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Chapter 11

THE FIGURE OF ABRAHAM IN THE ANCIENT GNOSIS¹

Csaba Ötvös

καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα
ὁ θεὸς ἐπεῖραξεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ

— Gen. 22:1 LXX

The subject of this paper is the figure of Abraham in the so-called ancient Gnostic systems. At first sight, the topic is seemingly obvious and straightforward, but before turning to the question more closely, it is necessary to introduce, as concisely as possible, this rich, ambiguous, and complex source material under examination.

The never-ending questions that surround the religious, theological-philosophical, and mythological phenomenon of the ancient Gnosis are well known.² Without being distracted by the disputes over the definition, as well as the temporal and dogmatic limitations of the ancient Gnosis, I use this term as a common denominator for the second- and third-century theo-mythological dualist systems that are detectable in the codices from the Nag Hammadi Library³

1. First and foremost I would like to express my gratitude and my heartfelt thanks to the editors of this volume for their kind invitation. The research for this chapter was supported by the Project OTKA PD 112421.

2. For a general introduction and basic questions, see e.g., K.L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Ch. Marksches, *Die Gnosis* (Munich: Beck, 2001, 2006); K. Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (trans. R. Wilson; San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1987); K.W. Tröger, *Die Gnosis. Heilslehre und Ketzer Glaube* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2001), M.A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

3. The facsimile editions of the codices from Nag Hammadi were published by Brill between 1972–9.

and related codicological materials,⁴ as well as the systems which were labeled as pseudo-Gnostics, and which belong to this category in the refutations of the Church Fathers.⁵ Because of this flexible, indefinite, but far from indisputable grouping, one is unable to handle the sources together, and only the particular features, that will be introduced later, could fill in and strengthen this apparently dubious category of Gnostic. In the course of this analysis, the categories of Gnostic and Christian are re-evaluated, along with their complex relationship. Furthermore this investigation will offer clear evidence for continuity between these heterogeneous materials and, despite divergences and contradictions within the corpus, the evaluation of these Gnostic systems together is not only possible, but also a necessity.⁶

In light of these suggestions (in place of a strict definition and unmentioned significant features), I will attempt to survey relevant Gnostic passages that mention the figure of the Patriarch Abraham in order to delineate how his person and his biblical stories were interpreted and used in these writings. One has to note that for the known and anonymous Gnostic authors, Abraham was not as central a figure as other Biblical characters, such as Adam or Seth, and so he is rarely mentioned in the primary and secondary sources. The *opinio communis* is well expressed by Bethge: "So gehen etwa die Zeugnisse des Sethianismus auffälligerweise auf die Patriarchenüberlieferung entweder gar nicht oder nur im Zusammenhang mit den Ereignissen von Sodom und Gomorra ein, haben aber z.B. an der Gestalt des Abraham überhaupt kein Interesse."⁷ Accepting in part this evaluation of

4. We have four codices: the *Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502 (see: W. Till, trans., *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1955)., erw. Aufl. bearb. von H.M. Schenke (TU 60; Berlin, 1972); the *Codex Askewianus* (see: V. Macdermot and C. Schmidt, trans. and eds., *Pistis Sophia* (NHS 9; Leiden: Brill, 1978); the *Codex Brucianus* (see: V. Macdermot and C. Schmidt trans. and eds., *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce codex* (NHS 13; Leiden: Brill, 1978); and the *Codex Tschacos* (see: J. Brankaer and H.G. Bethge, eds., *The Codex Tschacos: Text und Analysen* (TU 161; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007).

5. The Manicheans and Mandeans are not part of this research and we will not refer to philosophical critics and refutations because neither Celsus nor Plotinus were interested in the biblical figure of Abraham, even though Celsus mentions Abraham's name, knows about circumcision, and his begetting children. For this topic, see E.J. Young, "Celsus and the Old Testament", *Westminster Theological Journal* 6, no.2 (1994): 166–97. On the other side, Origen tells us that Abraham's name occurs in magical formulas, invocations, exorcist formulas etc., in the formula "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac" (e.g., *C. Cels.*, 4.33).

6. This idea is not a new one: see e.g., S. Pétrement, *Le Dieu separe. Les origines du gnosticisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1984).

7. H.G. Bethge, "Die Ambivalenz alttestamentlicher Geschichtstraditionen in der Gnosis", in *Altes Testament-Frühjudentum-Gnosis. Neue Studien zu "Gnosis und Bibel"*, ed. K.W. Tröger (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1980), 89–109, here 99.

Sethian writings, in what follows I attempt to modify this position and show how these authors engaged with the character of Abraham.

In order to reach this aim, I will begin by evaluating the relevant primary quotations and their mythological background. Then, turning to the secondary sources belonging to the Christian theologians and Church Fathers, I shall attempt to replace this deficient picture with a more complete one. In doing so, I hope to provide a compilation of materials comparable with the Christian examples. Lastly, I will briefly point out how these examples could serve to describe the developments of the allegoric exegesis and the movement of the ancient Gnosis.

Primary Sources

The figure of Abraham in the primary sources of the ancient Gnosis is not only present in its biblical texts, but was also used and commented on by anonymous writers. There is no Gnostic writing where the whole Abrahamic story occurs, instead, parts of it—sentences or allusions—are witnesses for the author's knowledge of the biblical narrative. These examples not only represent different Gnostic theological concepts and different purposes, but also reflect the contemporary Jewish and Christian theological ideas concerning the Father of the Faith. In every case, their wider context indicates the given author's or school's relationship to specific Jewish and Christian traditions, especially to those related to Genesis 6–9.⁸

Exegesis Animae (NHC II.6)

The *Exegesis Animae* (ExAn) is the sixth treatise of the Nag Hammadi Codex II. It was composed in the second half of the second century and provides a short account of the Gnostic myth of the feminine soul, from her fall into a body and the world to the return to her heavenly place.⁹ The main elements of the narrative are the soul's fall into a body, her defilement, desolation, repentance, regeneration, and marriage to the bridegroom, her brother sent from heaven, and, as a result of this salvation, her ascent to the Father.

8. For the background of our question, see the recent, general, and detailed overview of L. Jaan, *Gnosis und Judentum. Alttestamentliche und jüdische Motiven der gnostischen Literatur und das Ursprungsproblem der Gnosis* (NHMS 75; Leiden: Brill, 2012).

9. M. Scopello, *L'Exégèse de L'Âme, Nag Hammadi Codex II,6. Introduction, traduction et commentaire* (NHS 25; Leiden: Brill, 1985); C. Kulawik, *Die Erzählung über die Seele* (TU 155; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005); L. Roig Lanzillotta, "Come out of Your Country and Your Kinsfolk: Abraham's Command and Ascent of the Soul in the Exegesis on the Soul (NHC II,6)", in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, eds. M. Goodman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 401–20.

Turning closer to the text, the significant sentences come from the middle of the mythological story, as the soul starts to recognize her brother.¹⁰ The following passage reveals also the methodology of the writer¹¹:

Then gradually she recognized him, and she rejoiced once more, weeping before him as she remembered the disgrace of her former widowhood. And she adorned herself still more so that he might be pleased to stay with her. And the prophet said in the Psalms: "Hear, my daughter, and see and incline your ear and forget your people and your father's house, for the king has desired your beauty, for he is your lord.

