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Gnostic exegesis on book of *Genesis*

Abstract: Through the influential thesis of Hans Jonas, for a long time modern scholars considered Gnostic schools as being, *par excellence*, anti-Jewish philosophical and religious movements. An influential group of scholars thought that Gnostics rejected the books of Old Testament. Gnostic exegesis, they say, is a “protest exegesis”, an “inverse exegesis” or “value reversal”. To start with, there is not a systematic approach of “reversals” or a systematic rejection of Old Testament. Indeed, in original Gnostic sources we can find such an exegesis, but this is not a common point for all Gnostic writings. In this paper we want to tackle some scholarly debates on Gnostic exegesis on *Genesis*.

Keywords: exegesis, Genesis, protest, reversal, allegory

1. Introduction

In a recent study, Winrich Löhr notes that in the Second Century begin to appear a series of “Christian teachers sought to interpret and propagate Christianity as a Philosophy in the Ancient sense of the word” (Löhr 2013, 584). These thinkers are at the origins of Scriptural Hermeneutics, or, using his own words, “Christian Gnostic teachers and schools are at the origin of the Christian interpretation of the Bible” (Löhr 2013, 584). Indeed, there are a couple of Gnostic teachers who played a leading role in the history of biblical interpretation. Basilides, Valentinus, Ptolemy or Herakleon – who wrote the first systematic commentary on the *Gospel of John*, are well known names therein. Over time, certain scholars have considered Gnostic teachers as anti-Jewish thinkers. That is what led them to say about those thinkers and teachers that they rejected the Jewish traditions and Jewish scriptures. The new discovered Gnostic writings revealed a more complex attitude toward the Old Testament and its doctrines. In this paper we want to highlight some scholarly debates on Gnostic exegesis in general, and their exegesis on book of *Genesis*, in particular.

Giovanni Filoramo and Claudio Gianotto analyze both heresiological sources and Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi and observe the following thing: from nearly 600 analyzed sources, the references to Old Testament are in particular references to book of *Genesis*; more exactly, from 600 texts,

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50 % refer to historical books, 25 % to prophets and 25 % to sapiential books. In the first group, almost 70 % are references to *Genesis*. Further, from 230 passages of this kind, almost 200 are linked with *Genesis* 1-11 (Filoramo and Gianotto 1984, 55). Accordingly, we see that stories from book of *Genesis* play a major role in Gnostic writings, in their way of thinking and interpreting the world and human history.

2. Protest against Old Testament?

Jonas' work had a huge impact in the history of research in this field. In his early work *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, first volume published in 1934, and after that revised and translated into English in 1958, Jonas makes a breakthrough point in the study of "Gnosticism". He suggests that the Gnostic religion is a religion of knowledge with "a certain conception of the world, of man's alienness within it, and of the transmundane nature of the godhead" (Jonas 2001, 101). This kind of special knowledge is expressed creatively in myths, borrowed from other religions. In his paper, presented in 1966 at the Messina Conference, Jonas proposes a definition of "Gnosticism" and he will point out that it has seven essential features; one of it interests us here: "Gnosticism" has an aggressive polemic against other religious tradition, as is the case of Judaism (Jonas 1970, 101-102; Jonas 2001, 33).

For the German scholar, Gnostics manipulate in an arbitrary way the text of Scripture. In this regard, he notes:

"Gnostic allegory, though often of this conventional type, is in its most telling instances of a very different nature. Instead of taking over the value-system of the traditional myth, it proves the deeper "knowledge" by reversing the roles of good and evil, sublime and base, blest and accursed, found in the original. It tries, not to demonstrate agreement, but to shock by blatantly subverting the meaning of the most firmly established, and preferably also the most revered, elements of tradition." (Jonas 2001, 91-92)

In his paper from the Messina Conference, he also writes: "The same value-reversal is practiced with regard to the Law, the prophets, the status of the chosen people – all along the line, one might say, with a very few exceptions, such as the misty figure of Seth. No tolerant eclecticism here" (Jonas 1970, 102).

