The Secret Revelation of John

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The Ideal:
The Divine Realm

Christ's revelation to John begins with a lengthy description of the transcendent Deity, painted primarily with images, terms, and concepts prevalent in current Platonizing philosophical speculation and religious piety (SRevJohn 4:1–5:4). The transcendent Deity is described as a Monad, an indivisible unity, the source and foundation of everything. It is a monarchy, a sole ruling power with nothing that could stand above It to rule over It. Ontological primacy and primordial power combine to legitimate Its just position as ruler, as the head of all the Aeons. Religious piety can rightly acknowledge the transcendent Deity as God and holy Father, metaphoric terms suggesting both ruling and generative power (SRevJohn 4:2–3).

The Secret Revelation of John also describes the transcendent Deity in terms of negative theology (via negationis): It is invisible, incorruptible, illimitable, lacking nothing, prior to everything, unsearchable, immeasurable, ineffable, unnamable, indestructible, and incomprehensible. The transcendent Deity may also be described as far superior to anything that might be said of it or any qualities or attributes that might be ascribed to it (via eminentiae). It is even superior to perfection, blessedness, and divinity, while yet being the source of all these. Its transcendency is emphasized by insisting that the categories ascribed to existing things (being, movement, rest, identity, and diversity; substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, and affection) do not strictly apply to the transcendent Deity, for It is far superior to them all (SRevJohn 4:22–
Yet it is also the source of everything; the eternity who gives eternality; the light who gives light; the life who gives life; the blessed one who gives blessedness; the understanding which gives understanding; the ever good one who gives good and does good; mercy which gives mercy; grace which gives grace (SReuJohn 4.37–38). The myth-makers of the Secret Revelation of John are also content to apply the positive language of religious piety to describe the transcendent Deity (via analogiae). It is God, and indeed more than a (mere) god, the father of the All, holy, pure light, life, spirit, completely perfect, pure, blessed, goodness, knowledge, and complete stability.

The Secret Revelation of John thus utilizes three modes of conceiving the highest Deity: It denies that any attribute can appropriately apply to the transcendent and ineffable Deity (via negationis); it understands the transcendent Deity as the source of everything and therefore father, light, life, and goodness (via analogiae); and it declares the superiority of the Deity to any attribution that could be applied to it, for example, God but more than God (via eminentiae). This mixing of various modes of theological conceptuality might be considered poor philosophy, judged by standards of purely logical consistency, but actually the Secret Revelation of John stands in good company with Middle Platonizing philosophers and theologians, for whom such mixing is at least in part "a conceptual necessity." Moreover, by including both the most prestigious intellectual terms and the most popular religious language of its day, the Secret Revelation of John strikes chords that resonate across the entire range of ancient spiritual sensibilities. No one in antiquity would have complained that this portrait of the transcendent Deity was not entirely appropriate in its prose and praise.

When we turn to the Savior's description of the rest of the Divine Realm, the same mixing of genre, mood, and intellectual modes of speculation continues. Philosophical conceptuality finds its place alongside numerological speculation, mythic drama, and metaphoric play. While the accounts in the four manuscript versions are not entirely consistent, for our limited illustrative purposes here, it is possible to construct a synthetic portrait of the genesis and structure of the Divine Realm that is common to all the versions (see table below). From the Divine Father first emerges a female entity variously called Barbelo, Pronoia, Ennoia, or Protennoia. She requests the Father to grant her children, and four Aeons (eternal beings) came into existence: Foreknowledge, Indestructibility, Eternal Life, and Thought (BG/III) or Truth (II/IV). Together with Barbelo, these form an androgynous pentad (a decad) of Aeons. They may be thought of collectively as the realm of Barbelo.

From Barbelo now comes the next level of existence, the realm of Autogenes-Christ. With the permission of those above him, he fills out his realm with a set of twelve Aeons. The most important of these are the four Lights (or Illuminators): Harmozel, Oroiel, Daveithai, and Eleleth, each of whom is associated with three other Aeons (for a total of twelve). The four Lights function not only as hypostasized beings (characters or personalities), but also as the realms over which and in which are placed those who belong to the All: Adam, Seth, the seed of Seth (the souls of the saints), and last of all those souls whose repentance comes late.