"For he requires her to turn her face from her people and the multitude of her adulterers, in whose midst she once was, to devote herself only to her king, her real lord, and to forget the house of the earthly father, with whom things went badly for her, but to remember her father who is in heaven. Thus also it was said to Abraham: 'Come out from your country and your kinsfolk and from your father's house' ΔΜΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΕΚΚΑΖ ΜΗ ΤΕΚΥΝΓΕΝΕΙΑ ΔΥΩ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗΠΗ[Ε]Ι ΜΠΕΚΙΩΤ."

133.10–31¹²

The quotation includes two units with the same structure. In both, the argumentation starts with the mythological story, manifesting the Gnostic background on the actual state of the soul and is followed by an explanation, or rather verification, from Scripture.¹³ The first quotation from Ps. 45:10–11 reinforces the soul's repentance and its turning back to her Father. This usage of biblical verses presents the personification and interiorization of the Psalm as the marriage of the nation/the church and its Savior, as it is known in the Jewish and early Christian exegetical traditions (e.g., Origen's spiritual exegesis on the Song of Songs: Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.31).¹⁴

10. This happens by the will of the heavenly Father and regeneration starts with a cleansing from pollution that could be identified with the rite of baptism: see, ExAn 131, 27–34. For this motive see B. Layton, "The Soul as a Dirty Garment", *Mus* 91 (1978): 155–69.

11. The Coptic text is from the Coptic Workplace 1.1. Silver Mountain Software, Canada, 1983.

12. The translation is from Robinson, in B. Layton ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7 Together with XIII, 2, Brit Lib. Or. 4926(1), and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655* (NHS 21; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 157 and 159 with small modifications.

13. R. McL. Wilson, "Old Testament Exegesis in the Gnostic Exegesis on the Soul", in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Pahor Labib*, ed. M. Krause (Brill: Leiden, 1975), 217–24.

14. For Ambrose and the Latin tradition of the history of the Psalm's interpretation, see D.G. Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride and the Church. Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine", *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 281–303.

The second part of the quotation mentions the figure of Abraham and, thus, the same mythological thinking arises. The new features are the real Lord and the king, the heavenly father with the original "house"; all these elements were used as symbols of mythological thinking. On the one hand, the writer creates a theological duality (hinting at a heavenly father¹⁵) in the present, worldly state, while he also describes why the *metanoia* of the soul is needed. The quotation comes from Gen. 12:1, but with significant alterations related to the biblical story, these being: it is not the Lord who commands Abraham (a simple passive form of the verb appears); and the reference to a promised land that will be shown to him, in the biblical story, is omitted.

The common motif between the two units is the departure from the country by the soul which is only apparently her own. For this concept, both references from the Old Testament fit well. As far as the structure of the passage is concerned, the mythological method of thinking reveals first its own story line and then uses the Scriptures in order to exemplify it. On the one hand, the line of the myth runs on the soul, while on the other, the Scriptures relate the story of Abraham. At this point, I conclude that there is no real exegesis of the biblical passages, and the biblical story is not the source for the narrative here. On the contrary, the writer has his own concept and proceedings on the line of his own story, while supporting its successive steps by different biblical quotations, that is, by the authority of Scripture.

In this passage, the story of Abraham was used to illustrate the state of the soul. The anonymous writer used the biblical story¹⁶ and the example of the Patriarch in order to present his own theological perspective on repentance and the returning of the soul to her original place: her authentic, celestial origin.¹⁷

15. It could be a sign of the duality of the first God and the creator god, but also of the earthly and heavenly father. The former is the opinion of Scopello, *L'Exégèse*, 144. According to the opinion of other scholars, this passage is insufficient evidence to argue for a theological dualism, e.g., Kulawik, *Die Erzählung*, 204.

16. Before ending this analysis, one should mention that the author of the treatise not only used the Bible (the Old and New Testament), but also introduced frequent quotations from Homer, and, in weaving together the biblical and the classical traditions, he created an original symbolism about the Gnostic story of the Soul. For this, see M. Scopello, "Les citations d'Homère dans le Traité de L'Exégèse de l'âme", in *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, ed. M. Krause (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 3–12.

17. It is worth noting the conclusion of Lanzillotta discussing the possible parallels from the Christian tradition: "Origen and Didymus consequently not only provide exactly the same interpretation of the Genesis passage as the Exegesis on the Soul; they also combine Gen. 12:1 with the same quotation from Psalms. Even more interesting, however, is the fact that all three texts artificially introduce a gloss in order for the quotes to fit in their respective contexts": Roig Lanzillotta, "Come out of your Country", 417.

The Gospel of Philip (NHC II.3)

The *Gospel of Philip* belongs to the Valentinian tradition¹⁸ and was written around the second half of the second century or the first half of the third century.¹⁹ Its writer uses not only the name, but also the story of Abraham in its accounts of controversies on religious practices, presenting detail that had not been mentioned previously:

“When Abraham [rejoiced/laughed²⁰] for him to see what he would see, [he] circumcised the flesh of the foreskin (ΝΤCΑΡΞ ΝΤΑΚΡΟΒΥCΤΙΑ), [teaching/telling] us that it is necessary to destroy the flesh (ΝΤCΑΡΞ)” (82.26–8).²¹

This short fragmentary sentence provides an unique interpretation of the practice of circumcision. It is not an exact quotation from the Old Testament, but one can state with certainty that it is a witness to the author’s knowledge of the Old Testament and use of allegorical exegesis.

As far as its links to the biblical sources are concerned, the thoughts of Evans, Webb, and Wiebe seem correct.²² They suggest that the first half of the sentence with the supposed Coptic word (ΠΑΩΕ, rejoiced)²³ could come from Jn 8:56 (in agreement with Schenke and the translators who followed him e.g., Menard and Janssens),²⁴

18. For this Valentinian school, see the collection of B. Layton, ed., *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism. I. The School of Valentinus. Studies in the History of Religions* 41 (Supplements to Numen; Leiden: Brill, 1980); and E. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the “Valentinians”* (NHMS 60; Leiden: Brill, 1980, 2006); and Ch. Marksches, “Valentinian Gnosticism. Toward the Anatomy of a School,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration*, eds. J.D. Turner et al. (NHMS XLIV; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 401–38.

19. For the writing see e.g., W.W. Isenberg, “The Coptic Gospel According to Philip,” PhD. diss., The University of Chicago, 1968; H.M. Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium (Nag-Hammadi-Codex II,3)* (TU 143; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997); and R.McL Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip. Translated from the Coptic Text, with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Evanston, 1962).

20. Layton’s addition in B. Layton ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2–7 Together with XIII,2, Brit Lib.Or.4926(1), and P. Oxy. 1,654, 655* (NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 206 and Schenke’s in his first translation (“sich freute”) in H.M. Schenke, “Das Evangelium nach Philippus,” *ThLZ* 84, no.1 (1959): 1–26, here 23.

21. Translation from Isenberg, *The Coptic Gospel According to Philip*, with minor modifications.

22. C.A. Evans, R.A. Wiebe, and R.L. Webb, *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index* (New Testament Tools & Studies; Leiden: Brill, 1993).

23. The verb ΠΑΩΕ could be the translation of the Greek χαίρειν, ἰλαρύνειν, εὐφραίνειν. W.E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939) 308B.