Most of Jonas' theses are attractive, but they tend to distort the actual picture given by the original Gnostic tractates from Nag Hammadi library. Michael Allen Williams has the merit for rendering the first systematic attempt of dismantling the category of 'Gnosticism', as it was developed by Jonas. The American scholar summarizes the version of Jonas' 'Gnosticism' in the following way:

“‘gnostic’ demiurgical myths can be distinguished from others because ‘gnostics’ had an ‘attitude.’ They had an attitude of ‘protest’ or of ‘revolt,’ an ‘anticosmic attitude.’ This attitude allegedly showed up in the way ‘gnostics’ treated Scripture (they are alleged to have reversed all its values), viewed the material cosmos (they supposedly rejected it), took an interest in society at large (they didn’t, we are told), felt about their own bodies (they hated them).” (Williams 1996, 4-5)

If Jonas speaks about “value-reversal,” the one who talks about a “protest exegesis” is another German scholar, Kurt Rudolph. For him, Gnostic exegesis “runs counter to the external text and the traditional interpretation” (Rudolph 1984, 54). At a Conference, in 1978, Karl-Wolfgang Tröger states that “Gnostic religion” is an anti-cosmic religion, a protest-religion, it is antinomistic and its method is represented by “the reinterpretation and above all the revaluation of Jewish traditions” (Tröger 1981, 92). More than that, Gnostics are against other traditions, not only against Judaism: “The anti-cosmic attitude of the Gnostic religion has not only an anti-Jewish aspect, but also on anti-Greek or anti-Hellenistic one in despising the ingenuity (...) and beauty of the cosmos in Hellenism as well in Judaism” (Tröger 1981, 89).

The Romanian scholar Ioan Petru Culianu (1992, 121; cf. Nagel 1980, 50) points out that the starting point of the Gnostic myth is the exegesis of the book of *Genesis*, who it is not an innocent exegesis, but an inverted one. It reverses, steadily and systematic, the traditional interpretations of the Bible. After this remark, he notes: “Inverse exegesis’ may be singled out as the main hermeneutical principle of the gnostics. It appears to us as reversed. In reality, gnostics would see it as ‘restored’” (Culiano 1992, 121). For him, Gnostics seem to be the first representatives of an “hermeneutic of suspicion”.

With respect to all these theories, Michael Allen Williams writes: “The problem with such formulas as ‘protest exegesis,’ or ‘inverse exegesis,’ or ‘value reversal’ in this context is that any survey of the array of sources normally categorized today as ‘gnostic’ reveals that in fact they share no pattern of consistent reversal” (1996, 57). He shows in a very convincing way that there is not a systematic approach of ‘reversals’. We follow here his tables, in order to show some examples. For example, if Cain is negatively evaluated in *Genesis*, he is positively evaluated by Cainites, but negatively too by Sethians, Ptolemy, by Ophites, in *The Apocryphon of John*, *Gospel of Philip* or *A Valentinian Exposition*. The Eating of Tree of Knowledge episode is negatively evaluated in book of *Genesis*, same thing happens in Justin’s *Baruch*, *The Tripartite Tractate* or *Gospel of Philip*, but it is positively evaluated in *The Apocryphon of John*, *The Testimony of Truth* or *On the Origin of the World*, and examples may continue (Williams 1996, 61-62).

Indeed, they resort sometimes to a hermeneutical reversal, but they do it like that when are dealing with passages traditionally considered to be difficult. Focusing on a group of “scriptural chestnuts,” as is the case of *Genesis* 1:26-27, *Genesis* 2:3, *Genesis* 2 or *Genesis* 6, Williams demonstrates that in all these cases the Gnostics are dealing with difficulties related to the anthropomorphism of God (Williams 1996, 64-75).¹ It should be mentioned here that the Gnostics are not the only ones who criticize the Creator God from *Genesis*. John Granger Cook performs an extensive study that deals with Old Testament interpretation in the Ancient pagan philosophy and reports that in addition to Celsus there are many more pagan thinkers who find some scandalous issues in the *Genesis* story: “Porphyry criticized the OT God for not giving the first humans knowledge. Julian criticized the Creator for not allowing people to have knowledge of good and evil, and argued that the serpent was a benefactor rather than a destroyer of the human race (...) Theophilus argued against the thesis that God was envious of Adam by noting that a newborn child begins with milk and not solid food” (Cook 2004, 77).