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Divine One-Father
  ↓
Pronoia-Barbelo
  ↓
(Ennoia [or Truth]—Foreknowledge—Indestructibility—Eternal Life)
  ↓
Autogenes-Christ
    (Mind—Light—Word—Will)
      ↓
Harmozel (Armazel) Oroiel (Oriael) Daveithai (Daveithai) Eleleth
  ↓
Grace Providence Understanding Perfection
Truth Perception Love Peace
Form Memory Idea Wisdom
  ↓
Adam Seth Seed of Seth Penitents
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The Problem: Rupture

According to the Secret Revelation of John, this portrait of the Divine Realm contains within it everything which truly exists (in an ontological sense). It portrays creation as the emanation of Divine beings in an ontologically real and authorized process from a single monadic principle of origin. The Divine Realm is thus perceived as a Unity and is appropriately called the One (forms and images models or imitations of what truly exist in the Divine Realm).

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is he, not Sophia, who disobeys the true Deity when he falsely calls himself “God” (SRevJohn 14.2).

It is not that Sophia is herself evil or that she is powerless—indeed the Secret Revelation of John stresses that “her thought did not remain idle” (SRevJohn II 10.7). In similar stories elsewhere, Sophia's generation of Yaldabaoth is emphatically narrated as a tragic case of female sexuality and reproductive power out of male control. While that theme is implicit here as well in the figuration of Sophia as a female acting without the approval of her male partner and in her birthing of Yaldabaoth, the Secret Revelation of John more strongly emphasizes Sophia's disruption of harmony in the divine household through her reckless female daring and ignorance. Her fault is twofold: she acts without the consent of the Spirit, thereby violating the natural and proper hierarchical order of the Divine Realm; and she acts apart from her male consort, thereby violating the harmonious concord symbolized by male and female union. The terms used to refer to Sophia's consort emphasize his role in the narrative primarily as a reification of the harmony embodied in the divine unity (SRevJohn 4.3–5).

In Sophia's exercise of independent thought, the ideal pattern of obedience and subordination is broken, shattering the intellectual unanimity of the Divine Realm. The tragic result is a rupture in the divine unity, in the full accord, the “single-mindedness” so to speak, of the All, which is exemplified by the Aeons' collective subordination to the will of the Father.

The World Below: Opposition and Counterfeiting

The consequences of Sophia's actions become brutally apparent in the description of her offspring and his subsequent creation of the world and humanity. Sophia's disorderly conduct breaks the unity of divine outpouring insofar as her desire to create a likeness out of herself results in the production of difference. Because the text's logic indissolubly links knowledge and existence, Sophia's rupture of the unanimity in divine thought (epistemology) leads to a rupture in the nature of being (ontology). The break is figured as a mimetic failure: Yaldabaoth is not like his Mother. The product of her thought is an image unlike its producer: it is ugly and imperfect. Again and again the Secret Revelation of John stresses that her product is not like Sophia:

Because of the unconquerable power within her, her thought did not remain idle. And an imperfect product appeared from her, and it was different from her pattern because she created it without her partner. And it was not patterned after the likeness of its Mother, for it had a different form (SRevJohn II 10.7–9).

This mimetic rupture is the whole cause of human suffering and death. Yaldabaoth's birth rips the seamless fabric of divine Being. The entire cosmos is subsequently built not in continuity with the divine, but across a gap. The world is not an imitation of the Divine Realm but an ignorant and malicious parody of it.

Here the oppositional logic of the Secret Revelation of John's myth-makers sets in with a vengeance. In what follows, they engage in an astonishingly consistent and unremitting application of analogic dualism in which difference implies opposition and antagonism. Only now does it become fully apparent that the portrait of the Divine Realm was set up imaginatively precisely as a foil for this oppositional strategy.