24. Schenke, “Das Evangelium nach Philippus,” 23 and Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 501; J.E. Menard, *L’évangile selon Philippe: Introduction, texte, traduction, commentaire* (Strassburg-Paris: Letuzey et Ane, 1967) 109 (“se réjouit”); Y. Janssen, “L’Évangile selon Philippe,” *Mus* 81 (1968): 407–14.

while the second half resembles Gen. 17:24.²⁵ On the reconstruction of this fragmented passage, it should be noted that there are scholars who argue that the suggested Coptic word $\rho\alpha\upsilon\epsilon$ should be “laughed” instead of “rejoiced” (e.g., Wilson).²⁶ According to Wilson, if this was the case, the source could have been Gen. 17:17 (where Abraham “laughed”): “since Philip does not appear to share completely the Gnostic aversion to the Old Testament.”²⁷ On the question of the reconstruction we could also follow Segelberg’s opinion on the treatise: “These references clearly show that the author or authors of the Gospel of Philip had access to basic Old Testament teaching about the beginning of the world and of the elect people of God in Abraham.”²⁸

In order to understand the symbolism of the passage, it is worth noting that, behind the narrative, it represents an anthropological dualism that lies between the soul and the body, and a theological dualism between the first God and the creator archon. These concepts explain the sharp rejection of the body as it was created by the archon. In spite of this dualist framework, the figure of Abraham and his acts have a positive evaluation, but this attitude to the Old Testament is rare in the writings of the Valentinian tradition as well as in other Gnostic texts. The reason for this positivism is that the writer finds a parallel between circumcision and his concept of rejection and devaluation of the body; in this way, the biblical example finds its way into the argumentation seen in Gnostic writing. In short, according to the interpretation of the writer, the meaning of the Old Testament scene is that Abraham mortifies the flesh to attain the spirit. Going further, based on these aforementioned reasons, we should mention the author’s invention connecting the motive behind the laughter and circumcision, as this invention also supports the author’s implied belief concerning the body. At the same time, we should note that the main alteration in this excerpt from the biblical story, that is the omission of the covenant, is because the writer does not need it within his theological perspective.

Siker interprets the part of the sentence, (“that he was to see what [or whom] he was to see”) as a clear reference to Christ.²⁹ In this reading—based on the supposed influence of Jn 8:56–58—Abraham’s action foreshadows and anticipates the meaning of Christ’s advent. This solution could be true and fits well within the context of the writing. However, I incline to the more cautious opinion of Lundhaug who writes: “While the text does not explicitly state that Abraham saw God, it emphasizes that circumcision was necessary in order for him to see what he was going to see.”³⁰ In addition, Wolfson argues:

25. For this see Evans, Webb, and Wiebe, *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible*, 169.

26. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip*, 186.

27. Ibid.

28. E. Segelberg, “The Coptic-Gospel According to Philip and its Sacramental System”, *Numen* 7, no.2 (1960): 189–200.

29. J.S. Siker, “Gnostic Views on Jews and Christians in the Gospel of Philip”, *NovT* 31 (1989): 275–88, here 282.

30. H. Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth* (NHMS 73; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 262.

The motif of Abraham's circumcision occasioning a vision of the divine—based on the exegesis of the juxtaposition of Abraham circumcising himself, Ishmael, and every other male in his household, to the epiphany of the Lord by the terebinths of Mamre and the subsequent vision of three men/angels at the entrance to his tent—is a well attested topos in midrashic and kabbalistic sources.³¹

In contemporary Jewish and Christian traditions, Abraham's circumcision received similar, but not identical interpretations. In Philo (*Migr. Abr.* 89–93) the foreskin is the symbol of the bodily passions (“excision of pleasure and all passions”). The main differences are that Philo retains the role of bodily circumcision in God's covenant with the Jews and he is critical of some Jews who want to spiritualize circumcision completely and renounce the actual rite itself. Of the earliest witness of the Christian tradition, the author of Col. 2:11 makes another allegorical interpretation: “in whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ). The Epistle pairs circumcision with baptism (Col. 2:12), creating the basis for the later Christian understanding of the gesture. In Justin Martyr's writings, these two rituals pertain to the same sacrament (see *Dialogue with Trypho* 19).³²

Thus, we could state that the story of Abraham in this Gnostic passage was not only known before the Valentinian writer but he positively used it without a literal quotation of the Old or New Testament. From this point a new question could emerge: was the author a Jewish Christian, who affirmed the legitimacy of circumcision based on the Jewish tradition, but who added a new spiritual significance to it, or was he rather a Gentile Christian, who attempted to replace the circumcision of the flesh with the circumcision of the spirit following the Pauline understanding?³³ It is well-known that the figure of Abraham and his circumcision was a central element of the controversy over religious practices between Jews and Christians, as well as amongst early Christians. Thus, the meaning and the significance of this passage—just as those elsewhere in this “gospel”—should be assessed in the context of this dispute. In this way, we can suppose that the writing on Abraham's circumcision occupies the position of the bodily understanding (“it is necessary to destroy the flesh (NTC&PZ)”) but it is used as a prerequisite for his spiritual experience).

31. E.R. Wolfson, “Becoming Invisible: Rending the Veil and the Hermeneutic of Secrecy in the Gospel of Philip”, in *Practicing Gnosis. Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature. Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson*, eds. A.D. DeConick et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 118–35, here 118–19.

32. For this, with other occurrences see R. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual and Theological Dimension* (Ada, MI: Baker, 2012), 86.

33. For this question I am indebted to Wolfson, *Becoming Invisible*, 119.

The Second Treatise of the Great Seth (NHC VII.2)

This writing exemplifies so-called Sethian literature,³⁴ from Codex VII of the Nag Hammadi Library. Along with the pattern of Sethian thinking in the treatise, there is a significant Christian influence, including the part describing a revelation delivered by the ascended Savior Christ to his followers, who are “from the height.” The revelation describes the heavenly triad in a heavenly world of light, with the heavenly church. Further, it covers the history of the redemption: the role of the Savior as the heavenly Son from his descent into the world of creation that is ruled by Jaldabaoth and his archons, taking the body of an earthly man, the docetic passion during the crucifixion and his return to the celestial home, to the end-time wedding feast. The writing is polemical, standing in opposition to the Christians of the church (“the few and uninstructed”) while using motifs of Christian revelation.³⁵

In the second half of the text, the polemical attitude prevails, and becomes stronger. The target of the rejection is not only the Christian faith and its practices, but the text addresses Jews and some Gnostic schools and their doctrines:

For Adam was a laughingstock, since he was created from the image of type of man by the Hebdomad, as if he had become stronger than me and my brothers. We are innocent with respect to him, since we have not sinned. And Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were a laughingstock, since they were given a name by the Hebdomad, the counterfeit fathers, as if he had become stronger than my brothers and me. We are innocent with respect to him, since we have not sinned.³⁶
62.27–63.3

The use of antithetical pairs between the Old Testament figures and the writer's group illustrates precisely the negative relationship with the tradition of the Old

34. H.M. Schenke, “Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften”, in *Studia Coptica*, ed. P. Nagel (Berliner Byzantinistische Arbeiten 45; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1974), 165–73; and H.M. Schenke, “The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism”, in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Vol. 2: *Sethian Gnosticism*, ed. B. Layton (Studies in the History of Religions 41; Supplements to Numen; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 588–616; and J. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi, Section: «Études» 6; Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval; Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

35. According to van den Broek, it implies that the writing “was written after the rift between gnostic and non-gnostic Christians had become a fact and the two groups had started to exclude each other from the true Church” and for this reason could be dated to the last decade of the second or the first decade of the third century. For this see R. van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 111.