3. Irenaeus’ Critique on Valentinian Interpretation of Scripture

In order to illustrate the way Gnostics pervert the Scripture and how they use it to produce their own texts or tales, Irenaeus appeals to an analogy. He suggests us to imagine the mosaic of a king, an image made by a skilled artisan. This artwork with all of its tesserae or stones is associated with God’s word from Scripture. When a second artisan dismantles the king’s mosaic in order to make a new one, he will finish up by composing a completely different and new mosaic, but using the same precious tesserae. If the first image represents the King (God), the one made by the second artisan is an image of an unclean dog or a deceitful fox. Let’s read this analogy in Irenaeus’ own words:

“By way of illustration, suppose someone would take the beautiful image of a king, carefully made out of precious stones by a skillful artist, and would destroy the features of the man on it and change around and rearrange the jewels, and make the form of a dog, or of a fox, out of them, and that a rather bad piece of work. Suppose he would then say with determination that this is the beautiful image of the king that the skillful artist had made, at the same time pointing to the jewels which had been beautifully fitted together by the first artist into the image of the king, but which had been badly changed by the second into the form of a dog. And suppose he would through this fanciful arrangement of the jewels deceive the inexperienced who had no idea of what the king’s picture looked like, and would persuade them that this base picture of a fox is that beautiful image of the king. In the same way these people patch together old women’s fables, and then pluck words and sayings and parables

from here and there and wish to adapt these words of God to their fables.”
(*Adversus Haereses* 1.8.1)

In the same section, Irenaeus writes „They disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures and, as much as in them lies, they disjoint the members of the Truth. They transfer passages and rearrange them; and, making one thing out of another, they deceive many by the badly composed phantasy of the Lord’s words that they adapt.” Gnostic thinkers do not ignore Scriptures, but they use it to compose a new and distorted text. Thus, in this analogy, Irenaeus tells us why Valentinians use the same stones (scriptural verses), but in another order.² As John J. O’Keefe and Russell R. Reno note, “the ability of the false readers to use a verse here and a verse there gives plausibility to their false image of the whole” (O’Keefe and Reno 2005, 35).

In a recent book, David W. Jorgensen gives a more complex interpretation of Irenaeus’ analogy. For him, the king represents the ultimate reality of God, the human king represents the catholic hypothesis, fox king has its equal in Valentinian hypothesis, the mosaic of the human king has its counterpart in the demonstration of catholic hypothesis, the mosaic of the fox represents the demonstration of the Valentinian hypothesis, the tesserae are the scriptural passages and the quarry is the Scripture (Jorgensen 2016, 71). Irenaeus’ example shows us that, at least, some Gnostics do not reject the Old Testament, but they use it for their own purposes and goals.

4. Gnostic attitudes toward the Old Testament

Other modern scholars tried to find a set of principles or attitudes behind Gnostic interpretative practice. In time, they have imposed more opinions in this regard (Löhr 2013, 594; Williams 1996, 57-59; Pearson 1988, 636-638). Peter Nagel (1980, 51), for example, proposes six types of Gnostic interpretation of the Old Testament: 1. openly rejection of figures and events from the Old Testament (e.g. *The Second Discourse of the Great Seth, The Testimony of Truth*); 2. an interpretation that changes the roles and functions of Old Testament characters and events (*The Hypostasis of the Archons, On the Origin of the World, The Apocalypse of Adam*) ; 3. a corrective interpretation in a close relation with point 2 (*The Apocryphon of John*); 4. a neutral and allegorical interpretation (Justin’s *Baruch, Pistis Sophia*); 5. quoting of a single Old Testament verse, in order to support the Gnostic teachings or practices (the Valentinians); 6. etiological and typological interpretations of the Old Testament, sometimes with a soteriological tendency (*Gospel of Philip, The Tripartite Tractate, Gosel of Truth, The Exegesis on the Soul, Pistis Sophia*).