Because the oppositional logic of the work assumes that the deity who heads each realm encapsulates and represents the nature and character of that realm, the myth focuses primarily upon contrasting the transcendent Deity of the Divine Realm with Yaldabaoth, the creator God and Chief Ruler of the mundane world. Where the transcendent Deity is ineffable and unnamable, the creator God is named—he is called Yaldabaoth or Saklas. Where the transcendent Deity is the "sole ruler," Yaldabaoth is merely "chief ruler" and his rule extends only over the authorities, powers, and angels he has created. Where there is nothing above the transcendent Deity to rule over it, Yaldabaoth is subject to the rule of the All, including
his mother, Sophia, whether he accepts it or not. The transcendent Deity is chronologically prior to everything, whereas Yaldabaoth comes into being only relatively late after the completion of the Divine Realm. According to the logic of ancient ideology, temporal primacy implies the transcendent Deity's superiority, while the derivative existence of Yaldabaoth implies his relative inferiority. In sharp contrast to the transcendent Deity, who is a holy, invisible, incorporeal, and incorruptible Monad—indeed even beyond incorporeality—the creator God is quite visible to linguistic description and is pluriform, having many faces or forms. He is not even human in appearance but bestial, having at once "the face of a serpent and the face of a lion" (Rev 10:11). He is, in form and in fact, a monster. This bestiality is the outward representation of his inward nature—violent, uncontrolled, and irrational—even as the incorporeality of the transcendent Deity figures his nature—beyond passion, an undivided, unchanging unity. Where the transcendent Deity is knowledge and the source of knowledge, Yaldabaoth is ignorant and indeed arrogant in his ignorance (Rev 14:15). The character of Yaldabaoth's rule also stands in sharp contrast to that of the merciful providence of the transcendent Deity. The joint sovereignty of Yaldabaoth and his powers over the world below is figured as the harsh rule of Fate, while the consort of the Father is Providence (Pronoia). Other contrasts could be elaborated, but these are sufficient to illustrate the point. The reader understands better the natures of both the transcendent Deity and the mundane pretender by seeing their opposition so clearly displayed.

But the portrait of Yaldabaoth is not solely and perhaps not even principally depicted through opposition. The greater injustice lies in the twisted similarities between the two, for Yaldabaoth does not merely oppose the transcendent Deity; he imitates it. He falsely sets himself up as God, styling himself as the creator and ruler of the lower world, mimicking the activities of the true Deity and Ruler of the All. But whereas the transcendent Deity truly is God, Yaldabaoth is merely "called God" (Rev 13:4). His declaration that he is God, indeed that "no other god exists beside me" (Rev 14:2), is both deception and self-deception. Imitation here has become a malicious parody, such that mimetic resemblance is transformed by oppositional logic into a deceptive counterfeit.

It is related, for example, that one of the Chief Ruler's first actions is to create an aeon illuminated by fire (Rev 11:4). Fire, one of the four primal elements of the material world (air, earth, water, fire), is contrasted with the immaterial, pure light of the transcendent Divine Realm. A material element that burns as well as illumines, fire is therefore inferior to the spiritual light in nature and function.

Or again, like the transcendent Deity, Yaldabaoth creates lesser beings (in his case, authorities, powers, and rulers). His manner of creation is patterned grotesquely on that of the transcendent Deity, as a kind of perversion in which oppositional logic combines with imitation to make the creation of the world into a monstrous parody. In the Divine Realm, the transcendent Deity produced Pronoia ("Forethought") by reflecting upon its own image in the light-water.

In every way it perceived its own image, seeing it in the pure light-water which surrounds it. And its thinking became a thing. She appeared. She stood in its presence in the brilliance of the light... She who is the perfect Pronoia of the All, the light, the likeness of the light, the image of the Invisible (Rev 5:11-14, 17-19).

The divine Aeons subsequently appear at the request of the virginal spirit, Barbelo-Pronoia, with the proper consent of the transcendent Deity. In this manner, generation in the Divine Realm originates in self-contemplation and proceeds according to the natural hierarchy of the divine will. By contrast, the world creator produces his minions by copulating with Aponoia ("Madness").

And he (the Chief Ruler) copulated with Madness (Aponoia), who is in him. He begat authorities who are under him, the twelve angels, each one of them to his own aeon following the model of the immortal
Aeons. And he created for each one of them seven angels each and for the angels three powers—these are all under him, 360 angelic beings with his third power, following the likeness of the primal model which is prior to him (SRev/John BG 11.5-10).

The transcendent Deity’s generation through pure mental acts of virginal self-reflection contrasts dramatically with the material baseness of Yaldabaoth’s sexual copulation, even as the phonetic similarity of “Pronoia” to “Aponoia” heightens the grating lexical contrast between purposeful reflection (pronoia) and loss of reflective capacity (aponoia). It is the simultaneity of phonetic resonance with lexical discord that makes the parody.

On the other hand, it is striking that the Secret Revelation of John insists that Yaldabaoth follows the model of the Divine Realm in all his acts of creation.

He ordered everything following the likeness of the first Aeons, which had come into being, so that he might create them in the indestructible pattern. Not because he had seen the indestructible ones, but the power in him which he had gotten from his Mother bore in him the likeness of the world (SRev/John II 13.21-24).