36. The translation is from G. Riley, “Second Treatise of the Great Seth” (with minor modifications), in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, ed. B.A. Pearson, (NHMS 30; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 129–200, here 181–3.

Testament. The list begins with Adam, continues with the Patriarchs and ends with the names of David, Solomon, the 12 prophets, Moses, and John the Baptist (63.4–34). They are the main characters of the Old Testament for the anonymous author.

For the concept of rejection under investigation, one could assume that the saying which comprises the three Patriarch's names could be a shortened form of self-revelation, namely how God makes himself known in this form as God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob (e.g., Exod. 3:15). This scriptural tradition could be the source for the name-giving of the Patriarchs referenced in the quotation ("they were given a name by the Hebdomad", ⲉⲁⲩⲧⲓ ⲣⲁⲛ ⲉⲣⲟⲟϥ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲛⲓⲧⲧⲙ ⲡⲓⲙⲉⲛⲥⲁⲩⲱⲩ). If this hypothesis is true, a trace of the theophany found in Exodus 3 or its history of reception can be unveiled in the present treatise. In any case, one is able to understand accurately why and how the writer used the tradition of the Old (or New) Testament.

In scholarly literature, this treatise has a prominent place, especially due to its relation to Old Testament material, but opinions vary. S.E. Robinson argues: "As elsewhere in Gnosticism, the God of the Old Testament is here identified with an inferior being, and those who serve him or observe his Law, including Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Moses, and the other prophets and John the Baptist, are called laughingstocks."³⁷ Nagel creates a categorization, where he quotes this present passage (in its first type),³⁸ arguing: "die offene, höhnische Absage an Gestalten und Begebenheiten des Alten Testaments."³⁹ In Tröger's explanation this passage is "ein markantes Beispiel für die polemische Behandlung biblischer Traditionen,"⁴⁰ while Bethge argues "Es gibt auch keine Uminterpretation, sondern nur totale Ablehnung und Konfrontation."⁴¹

37. S.E. Robinson, "Second Treatise of the Great Seth", in *Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. A.S. Atiya, Vol. 7, 2117b–2118b. On the website: <http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm/ref/collection/cce/id/1726>

38. Nagel differentiated six types of interpretation of the OT: 1. a clear 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 OT characters and events (The Hypostasis of the Archons, On the Origin of the World, The Apocalypse of Adam); 3. a corrective interpretation is closely related to point 2 (The Apocryphon of John); 4. a neutral and allegorical interpretation (Justin's Baruch, Pistis Sophia); 5. the quoting of a single Old Testament verse, in order to support 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, Gospel of Truth, The Exegesis on the Soul, Pistis Sophia). See: P. Nagel, "Die Auslegung der Paradieserzählung in der Gnosis", in *Altes Testament, Frühjudentum, Gnosis*, ed. K.W. Tröger (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1980), 49–70.

39. Nagel, "Die Auslegung der Paradieserzählung".

40. See Tröger, *Die Gnosis*, 120; Similarly, Bethge, "Die Ambivalenz", 106.

41. Bethge, "Die Ambivalenz", 106.

The mythical background of the passage is worth exploring. In the Sethian tradition, there is the aforementioned theological dualism between the first God and the inferior Creator. In the quotation mentioned above, the Creator and his brothers or his creatures, the archons, can be found in the sphere of Seven and they constitute it. It could also signify only Jaldabaoth, the first archon, as mentioned e.g., in the account of Irenaeus (*Adv Haer.* 1.5.2). According to the ancient cosmological view, the seven planets are the seven personified spherical powers,⁴² but in these systems, as is well-known from other Gnostic systems, the archons are hostile powers, since they work against the created man and his salvation, keeping humanity in slavery and ignorance. According to this, salvation comes from above, from the eighth sphere, with the coming of the Savior in the form of the heavenly Christ.⁴³

Considering this essential duality, the radical rejection of the Old Testament, as it was known in the roughly contemporary Marcion school and other Gnostic schools, becomes more understandable. According to this view, all the events and persons that are positive in the Old Testament are negative and should be rejected and eliminated. Consequently, because of the devaluation of the Jewish biblical tradition, its significance lies with this negative attitude and its presentation of the negative side of the author's own line of tradition. From this twisted perspective, the biblical creation of Adam could be interpreted as a fake creation by the Hebdomad, and the Old Testament Patriarchs could be considered as *counterfeit fathers*. In this way the writer constructs a reverse historical timeline of Israel's history and heroes and, in doing so, subverts the tradition, with his own version developing on the basis seen in the Bible (e.g., in Hebrews).⁴⁴

To sum up, from this Sethian perspective, in the earthly cosmos that is ruled by the archons, the Patriarchs and the prophets of the Old Testament belong to the hostile powers, and, since they are lead astray by the archons, they preached their Law and rules. Thus, only with the rejection of the Old Testament tradition and

42. For astrological theories in late antiquity, see H. Bietenhard, *Die himmlische Welt im Urchristentum und Spätjudentum* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1951). For Gnostics see e.g., N.D. Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (NHMS 81; Leiden: Brill, 2013).

43. It is the reason why we could find the identification between their heavenly figures, e.g. in Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 40.7.4. For this see Riley, introduction to "Second Treatise of the Great Seth" (with minor modifications), in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, ed. B.A. Pearson, (NHMS 30; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 131.

44. Other similar lists can be found in Josh. 24:1-15, Ezek. 20:2-38, Neh. 9:6-38, Pss. 135:1-26 and 77:1-72. Hellenistic Judaism contributes Jdt. 5:5-21, Wis.10:16-11:14, 1 Macc. 2:51-59, 4 Macc. 16.2-25, and most impressively of all, the "Now let us praise famous men" set piece in Sir. 44:1-50:24. For this list, see: R.A. Kitchen, "Making the Imperfect Perfect. The Adaptation of Hebrews 11 in the 9th Mēmrā of the Syriac Book of Steps", in *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Montreal Colloquium in Honour of Charles Kannengiesser, 11-13 October 2006*, eds. L. DiTommaso et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 235.

with dismissing these persons (i.e., the chosen race) could the audience of the tractate correctly understand the message of the Savior and reach the heavenly bridal chamber. In this explanation, theological and mythological reasoning are amalgamated into the establishing story of origin, and serve as a basis for the exegetical methodology that inevitably leads to the rejection of the Old Testament and the figures of the Patriarchs.