Giovanni Filoramo and Claudio Gianotto (1982, 63-73) show that in Gnostic texts we can find three hermeneutical approaches: 1. allegorical interpretation; 2. prefiguration and actualization; 3. reinterpretation and rewriting. One of the major conclusions reached by Filoramo and Gianotto lies in the fact that they indicate a correlation between the reinterpretative techniques and different theological positions. Also, Gnostics use allegory and prefiguration, when Old Testament is positively evaluated. Instead, the rejection occurs when Gnostics attempt to rewrite the text.³

A similar approach is undertaken by Anne Pasquier. For her too, Gnostic exegesis has a starting point in their theological, liturgical or apologetical goals (Pasquier 2008, 370). She finds two criteria that can be used to group Gnostic texts, depending on the type of exegesis which they applied to Old Testament: 1. after exegetical technique; 2. after the expressed theological view. In the first item we find three exegetical techniques: typology, allegory and Midrash exegesis. In the second point, she considers that there are three types of relationships with the biblical text: a. a rejection of the Jewish text, as is the example of *The Second Discourse of the Great Seth* or *The Paraphrase of Shem*; b. a positive interpretation of Old Testament texts, as is the example of *Eugnostos the Blessed* or *Exegesis on the Soul*; c. a middle position, which is the most common (Pasquier 2008, 370).

Birger Pearson (1998, 638) simplifies Nagel's list and finds three hermeneutical presuppositions used by Gnostics: 1. a wholly negative view of the Old Testament; 2. a completely positive view; 3. intermediate positions. *The Second Discourse of the Great Seth* is considered to be the main exponent of the first category. The Gnostic text is strongly polemical with the monotheistic Christians, and it is also against Old Testament and its prophets. In the section 62.27-64.17, the author of the treatise attacks Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Solomon, the twelve prophets, David, and call them a joke. The gap between the Old Testament and the new covenant is insurmountable, because nobody knew Christ in advance. The God of Old Testament is also under attack in 64.17-65.2: "He was a joke, with his judgement and false prophecy". As Pearson summed up "here is a wholesale rejection of the OT: its heroes of faith, its history of salvation, its legal demands, and its God." (Pearson 1998, 640)

On the other hand, *The Exegesis on the Soul* is considered to have a wholly positive stance toward Old Testament. Scriptural passages are cited as proof-texts for the story of soul. Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*, along with *The Tripartite Tractate* and *The Concept of Our Great Power* are seen as examples for the intermediate group, which is also the main tendency. Also, we have to note here Pleš's remark regarding the attitudes towards Gnostic demiurge: "whereas the 'Sethian' accounts tend to portray the demiurge as an autonomous semblance-maker stirred by the irrational impulses of his appetitive soul, various 'Valentinian' cosmogonies consider the cosmic

craftsman to be an imperfect yet reliable mediator between the superior world and the realm of matter – ignorant of the ideal forms, yet obediently following the rational principles of world-creation conceived by a higher power” (Pleše 2014, 118; cf. Thomassen 1993, 226-244). So, the attitude towards the demiurge, and, therefore, towards the Old Testament’s God, depends on the Gnostic school who treat him.

5. The Status of God’s Law in Ptolemy’s Letter to Flora

In his *Panarion*, Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis, quotes a letter written by the Ptolemy to Flora, one of his fellows. The Valentinian teacher, at the beginning of his *Letter*, rejects two opinions in respect to Old Testament’s source. One opinion represents the views of ordinary Christians and Jews, and it stipulates that the legislator is the highest God. The other view on this legislator identifies him with the devil.⁴ In his perspective, Law cannot be established by the perfect God, who is the Father, firstly because it must be of the same nature as its source. It is an imperfect Law, which needed the Christ in order to fulfill it. On the other hand, it contains commandments that are unworthy and incompatible with a perfect God. Also, it cannot have been ordained by the devil either, since the Law repeal injustice. (*Letter to Flora*, 33.3.1-33.3.5)