Even as Autogenes brought forth twelve Aeons, so now Yaldabaoth begets twelve authorities with their angels (for a total of 360 or 365). He speaks and they come into being (SRev/John 13.7; Psalm 32.9 LXX). Yet in their fundamental character and nature, Yaldabaoth’s products resemble him, on the principle that “like follows like.” They serve the world creator and like him are bestial in form and character. Their joint sovereignty is the harsh rule of Fate, which again stands in sharp contrast to the merciful Providence (Pronoia) of the transcendent Deity’s rule.

In the end, then, any resemblance to the divine is simply fraud. Rather than declare, as Plato did, that mimesis ensures that the mundane world is the best possible, the Secret Revelation of John exposes these likenesses as fundamental deception.

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The Result:
The Situation of Humanity in the World

Ultimately, the most significant consequence of the rupture within the unity of the Divine Realm is the introduction of injustice into the world in the form of arrogant, malicious, and ignorant rulers. Here the oppositional logic of the Secret Revelation of John takes on full narrative force. The ideal of just rule is figured in the portrayal of the transcendent Deity and its rule of the Divine Realm; the measure of injustice is figured in Yaldabaoth and his minions’ attempts to exert an illegitimate and distorted authority over the lower world.

Ancient religious thought ascribed the qualities that were most valued in Graeco-Roman society to the gods. So, too, the Secret Revelation of John’s conceptualization of the Divine Realm embodies the highest ideals. Divine transcendence guarantees the qualities of order, permanence, and stability beyond the disorderly chaos of life in the lower world. The divine is characterized by unity, uniformity, and universality, in contrast with the divisive tensions of human social life. The Secret Revelation of John insists upon the goodness of hierarchical arrangements of power and authority that ensure the just rule of the superior over the inferior by emphasizing repeatedly that the transcendent Deity is the sole ruler, with no one and nothing above It, the “head” of the All. The transcendent Deity is also superior in extent and effectiveness of ruling power. It is “sole ruler” over everything that exists; without Its consent, no plan can come to successful fruition. Those who operate with Its approval fulfill their plans, as we see in Barbelo and Autogenes’ creation of divine Aeons, while those who act
without this approval come to grief and their thoughts are ineffective, as Sophia’s untimely birthing demonstrates all too forcefully.

Because the lower creator Yaldabaoth acts without appropriate divine approval, we would expect him to be ineffectual and that is exactly what we see repeatedly emphasized. For example, his exaggerated claim “I am a jealous God and no other god exists beside me” serves only to highlight his ignorance and arrogance. As the Secret Revelation of John’s authorial voice reasonably points out to the reader: “If there were no other God over him, of whom would he be jealous?” (SRevJohn 14.4). He and his cronies repeatedly attempt to dominate the superior humans, but with at most only limited success—and even when they do partially succeed, they are forced to desperate strategies of violence and deception in order to gain what tenuous control they do manage (SRevJohn 18.12–18; 19.1–12; 20.1–21; 21.1–2; 22.1–15; 24.4–10, 17–19; 25.1–20). It is clear that the Secret Revelation of John regards such strategies as indications of impotence and unjust domination; they are used only by those who lack the moral and intellectual qualities of legitimate authority. Such strategies are never employed by the Divine Realm. Indeed Armstrong notes that even overcoming the darkness is not figured with military or war imagery. In the end, the creator God is exposed as powerless to bring his plans to successful fruition.

Nowhere are this impotence and malevolence more clear than in the Secret Revelation of John’s extended retelling of the Genesis creation narrative. Here at the heart of the work we find the world creator and his minions repeatedly characterized as wicked and ineffectual rulers. The plot of the Genesis creation story has been restructured as a sequence of violent attempts by the world creator forcibly and illegitimately to dominate humanity. Each move the creator makes prompts a countermove from the Divine Realm to rescue humanity, which in its turn provokes a response by the world rulers. The sequence of action is thus structured by repeating a paradigm in which the rulers note the superiority of the humans and attempt to dominate them; saviors sent by Pronoia from the Divine

Realm then intervene and counter their actions. In this process, the Genesis story is transformed into a spiritual struggle between the Divine Realm and the world rulers for the souls of humanity. The themes of goodness in divine creation and human culpability for evil are lost, and replaced by a story in which divine actions save humanity from wicked oppression.