Apocalypse of Adam (NHC V.5)

The *Apocalypse of Adam* is the final treatise in Codex V of Nag Hammadi, and indeed Epiphanius mentions the “apocalypses of Adam” that were used by the Gnostics (*Pan.* 26.8.1),⁴⁵ thus it may have existed beyond the Library corpus. It is a part of so-called Adam literature.⁴⁶

Concerning its content, the work presents itself as an apocalypse that was given to Adam after the fall. He taught it to Seth, while explaining their creation, the fall, the hostile creator God and his archons, and the work of the Savior: the Illuminator. The story of the revelation here tells us in some detail the transmission, loss, and recovery of redemptive knowledge: the gnosis. The account of this revelation is significant: Adam receives it in dream as a vision (“Now I slept in the thought of my heart”). Then in his discourse the sentence continues:

“And I saw three men before me whose likeness I was unable to recognise.”⁴⁷

65.26–9

According to the *opinio communis* of scholars, this short sentence is a witness of the biblical story of the three visitors of Abraham at Mamre.⁴⁸ If this is the

45. For an introduction to the treatise see e.g., G.V. MacRae, “Introduction”, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI: With Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, ed. D. M. Parrott (Leiden: Brill 1979), 151–3; and F. Morard, “L’Apocalypse d’Adam de Nag Hammadi. Un essai d’interprétation”, in *Gnosis and Gnosticism. Papers Read at the Seventh International Conference on Patristic Studies Oxford 1975*, ed. M. Krause (NHS 8; Leiden: Brill, 1977), 35–42. See also: G.W.E. Nickelsburg, “Some Related Traditions in the Apocalypse of Gnosticism”, in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism. Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale New Haven, Connecticut, 1978. Bd. 2: Sethian Gnosticism*, ed. B. Layton (SHR 41; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 515–39.

46. For good introductions to the literature, its categorization, and main questions, see M. Stone, *A History of the Literature of Adam and Eve* (Atlanta, GA: SBL 1992); M. De Jonge and J. Tromp, eds., *The Life of Adam and Eve and Related Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); G.A. Anderson, M.E. Stone, and J. Tromp, eds., *Literature on Adam and Eve: Collected Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

47. The translation is from MacRae, in Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices*, 159.

48. See G.M. Shellrude, “Nag Hammadi Apocalypses: A Study of the Relationship of Selected Texts to the Traditional Apocalypse”, PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 1986.

case, the text alludes to Gen. 18:2, and thus is another witness to the story of Abraham.

Further, the text reveals the meaning and the relevance of this short sentence. The passage quoted above continues with the explanation: “because they were not from the powers of god who created us.” (65.29–32). Here, the story returns to its Gnostic context and introduces the theological duality of the first God and the creator god on the one hand, and the different types of creatures on the other, using a quotation from Gen. 1:26 and the biblical story of creation. Thus, one can suppose that the three visitors were not created by the creator god through his power, and for this reason they have another likeness (ϵΙΝΕ in Coptic). Unfortunately, the next lines are so fragmentary that only a few words are readable (e.g., they surpassed, glory), thus no conclusion can be drawn for certain about these three men. Based on these details, I am only able to suggest that the text’s topic is the three visitors coming from the heavenly world, and one or all three of them are the mediator(s) of the revelation: the saving knowledge.

The genre of this tract is a contemporary revelatory account, starting with a circumstantial setting (the dream), continuing with the angelic visitors and the mediation of the knowledge, with reference to their indescribable appearance.⁴⁹

The sentences do not offer us any other indications for identifying with certainty the source or any contemporary traditions related to the Mamre theophany. The Jewish allegoric interpretation, expressed by Philo, *Abr.* 121—according to whom it was a vision of God’s powers, both creative and royal—has to be excluded. Most Christian interpretations, in which the Church Fathers saw either one God, the Word, or the Lord among the three visitors (e.g., Justin, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus), or *the holy and consubstantial Trinity* (e.g., Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, Athanasius of Sinai, Ambrose of Milan, Maximus the Confessor), have to be excluded as well.⁵⁰

In the sixth century, Procopius of Gaza mentions that in the interpretation of the biblical story, “Some take the three men as three angels” (*Comm. Gen.* 18 [PG 87/1:364B]), probably supported by LXX Ps. 78:25 (“man ate the bread of the angels,”). The same interpretation was also used in Late Second Temple Judaism (e.g. Josephus, *Ant.* 1.196, Philo, *Abr.* 115).⁵¹ In light of these interpretations, it

49. Ibid., 293.

50. For the Jewish and Christian interpretations see A.E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels. Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), esp. 59–70. See also E. Grypeou and H. Spurling, “Abraham’s Angels: Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 18–19”, in *The Exegetical Encounter Between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, eds. E. Grypeou et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 181–202; and B.B. Bucur, “The Early Christian Reception of Genesis 18: From Theophany to Trinitarian Symbolism”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23, no.2 (2015): 245–72.

51. K.P. Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels: A Study of the Relationship Between Angels and Humans in Ancient Jewish Literature and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), esp. ch. 2.1.

seems the example quoted above has similarities to this reading. Thus, the early Jewish or Christian angelological traditions that identified the three visitors with three angelic beings could have been the source of the text, since its writer could have been acquainted with this type of interpretation of the story of the visitors of Abraham.

Pistis Sophia

Pistis Sophia was written in the third to fourth century and presents a fully developed Gnostic system. In it the resurrected Savior explains the mysteries of the heavenly world, the creation, and salvation for the disciples. In the dialogue between Mary and Jesus on the fate of the Patriarchs, the Savior says⁵²:

I forgave Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob, all their sins and iniquities, and I gave to them the mystery of light in the aeons and I put them in the place of Jabraoth and all the archons who have repented. And when I go to the height and I am about to go to the light I will carry their souls with me to the light.

III.135⁵³

The Patriarchs and the Prophets belong to the part of Jabraoth (who is the brother of Sabaoth Adamas and rules over six aeons); after the repentance the Savior gives them the possibility to return to the middle-place. In this strongly mythologized but theological concept that is far away from the Old Testament narratives, we are facing an interpretation where Abraham is among the fallen ones but in the two-stage process of redemption; with the Savior's help he is lifted up to the kingdom of light, that is the perfect and ultimate redemption. The process starts with the repentance and the practice of the mysteries of light and they are rewarded by being placed in the location of Jabraoth together with the rulers, and are waiting until the Savior Jesus takes them into the place of light.⁵⁴ Undoubtedly, the figure of Abraham does not play an active role as an independent person, but exemplifies repentance and the belief that characterizes other Old Testament figures (who are linked with the figure of Jabraoth) as well. Going further, we can suppose that the quotation demonstrates the underlying positive evaluation of the Old Testament, or at least the main characters in it, among them Abraham.

52. Macdermot and Schmidt, *Pistis Sophia*, 702.

53. The translation is from Macdermot and Schmidt, *Pistis Sophia*, 703, with minor amendments.

54. For the cosmological system in the *Pistis Sophia*, see E.M. Evans, "The Books of Jeu and the *Pistis Sophia*. System, Practice, and Development of a Religious Group", PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2011, esp. ch. 3.

Secondary Sources

Marcion (Irenaeus, Adv Haer. 4.8.1.)