Then, Ptolemy makes three divisions of the Law: God’s laws, laws of Moses and Precepts of the Elders. In its turn, God’s laws split in pure law, as Decalogue, then comes retributive law or *lex talionis*, and ritual law. Related to these, Ptolemy writes that the Decalogue is pure, but imperfect, *lex talionis* is interwoven with injustice, and ritual law holds a symbolic part. In addition, he says that the pure law has been fulfilled by the Savior, the section interwoven with injustice has been abolished, and the symbolic part has been physically abolished. The conclusion reached by Ptolemy is as it follows: the law giver is an intermediate God. Let’s see his conclusion *in extenso*:

“If, as we have explained, the Law was not given by the perfect God himself, and certainly not by the devil – it is not proper even to say this – then this lawgiver is someone other than these. But this is the demiurge and maker of this entire world and everything in it. As he differs from the essences of the other two ‘and’ stands in between them, he may properly be titled ‘The Intermediate.’ And if, by his own nature, the perfect God is good – as indeed he is, for our Savior has declared that his Father, whom he made manifest, is the one and only good God – and if a god of the adversary’s nature is evil and is marked as wicked by his injustice – then a God who stands between them, and is neither good nor, certainly, evil or unjust, may properly be called ‘just,’ being the arbiter of his sort of justice.” (*Letter to Flora* 33.7.3-5).

Therefore, for the Valentinians, Savior establishes a new order. He does not abolish the law entirely, but only the part that refers to the law of retribution. Also, he completes the Decalogue and explains the spiritual meaning of symbols and rites. In other words, the Valentinian Gnostics do not break completely with Judaism but, as Christians did, they keep a certain continuity to it.

6. Gnostic use of *Genesis*

Søren Giversen analyzes the way in which Apocryphon of John makes use of Scripture. He finds four forms: 1. actual quotations, with introduction “as follows”, “as Moses said” or “the prophet said”, 2. quotations without such an introduction, 3. there are expressions derived from Old Testament, 4. use of a single word who can be linked with an expression from Old Testament (Giversen 1963, 63-66; cf. Pearson 1993, 160-161; Pearson 1988, 647). The Danish scholar shows also that the author of *The Apocryphon of John* does not completely accept the book of *Genesis*, but this does not mean that he rejects it: „According to AJ’s view, of course, Moses belongs to a time when the pneuma was not yet fully unfolded, but had yet made its influence felt. The Apocryphon’s use of Genesis is therefore often an interpretation that reverses matters.” (Giversen 1963, 75) Thus, the message of the Gnostic text provides the revelatory insight of Genesis, the initiates know now how to interpret the Jewish text, how to find the real truth hidden in it. Also, as Manlio Simonetti notices there are two sources of inspiration for the Old Testament text “the Demiurge, who inspires the literal, psychical meaning of the text intended for ‘psychic’ men, and Sophia, who inspires a deeper meaning, the spiritual one intended for Gnostics only.” (Simonetti 1994, 16)

It is very interesting here the fact that the Gnostic thinker, who wrote the *Apocryphon*, criticizes Moses a couple of times, with the phrases “do not suppose that it is as Moses said” or “it is not as Moses wrote”. After such expressions, the author gives the right interpretation of Moses’ text. When the author says that Moses is wrong, he doesn’t want only to provide a correct interpretation, but he wants also to complete it. The Gnostics did it this way because they are engaged in controversy with Christians and Jews (Luttikhuisen 2006, 28). The latter accepts the literal reading of *Genesis*, but Gnostics believe that *The Apocryphon* contains different voices: some are provided by Ialdabaoth, the bad demiurge, others are from his mother, the Wisdom, as seen above. For this reason the Gnostic must be a careful reader in order to distinguish among them. This means that Gnostics were capable to find and discern some truth in the book of *Genesis*, but this truth is hidden and it can be found only if the text is read and understood in a special Gnostic key⁵.

But, what does it mean to read the *Genesis* in a special Gnostic way? Karen King states that, according to the writer of *The Apocryphon of John*, “the literature of most tradition is unreliable” (King 2006, 180; Bos 1984, 21-22). For the Gnostic author, “Plato, Moses, and Solomon offer only a distorted and refracted imitation of the true Reality” (King 2006, 181). So, the *Apocryphon*’s author believes that Greek philosophical traditions, along with Jewish tradition, Johannine literature etc. are limited and offer us just a partial truth. Indeed, all of these traditions claim to offer a real and complete truth, but this may be doubted in a world dominated by ignorance and deceit. In this way, a question arises: how can we achieve the truth. The answer is, as Karen King writes, “through revelation from the Divine Realm” (King 2006, 181).

