dialogue which is a basic feature of the literary genre of the *Apocryphon*. In fact, dialogue prevails throughout the work, except for the cosmological section, and even that may be introduced by interrogation if one considers John's unuttered questions in that category. Furthermore, without this section the treatise would have little or no eschatology or explanation of the destinies of the various "souls." The preceding section closes with "the soul . . . he shall correct and heal it of the defect." This section follows logically from that statement.

To summarize this brief study of which text is earliest one needs to note that the *Apocryphon of John* is a literary unity. The "Christian" (?) salvation saga logically follows the revelatory statement: "I have come to tell you what is, and what was, and what shall be." The central section ("what is") tells how the spark of light was imprisoned in the world. The closing section ("what shall be") tells how the soul will be released. Thus a literary unity pervades the work. Any attempt to regard it as a Gnostic *Grundschrift*, edited and disguised as a Christian work is open to question.<sup>18</sup>

### III WHICH TEXT IS PUREST

Kasser believes BG is a reworking of an earlier text (*Le Museon*, 1964), p. 15) which suffered more in transmission than the long version (*RThPh.*, 1964, p. 144). He believes continual re-editing has given us a text far from its original (p. 142), with BG and L being the more archaic. Some light on this problem is shed by the external evidence.

Irenaeus had access to a document identical to or similar to AJ and used it in *adv. Haer.* I, 29 in his description of the Barbelognostics. However, he followed it only as far as 13,9. Schmidt thought Irenaeus had the entire document, but used only part of it.<sup>19</sup> Hans-Martin Schenke and Jean Doresse (*VC* II, 1948, p. 157 f.) believe he had only the cosmogonic *Grundschrift*. Both Schenke (p. 63) and Doresse think Irenaeus used a variant text. Doresse suggests the *Gospel of the Egyptians* as the source.<sup>20</sup> However, a careful perusal of the pertinent passages in *Egyptians* (III,2:42,7-10; 52,8-14) shows variants between it and Irenaeus. A careful study of *adv. Haer.* I,29 shows that Irenaeus used a version of the *Apocryphon* which sometimes is closer to BG, sometimes to L, and sometimes to neither. This would indicate that his text was independent of, and probably earlier than, the extant versions. Nevertheless, the texts behind both BG and L must be dated near the time of Irenaeus.

Various studies regarding copying errors in the different recensions,

18. *Contra* Doresse, *Secret Books*, p. 211 and Kasser, *RThPh*, XC VII (1964), p. 145 who both argue for the editorial process and believe that the shorter version is the earlier.
19. "Irenaeus und seine Quelle in *Adv. Haer.* I, 29," *Philotesia, Paul Kleinert zum LXX Geburtstag dargebracht*, Berlin (1907), pp. 315-336.
20. *VC*, II (1948), pp. 157 f.

and regarding the use of Greek words versus Coptic words have led to inconclusive results. This is partly due to the fact that it is impossible to determine how many times a given text has been copied in either Greek or Coptic. A frequently copied text would probably contain more errors than one less frequently copied, although it might actually date from a later time. Aside from broad generalities it seems impossible to reach definite conclusions at this time as to which text is purest.

#### CONCLUSION

We have now arrived at the point where the following tentative conclusions regarding the literary criticism of the *Apocryphon of John* may be set forth. First, critical scholars cannot agree on what is the basic document, the *Grundschrift*, and exactly what steps produced the treatise in its present form. Arguments presented to prove the priority of one section have met with counter-arguments offsetting them. Second, the reasons given for considering various sections as later additions have all been somewhat subjective and have been met by opposing views that show each of these passages to be definitely an integral part of the literary unity (even though we in this century may regard the passage as bizarre). Third, there is no external evidence forthcoming to date to demonstrate the priority of the shorter text, and thus demonstrate the supposed fact of editorial additions in the longer version. In fact, the reverse is true, for the condensed, garbled treatment of the Hymn of the Redeemer in the shorter version would pre-suppose that the longer version or its *vorlage* preceded the shorter version. It seems unlikely that two redactors borrowed the Hymn independently, and one quoted verbatim while the other mangled it. In short, the study of the literary criticism of the *Apocryphon* show the subjective nature of such criticism and how misleading it can be.

The great British scholar, Francis C. Burkitt, made a statement regarding criticism of the *Ascension of Isaiah* which is apropos. Perhaps you will recall that in the *Ascension* certain men, moved by Beliar, had Isaiah sawn asunder. Burkitt says: "I sometimes fancy that the spirit of Beliar must be dwelling in some of my friends when they use the wooden saw to dissect the *Ascension of Isaiah*."<sup>21</sup> One needn't agree with his conclusions regarding the unity of the *Ascension of Isaiah* to agree that the wooden saw has been used on the *Apocryphon of John* with disastrous results.

This article was opened with an anecdote and closed with another. That proves (following the methodology of the critics) that the body of the paper must have been considerably earlier than the work of the redactor (the present writer) who added the "frame story." Since redaction takes time—let us say about 100 years—the body of this paper was composed by an unknown scholar prior to 1896, and before modern scholars even knew of the existence of the *Apocryphon of John*.

21. *Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, London, (1914), pp. 45 ff., cf. pp. 72 ff.