History as a Spiritual Battle: Move and Countermoves

The first episode begins when Yaldabaoth boasts, “I am a jealous God; no other god exists beside me” (SRevJohn 14.2; cp. Ex 20.5; 34.14; Deut 32.39; Isaiah 45.5–6; 46.9). When Sophia hears this deluded boast, she becomes aware of her deficiency and is deeply aggrieved, agitated by the darkness of her ignorance. She begins to “move to and fro,” the same expression used to describe the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters in Gen 1.2 (LXX). She realizes that his wicked and rebellious claim is the consequence of her own action and she repents (SRevJohn 14.9–14). NHC II elaborates on this scene, stating that when Yaldabaoth boasts he is the only god, Sophia recognizes that her light has become dim: “She understood her deficiency when the brightness of her light was diminished. And she was darkened because her partner had not been in concord with her” (SRevJohn II 14.5–7). The light has become dim because when Yaldabaoth created his minions:

He divided his fire among them, but he did not send them anything from the power of the light which he had received from his Mother. For he is ignorant darkness. When the light mixed with the darkness, it caused the darkness to shine, but when the darkness mixed with the light, it darkened the light, so that it became neither light nor dark, but it was weak (SRevJohn II 12.1–6).

The dimming of the light comes about because it has mixed with darkness; here light and dark are at once real photic conditions and also metaphors for knowledge and ignorance.

In response to Sophia’s prayer of repentance, the Spirit is poured over
her and the transcendent Deity sends her partner to the lower realm to correct her deficiency. The partner raises Sophia to the Ninth sphere, above the eight heavens created by the Chief Ruler, and then the first Human appears to the world rulers to teach them about the true nature of the divine (SRevJohn 14.5-15.7). Although it is Sophia who is aggrieved and repentant, it is her offspring, the world ruler, who is in need of correction and instruction. It is as if Sophia’s deficiency has been projected outside of her and taken on a life of its own—the world rulers are the very embodiment of her ignorance. They themselves are too mired in their own ignorance and self-deception to be able to ask for aid or even to know that they need help. Yet until her deficiency has been rectified, Sophia cannot return to the Divine Realm.

In order to correct the Chief Ruler’s arrogant boast that “there is no other God beside me,” a voice comes forth from above saying, “The Human exists and the Child of the Human” (SRevJohn 15.2). This statement is almost a direct quotation from the Greek translation of Genesis 1.3, in which God says (in Hebrew), “Let there be light” and there was light.” The Hebrew term for light is translated into Greek as φῶς, which spells two Greek words depending upon how they are accented, either φῶς (“light”) or φῶς (“human”). Since most ancient manuscripts are not accented, the Greek could be translated either as “Let there be light and there was light” or “Let the human exist and the human exists.” The Secret Revelation of John exploits this ambiguity in order to make a pun identifying the image of the First Human who appears in the waters below with the primordial light of Genesis 1.4 Thus when “God said, ‘Let there be light/man,’ and there was light/man,” the image of the First Human shines on the waters. The Secret Revelation of John elaborates this interpretation further by attributing these words not to the lower creator God, but to Autogenes-Christ. He does not say, “Let there be light” but “The Human exists and the Child of the Human.” Christ’s speech is already itself the appearance of the light since his words illuminate the darkness of Yaldabaoth’s ignorance. Hence Christ’s revelation is not only auditory, but visible as the likeness of the heavenly first Human who appeared to Yaldabaoth and his minions in human form as an image reflected on water, even as Genesis 1.2 (LXX) notes that the Spirit of God moved upon the waters.7

NHC II expands the description of this scene, fitting the text more closely to both Genesis and the Gospel of John: “And upon the waters which dwell under matter, the underside was illumined by the appearance of his image which had been revealed. And when all the authorities and the Chief Ruler stared (on the water), they saw all the region below which was shining. And by the light, they saw the model of the image upon the water” (SRevJohn II 15.9-11). This brief description fuses a number of ancient traditions:

- Platonic notions that humanity is created in the image of the divine Idea of Man;
- Gen 1.2-3 in which God brings light into a dark and watery world through speech;
- Jewish Wisdom traditions in which Wisdom is presented as the light which instructs humanity in the ways of God;
- the Johannine connection of Christ with the creative speech of God: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God: all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of humanity. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (GosJohn 1.4-5).

When Yaldabaoth and his authorities see the image of the true Human, they devise a plan: “Let us create a human being according to the image of God and according to our likeness” (SRevJohn 15.12). This command refers directly to the terminology of Genesis 1.26-27 (LXX), where humanity is said to be created in the image and likeness of God. They create the First Human, the psychic Adam, according to the image they perceive