So, when Gnostics read the book of *Genesis*, they do it in a special way. Whenever they refer to book of *Genesis*, they have as presupposition their myth. One basic conviction of this myth is the relationship between the absolute and totally transcendent God, and a separate spiritual world, on the one hand, and the Demiurge⁶ the craftsman of this world, who isn’t perfect, on the other hand. Another principle of their myth is the fact that they believe they are in possession of a secret, esoteric type of knowledge.

7. Gnostic esoteric readings

Gnostics claim that they received their secret tradition and knowledge through a direct contact with the apostolic tradition. The apostles, and through them, Gnostics too, are the only true keepers of the Savior’s secret doctrines. The Dutch scholar Gerard P. Luttikhuisen remarks that a basic concept of the Gnostics “was the conviction that Christ revealed another God than the Old Testament creator and ruler of the world.” (2006, 27)

In this respect, Christian heresiologists give us several testimonials. For example, Hippolytus tells us that Basilides, an Alexandrian Gnostic theologian, and his son claim that they know the secret message of Jesus via Matthias: “Basileides and Isidore – his genuine son and disciple – say that Matthias spoke to them hidden discourses that the Savior taught in private.” (*Refutation*, 7.20.1)

Irenaeus of Lyons often talks about Gnostics who make such statements. Clement of Alexandria, in his *Stromata* VII.17, informs us that Valentinus claims he was a hearer of Theudas, a disciple of Paul. In his *Letter to Flora*, Ptolemy speaks about an apostolic tradition which, he writes, “I have received in my turn, together with the assessment of all its statements by the standard of our Savior’s teaching.” (*Panarion* II.7.8.).

Such statements can be also found in primary Gnostic sources. For example, in *The Apocryphon of John* 31.25-32.10 we read that the esoteric message of Savior must be shared only with the spiritual ones: “I have told

you everything for you to record and communicate secretly to your spiritual friends.” In *Revelation of Peter* 72.4-73.23 we can read “I have told you that these people are blind and deaf. Now listen to the things I am telling you in secret and keep them. Do not tell them to the children of this age.” An unequivocal allegation is found in *The Revelation of Adam* 85.3-18 “The preserved words of the God of the eternal realms were not copied in a book or put in writing”. PHEME PERKINS believes that although Gnostics produced a rich literature and new gospels, they did not create a Gnostic Bible in order to replace the canonical texts of Judaism and Christianity. They adopt an hermeneutics of esotericism “to frame a different experience of self, world, and salvation” (Perkins 2002, 371).

8. Allegory and re-writing Genesis

We already noted that Gnostic use often allegory in their exegesis on book of *Genesis*. Gnostic thinkers do not use the Old Testament text only to cite or comment. Moreover, these exegetes do not maintain always a clear distance between the original text and the commentary itself. In this line, David Dawson adds:

“allegorical interpretation sometimes takes the form of new composition: the allegorical interpreter gives ‘other’ meanings to the narrative he is interpreting, but at the same time makes those other meanings represent characters and events in a new story, into which he surreptitiously weaves the old story. (...) The interpreter thus offers the new story with its own integrity and does not explicitly say that this new story is derived from one that precedes it.” (Dawson 1992, 129-130)

The American scholar gives as example the opening verses of *Genesis* and its allegorically reading in Philo and the *Prologue to John's Gospel*. If Philo keeps a clear distinction between the original text and his commentary, the evangelist breaks that clear separation. John the evangelist has such an approach because he “does not want his readers to think that he is simply giving them an interpretation of Genesis; rather, he is giving them Genesis properly understood, that is, Genesis as absorbed by a larger story.” (Dawson 1992, 131). This is indicated by Irenaeus also, in *Adversus Haereses* 1.8.1, as we have already seen. In this regard, some paradigmatic examples are *The Apocryphon of John* or *The Hypostasis of Archons*, which are in essence rewritten stories of *Genesis*.