Marcion was not only regarded as a heretic thinker, theologian, and radical exegete of the Gospel in the early second century CE, but he was also a founder of a church. Although his doctrines are sometimes separated from the category of the ancient Gnosis, there are reasons for which we must include him.⁵⁵ Justin Martyr's *Apology* (c. 153/154) mentions Marcion's name for the first time and describes his activity and teachings. The two main sources for the reconstruction of his system come from Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* and Epiphanius in his *Panarion* (c. 375), who refute his school and church. Although Marcion's theology was refuted and attacked by the Church Fathers, the Marcionite church in the East and traces of Marcionite groups are found in Arabic sources as late as the tenth century.⁵⁶

It is not necessary to assess the rich scholarly literature on the sources and assessment of Marcionite teachings here,⁵⁷ but even though they do not provide a coherent picture of Marcionite doctrine or its alterations by its disciples, there is no doubt that his teaching focuses on theological dualism. Concerning the author's exegetical methodology and the source's critical methodology, it is also beyond dispute that he created his own canon from the Gospel of Luke and the *Corpus Paulinum*. Equally though, he does not accept the Old Testament in his canon; he treats it as the testimony of the Creator who is opposed to the Father of Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ In this theological dualism, according to which the God of Jesus had been totally unknown before his first appearance and miracle, Marcion concluded that there could be no connection between Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, although in the case of Marcion one is unable to find a reference to the person or the biblical story of Abraham, Marcion and his school need to be mentioned since he created a dualist system with theological reasoning that is paradigmatic in the evaluation of other heretical examples.

In Irenaeus' refutation of Marcion, this theological dualism was the reason why he rejected Marcion's opinion and the exclusion of the Patriarchs (Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham) from salvation. According to Irenaeus, behind this theological conviction there was a simple logical argumentation which points to an opposition

55. Marksches left him outside of the Gnosis: Ch. Marksches, *Die Gnosis* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001).

56. M. Frenschkowski, "Marcion in arabischen Quellen", in *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung/Marcion and His Impact on Church History*, eds. G. May et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 39–63.

57. For the present state of the literature see, S. Moll, "At the Left Hand of Christ: The Arch-Heretic Marcion", PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2009.

58. For the Marcionite revisions of the Scripture we accept the conclusions of Schmid; in the case of the Pauline corpus the deletions are in fact the only safe textual changes we may assume for Marcion: U. Schmid, *Marcion und sein Apostolos* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995).

to the original Christian message, with this reverse logic leading to mistaken conclusions. Following the rhetorical strategy of Irenaeus, Marcionite theology fails to reach the meaning of the salvation:

Saying all things in direct opposition to the truth, that Cain, and those like him, and the Sodomites, and the Egyptians, and others like them, and, in fine, all the nations who walked in all sorts of abomination, were saved by the Lord, on His descending into Hades but on the other side: the serpent which was in Marcion declared that Abel, and Enoch, and Noah, and those other righteous men who sprang from the patriarch Abraham, with all the prophets, and those who were pleasing to God, did not partake in salvation. For since these men, he says, knew that their God was constantly tempting them, so now they suspected that He was tempting them, and did not run to Jesus, or believe His announcement: and for this reason he declared that their souls remained in Hades.

Adv. Haer. 1.27.3⁵⁹

The source of this story is an early Christian teaching where the Patriarchs, prophets, and the Jews are in Hades and are waiting for the coming of the Savior. However, Marcion gave it an opposite meaning based on his theological teaching on the unknown God. He made a distinction not only between the two gods, but between two Messiahs also, “one who appeared under Tiberius, another who is promised by the Creator.”⁶⁰ The Patriarchs and the prophets saw the descended Savior but did not believe in him and so they remained in Hades, waiting because they knew that their God was always tempting them, and so they suspected that he was tempting them again (*Adv. Haer.* 1.27.3).⁶¹ This understanding could be a consequence of the literal interpretation. This non-allegorical, non-figurative interpretation of the prophets and, indeed, of all the Hebrew Scriptures occurs in some other refutations (e.g., Origen, *De Princ.* 2.5.2). It is worth mentioning a further passage from Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 4.8.1):

Vain, too, is [the effort of] Marcion and his followers when they [seek to] exclude Abraham from the inheritance, to whom the Spirit through many men, and now by Paul, bears witness, that “he believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.” (Rom. 4:3). And the Lord [also bears witness to him,] in the first place, indeed, by raising up children to him from the stones, and making his seed as the stars of heaven, saying, “They shall come from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, and shall recline with Abraham, and Isaac,

59. The translation is from A. Roberts and W. Rambaut, trans., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1., eds. A. Roberts et al. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885).

60. Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 1.15.6.

61. For this, see Moll *ibid.*, who notes that Epiphanius also reports this story, but in his version the reason is other: they do not follow Christ because they stuck to their own God (*Pan.* 42.4.3–4).

and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven;" (Mt. 8:11) and then again by saying to the Jews, "When ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of heaven, but you yourselves cast out." (Lk. 13:28). This, then, is a clear point, that those who disallow his salvation, and frame the idea of another God besides Him who made the promise to Abraham, are outside the kingdom of God, and are disinherited from [the gift of] incorruption, setting at naught and blaspheming God, who introduces, through Jesus Christ, Abraham to the kingdom of heaven, and his seed, that is, the Church, upon which also is conferred the adoption and the inheritance promised to Abraham.⁶²

In this passage the Church Father Irenaeus refutes Marcion with arguments from New Testament verses. He not only insists that the testimony of the Old Testament has the same authority with the one of the New Testament, but he also uses the authoritative sayings of the Lord and Saint Paul, who referred to righteous ones, and among them, to Abraham. Thus, Irenaeus proclaims his own teaching, arguing for universal salvation and, at the same time, for the unity of the God of the Old and New Testaments. The verses on the promise that serve and prove the unity of the Old and the New Testament, form also the basis of the theological doctrines on the heavenly kingdom. This idea is in opposition with Marcion's teaching that neglects not only the Old Testament with the figure of Abraham, but also the validity of universal salvation.⁶³

Ophites and Sethians (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 1.30.10)

Irenaeus' account of the mythological story of the Ophites⁶⁴ and Sethians includes some details that were missing from the aforementioned examples. The main actors are Jaldabaoth and Sophia, both of whom operate in the worldly sphere and participate actively in forming and constructing the history of humanity as if it would be a history of their and their parts' struggle for reaching and possessing the fallen divine light:

62. The translation is from Roberts and Rambaut, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, with minor modifications.

63. From later refutations we can refer to the example of Theodoret of Cyrus, because, according to him, Marcion calls the patriarchs and prophets lawbreakers (*Haer. fab. com.* 24.41).

64. The evaluation of this section of Irenaeus leads us into the complex history of traditions from the writings of the Library, from Origen (*Contra Celsum*) and from the Ophite Diagrams. For recent scholarly opinion about this account and its connection to other heretical movements and writings from Nag Hammadi, see, T. Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence* (NHMS 68; Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Jaldabaoth himself chose a certain man named Abraham from among these, and made a covenant with him, to the effect that, if his seed continued to serve him, he would give to them the earth for an inheritance. Afterwards, by means of Moses, he brought forth Abraham's descendants from Egypt, and gave them the law, and made them the Jews.

Adv.Haer. 1.30.10

As in the aforementioned writings, Jaldabaoth represents the creator god, the God of the Old Testament. This broad identification is clearly detectable from an earlier passage where Jaldabaoth claims vainly to be the only God in words that are reminiscent of YHWH's monotheistic claim (*Adv.Haer.* 1.30.6). The new—and until now unmentioned—motif that occurs in this quotation is the covenant. Corresponding to the biblical accounts, the creator God chooses Abraham to give him the entire earth. But the author goes further and uses this motive to explain the nation's origin; through Moses he creates the Jewish nation out of his descendants.

According to the source that Irenaeus uses, the Ophites (and Sethians) rewrite the Old Testament in order to create their own mythological story of origin and destiny. As mentioned before, in this mythological history Abraham, among other important figures, has a negative role, similar to the figures who were subservient to the archons. This understanding was well known in Sethian thinking (e.g., 2LogSeth), but was also present in some Valentinian writings and in the texts belonging to the other Gnostic schools, such as the Marcionite.⁶⁵

Heracleon

Heracleon was a Valentinian author who wrote the first extant, systematic commentary on the Gospel of John in the second half of the second century.⁶⁶ Scholars have different opinions concerning the place of his activity; Pagels situates him in Alexandria, but according to Rudolf he was active in Rome.⁶⁷

His commentary is lost but some fragments are preserved in Origen's similar work, since he quoted, commented, and refuted the opinion of Heracleon.⁶⁸

65. In Irenaeus there is another example from the Gnostics whose arithmological speculation mentions Abraham's tribes (*Adv. Haer.* 1.18.3).

66. A.E. Brooke, *The Fragments of Heracleon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891) and T.J. Pettipiece, "Heracleon: Fragments of Early Valentinian Exegesis. Text, Translation, and Commentary", PhD diss., Wilfrid Laurier University, 2002.

67. E. Pagels, *Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), 29; Rudolph, *Gnosis. The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, 323.

68. In the Commentary of Origen there are 48 fragments from Heracleon, next to them there are two others, in Clem.AL., *Strom.* 6.71–3; Photius, *Ep.* 143).

Thomassen states, based on the list of the fragments, that “It is uncertain whether Heracleon’s Commentary covered the whole text of the gospel.”⁶⁹ The relevant fragment is a part of smaller group that is concerned with the dispute of Jesus with the Jews (Frags. 44–9). Fragment 44 comes from Origen’s work 20.168–70 as a commentary on John 8:43–4⁷⁰:

Heracleon, however, attempts to give a reason for why they are not able to hear the word of Jesus nor understand his language in that passage: “you are from your father the devil” (ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ). He says with these words: Why are you not able to hear what I say? Or that “you are from your father the devil? (Διὰ τί οὐ δύνασθε ἀκοῦειν τὸν λόγον τὸν ἐμὸν ἢ ὅτι ὑμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ) Showing them their nature “from the substance of the devil” (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ διαβόλου) and proclaims to them that they are not children of Abraham for they would not hate him, nor of God for they would not love him.⁷¹

Unlike our other examples, this text focuses on the words of the Savior in the Gospel. By means of allegorical exegesis and by his interpretation of Jesus’ words, Heracleon demonstrates his doctrine on the three, pneumatic, psychic, and bodily natures.⁷² Accepting the results of Thomassen, who doubts this evaluation of Heracleon’s teaching,⁷³ I am inclined to think that Heracleon, keeping his tripartite teaching, considered the different response to the Savior’s call as an explanation of these different categories. Thus, salvation is for all, but people’s response to it reveals their human natures.⁷⁴ In this way, in Heracleon’s understanding, the οὐσία explains rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees as a consequence of their “substance.”

By means of this teaching, Heracleon was able to make a new distinction between the Jews and the Christians, and to formulate a special teaching about the

69. E. Thomassen, “Heracleon”, in *The Legacy of John. Second Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 176.

70. The Greek text is from Pettipiece, “Heracleon”, 143.

71. Translation from Pettipiece, “Heracleon”, 143 with minor modifications.

72. For the Valentinian understanding of the three natures, see I. Dunderberg, “The School of Valentinus”, in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics”*, eds. A. Marjanen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 68–70.

73. E.g., B. Aland, “Erwählungstheologie und Menschenklassen-lehre: Die Theologie des Heracleon als Schlüssel zum Verständnis der christlichen Gnosis”, in *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, ed. Martin Krause (NHS 8; Leiden: Brill, 1977), 148–81; A. Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon Philologus: Gnostische Johannesexegese im zweiten Jahrhundert* (WUZNT 142; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002); J. Holzhausen, “Die Seelenlehre des Gnostikers Heracleon”, in *Psyche—Seele—Anima: Festschrift für Karin Alt*, ed. G. Buch (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 109; Stuttgart: Teubner, 1998), 279–300.

74. Thomassen, *Heracleon*.

origin of the Pharisees from the substance of evil (in this construction the matter has no *physis*). Further, the Jews are presented as the children of Abraham, the psychics, in accordance with Heracleon's understanding. This is different from the widespread Valentinian understanding where the church belongs to this category and is identified with the psychics (e.g., *Gosp. Truth; Interp. Know.*).

The genre of the text is a genealogy, rooted in the tradition of Abraham as ancestor of the Jews. This idea is widespread and occurs not only in Jewish writings (e.g., as father of the Jews according to Josephus, *Ant.* 1.158; as forefather in Josephus, *War* 5.380), but also in Christian writings (e.g. Rom. 4:1; Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.* 9.19.2–3), and even in pagan texts (e.g., Apollonius Molon).⁷⁵

In the passage quoted, this widespread motif is used in a totally different way than in the previous accounts examined so far. Based on the structure of the fragment, its source is the words spoken by the Lord in the Gospel. Moreover, from them the author derived their allegorical interpretation, in which the Jews are independent from the Pharisees, with their own origin. Also, at a new interpretative level in this Valentinian context, the category of Abraham's children received its symbolic understanding as representative of the psychic nature.

Theodotus

Theodotus, a contemporary of Valentinus, provides another example of how the figure of Abraham was used in eastern Valentinianism.⁷⁶ Nothing is known about Theodotus' life and doctrines, except for what Clement of Alexandria's *Excerpts from Theodotus and of the so-called eastern doctrine of Valentinianism* mentions.⁷⁷ This work is a compilation of different authentic writings interwoven with the comments of Clement. In *Exc.* 18, Clement mentions:

When the Saviour descended, he was seen by the angels and so they proclaimed him. But he was also seen by Abraham and the other righteous men who are in Paradise on his right hand. For he says, "He rejoiced to see my day," (Ἠγαλλιάσατο γάρ, φησὶν, ἵνα ἴδῃ τὴν ἡμέραν τὴν ἐμὴν) that is the advent in the flesh. Wherefore, the risen Lord preached the good tidings to the righteous who are in Paradise, and moved them and translated them and they shall all "live under his shadow"

75. For these examples and other occurrences see B. van der Lans, "Belonging to Abraham's Kin: Genealogical Appeals to Abraham as a Possible Background for Paul's Abrahamic Argument", in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, eds. M. Goodman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 307–18.

76. F. Gagnard, *Clément d'Alexandrie: Extraits ex Theodote* (SC 23, Paris : Editions du Cerf, 1970).

77. R.P. Casey, ed. and trans., *The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria* (London/Cambridge: Christophers, 1934).

(ἐν τῇ σκιᾷ αὐτοῦ ζήσονται). For the advent here is a shadow of the Saviour's glory which is with the Father, and a shadow of light is not darkness but illumination (φωτὸς δὲ σκιά οὐ σκότος, ἀλλὰ φωτισμός ἐστιν).