Among all rewritten Old Testament verses, most often is used *Genesis* 1-11, and this suggests that Gnostic exegetes and theologians “were only interested in elaborating their mythic and theological speculations concerning the origins of the universe, not in appropriating a received canonical tradition.” (Perkins 2002, 371). As we have seen, they have a

predilection for certain passages from Bible, they chose problematic verses which are suitable to their purposes, they gave them a new interpretation according with their doctrines.

9. Conclusion

When Gnostic writings were composed, cosmogonies as *Genesis* or *Timaeus* had been reinterpreted for many decades, even centuries. *Genesis* has been interpreted by Jewish thinkers, as Philo, in order to clarify some difficult verses and to put Jewish tradition in harmony with Hellenistic philosophy. *Timaeus* has been interpreted by Plato's followers and especially by medio-Platonists as Albinus, Atticus or Numenius.

The original Gnostic sources reveal us a whole range of exegesis strategies applied to *Genesis*. Indeed, some texts reject the *Genesis*' story, but there is also a partial acceptance, allegorical interpretation and commentary, paraphrase, allusions, quotes, etiological and typological interpretations, expansion and creation of new characters and stories, parody, and so on. Another conclusion can be summed up by using Bentley Layton's (2005, 54) words: "much of Gnosticism can be seen not as a revolt against, but as a revision of, traditional religions, especially in their textual manifestations." Therefore, they do not reject Old Testament, as Marcion did, but they use it in a revisionist way. They claim that it must be interpreted after their understanding, their esoteric and special knowledge. Some truth is hidden in the text of *Genesis*, but it must be read correctly, in a special way.

Notes

¹ For example, "I am a jealous God" (*Exodus* 20:5; 34:14; *Deuteronomy* 4:24; 5:9, 6:15); "there is none beside me" (*Isaiah* 43:11; 44:6,8 etc.).

² Not the Canon is the central point of conflict between Irenaeus and Valentinians, but their hermeneutics (Perkins 2002, 371).

³ "La scelta delle varie tecniche interpretative pare strettamente collegata alle diverse posizioni teologiche. Da una parte, l'utilizzazione dell'interpretazione allegorica (peraltro scarsamente documentata nei testi di Nag Hammadi) e prefigurativa dell'AT e collegata ad una valutazione in qualche modo positiva del carattere ispirato del testo sacro; dall'altra, la posizione di rifiuto più o meno radicale si traduce in tentativi di ritrascrivere il testo biblico che sfociano nella redazione di racconti mitici alternativi" (Filoramo and Gianotto 1982, 74).

⁴ About such an attitude we can read also in Hippolytus' *Refutation* VI.35.1: "So all the prophets and the Law spoke from the Artifier (the 'stupid god,' as he alleges), and they were stupid since they knew nothing. For this reason, he says, the Savior declares, 'all who have come before me are thieves and brigands,' and the apostle refers to 'the mystery which was not recognized in former generations.'"

⁵ "Die Gnostiker haben die Vorgänge, die sich im Bannkreis jenes Gartens abgespielt haben, von der Erschaffung des Menschen aus feuchtem Lehm (Gen 2,7) bis hin zu seinem Hinauswurf (Gen 3,24), nie als Humbug abgetan oder schlicht für 'ungeschichtlich' erklärt. Das eigentliche Problem wurde darin gesehen, wie jene Vorgänge zu interpretieren seien und wem sie praktisch recht geben" (Nagel 1980, 50; Luttikhuisen 2006, 28).

⁶ The Valentinian demiurge, for example, is very different from the Platonic one, but the main ideas of Platonism are kept unchanged. Dunderberg (2008, 123) claims that relation between Valentinian Gnosticism and Platonic tradition involves both tension, as well as continuity, as Valentinians are in relation with Jewish tradition too. For the Finnish scholar, both attitudes are important, by ensuring Valentinians that they are understood by those who know philosophy, instead tension is necessary to show that they have something new to offer. Scott C. Carrol (1994, 300-301) considers that the Gnostics took ideas from Plato's philosophy, even if they do not inspire with fidelity from it, but hoping to impress an Hellenized audience.

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