The passage is a testimony of Theodotus' exegesis of Jn 8:56. Jesus' sentence in the Gospel implies Abraham's name, while the Valentinian writer mentions it later, together with reference to the righteous. In the first sentence, there is a particular early Christian teaching on the descent of the Savior, who gradually takes the form of the beings and identifies with them. Further, the text hints at the incarnation, the embodiment (the advent in flesh), and to the transfiguration and resurrection, when he preached the gospel in Paradise. Moreover, in the last sentence the text identifies the antediluvian condition of creation with the saved condition, through the symbol of the shadow, which hints at the Garden of Paradise.⁷⁸

If we look more closely at the methodology of Theodotus, it seems that the location of the Savior's speech is Paradise, where Abraham is placed with other righteous men. This verse starts the exegesis to express a particular Valentinian teaching on redemption and illumination. The author uses the figure of Abraham so that his speculation corresponds with the biblical concept of Paradise as Abraham's bosom (cf. Lk. 16:22). This motive can reveal the main and radical alteration to the standard narrative, because this Paradise is not the final place where people reside, but rather a transitional one where the Savior preaches the Gospel and from where the Savior moved and translated the righteous ones to his light. With the symbol of a light's shadow, the narrative turns back to the Mosaic creation account and receives a new focus, through which the author is able to create his own interpretation. To present his theological concept one more change needs to be applied, namely the advent of the Savior takes the place of the advent of God; that is a change between judgement and redemption and illumination.

The Refutatio on One Valentinian Teaching

The *Refutatio*⁷⁹ gives a radical allegorical interpretation that supports a unique understanding of Abraham. As a part of the Valentinian allegorical interpretation and arithmology in VI.34, the anonymous author mentions Abraham in this way:

In this manner these subdivide the parts within the Pleroma. Now likewise the parts in the Ogdoad have been subdivided, and there has been projected Sophia, which is according to them, the mother of all living creatures (μήτηρ πάντων τῶν ζώντων), and the joint fruit of the Pleroma who is the Logos, and the other aeons who are the celestial angels that have citizenship in Jerusalem which is above, which is in heaven (Ἱερουσαλήμ τῇ ἄνω, τῇ ἐν οὐρανοῖς). For this

78. This description is supported by references to Heb. 1:3 and 2 Cor. 4:6.

79. The authorship is debated in scholarly literature, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

Jerusalem is Sophia, she is outside (the Pleroma) and her spouse is the joint fruit of the Pleroma. And the Demiurge projected souls, for this (Sophia) is the essence of souls (οὐσία ψυχῶν). This (the Demiurge), according to them is Abraham and these (the souls) are the children of Abraham (οὗτός ἐστι κατ' αὐτοὺς Ἀβραάμ καὶ ταῦτα <ς> τοῦ Ἀβραὰμ τὰ τέκνα).

Ref. 6.34.3.3–6.34.5.1

The introduction to this chapter reports that the sphere of the creator is the sphere of the Soul. This teaching, coming from a Platonic interpretation of the world's Soul, provides the key for understanding the last sentences, according to which Abraham and his descendants belong to the psychics. This is the first main alteration compared to other Valentinian accounts. Thus, I support Dunderberg's evaluation: "Thus, it seems that the psychic offspring is especially associated with the Jews rather than with 'Church Christians' mentioned in Irenaeus."⁸⁰ This type of interpretation is not unknown in the Valentinian exegetical tradition, but this version exemplifies a new, unusual stratum which deepens the allegorical interpretation and identifies Abraham with the Creator: the Demiurge.

Conclusion

To conclude, this review of the figure of Abraham and his biblical stories in the Gnostic traditions reveals a unique, polymorphic, and complex mix of traditions that are both interrelated and interconnected. Although there is no common, one-sided picture of the Old Testament, nor a common attitude to the biblical tradition, a commonly accepted methodology for the interpretation of the texts, nor a common genre, the late antique writers used the name and the story of the Patriarch Abraham regardless of the school to which they belonged. The surviving texts, which belong to the Valentinian, Sethian, and the Marcionian schools, show that their authors were acquainted with the Patriarch. Nevertheless, for them, Abraham was not as central an Old Testament character compared to others, such as Adam and Seth. However, in spite of his relative absence, the material related to him characterizes not only the different Gnostic schools, but also their divergent exegetical methods.

For Böhlig, the reason for Abraham's absence, from a theological viewpoint, is that: "Seth, der Sohn Adams, hat sich im Synkretismus des Hellenismus einen hervorragenden Platz erobert. Er ist der spiritualisierte Abraham."⁸¹ This statement could be applied to some Sethian writings, where Seth has a central and essential

80. I. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism. Myth, Lifestyle and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 141.

81. A. Böhlig, "Zur Frage nach den Typen des Gnostizismus und seines Schrifttums", in *Gnosis und Synkretismus. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur spätantiken Religionsgeschichte*, ed. A. Böhlig (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 225.

role, but we cannot prove this. The examples we have looked at testify not only to the presence of Abraham but his relevance in creating and articulating Gnostic ideas. In addition, in some cases, the figure of Abraham is a spiritualized one, but he still has his own character, independent of the negative or positive role that he plays within these texts.

These writings use a plethora of methodological strategies, which vary from literal to ethical and allegorical exegesis. Besides this variety, which indicates the manner in which the authors considered their own theological doctrines, the presence of Old Testament writings, regardless of how radically the writers used them, is significant. Naturally, there is no doubt as to the compound influence of the New Testament as well on these texts, and both signify not only the main source here, but also the authority of Scripture for these Gnostic writings. It is also beyond question that the nature of this "authority" varies wildly, from complete aversion to a positive evaluation of Scripture.

Further, in the examples quoted above, the writers reflect on contemporary controversies over differing religious and theological questions, such as circumcision, the command of God for a religious calling and conversion (*metanoia*), hospitality, or the name of the Patriarchs. All these theological topics were part of acrimonious disputes between movements and schools in the first Christian centuries and, if my hypothesis is right, all of them are reflected in early Christianity. The status of the Old Testament is questioned primarily through the figure of Abraham, but these examples and writings belong firmly within the Christian tradition. From this theological perspective, these passages are significant for their mythological context and expressions and, hopefully, now, after this short investigation, these are more clearly understandable.

One should also mention that some other Abrahamic episodes are missing from the quoted texts. These are the story of Melchizedek (although a revelatory text under his name exists [NHC IX.1] it does not mention Abraham), the episodes in which his wife appears, or his children, his prayers, the *Akedah*, etc. Although this chapter does not aim to investigate their absence, it would appear that the authors did not need these Abrahamic narratives to express their theological argument.

In spite of the different strategies of argumentation, theological contents, and mythological backgrounds of these Gnostic texts, they have some common features. This seemingly arbitrary selection, with all its inconveniences and weaknesses, displays the following characteristics: (1) in all the examples the rejection of the God of the Old Testament occurs; (2) the supposition that evil and/or inferior power(s) created and rule the world is present; (3) the texts have their own teaching about Jesus, which differs from the teaching of the church (in some cases it is definitely docetic Christology); and, lastly (4) the adherents claim, through these examples, that they have been liberated from obedience to the evil angels and/or the creator, through knowledge. All these features together offer the possibility for raising a minimum definition of ancient Gnosis.