The Figure of Seth in Gnostic Literature

Gnostic speculation on the figure of Seth, son of Adam, is gaining greater attention among scholars interested in the origins and history of Gnosticism. Studies on this subject have recently multiplied, and the publication of an important monograph on Seth by A. F. J. Klijn, Seth in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Literature, is especially noteworthy. Indeed, the ground covered in Klijn’s book can be said to pose the question whether it is profitable to presume to carry the investigation any further. It is thus with some hesitation, and perhaps some presumptuousness, that I offer herewith some observations of my own on this subject, though I should perhaps add that I began to work on this topic before I had had a chance to read Klijn’s book.

In this chapter I shall try to build upon evidence presented by Klijn and others, as well as upon research done in connection with my own previous study, in order to show, hopefully with greater precision than

1. See esp. the papers presented to a special joint seminar of the Pseudopigrapha Group and the Nag Hammadi Section of the Society of Biblical Literature at the Society’s One Hundred Thirteenth Annual Meeting in San Francisco, December 1977. The following papers prepared for this seminar are published in the volume of proceedings, SBLSP 1977 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977): Anita Bingham Kolenkow, “Trips to the Other World in Antiquity and the Story of Seth in the Life of Adam and Eve,” 1-11; William Adler, “Materials Relating to Seth in an Anonymous Chronographer (‘Pseudo-Malalas’) and in the Chronography of George Synclerus,” 13-15 (an introduction to texts and translations); George W. MacRae, “Seth in Gnostic Texts and Traditions,” 17-24; and Birger A. Pearson, “Egyptian Seth and Gnostic Seth,” 25-43. The following items were presented to the seminar but are as yet unpublished: William Adler et al., “Materials Relating to Seth in an Anonymous Chronographer (‘Pseudo-Malalas’) and in the Chronography of George Synclerus” (texts and translations); William Adler, “Notes to Text of George Synclerus and Pseudo-Malalas”; John T. Townsend, “Seth in Rabbinic Literature: Translations of the Sources”; and Dennis Berman, “Seth in Rabbinic Literature: Translations and Notes.” Other studies will be cited below.

3. “Egyptian Seth and Gnostic Seth.” Part of the research done for both of these

studies was supported by an NEH Senior Stipend for the summer of 1977. I am grateful to the Endowment for its support.

4. For brief surveys of the Mandaeans and Manichaean evidence see my paper “Egyptian Seth and Gnostic Seth,” 34-35, and Klijn, Seth, 107-111. It might be noted that the genetic and phenomenological relationships between Mandaeans/Manichaean and other Gnostic speculations on Seth could very profitably be investigated, but this would require a more extensive study than could be attempted in this chapter. On the Manichaean material see now my article, “The Figure of Seth in Manichaean Literature,” in F. Breyer, ed., Manichaean Studies: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Manichaeism (Aug. 5-9, 1987, Lund, Sweden: Lund; Plus Ultra, 1988) 147-55.

5. The characterization “Sethian-Ophite” is based on Theodoret of Cyrus’s restatement of Irenaeus’s description, Hær. 1.14: οὐδεὶς Σαθών οὐδεὶς Οφθαντός οὐδεὶς Οφθαντος των διαζυγουσών: Irenaeus’s text has only, “οὐδεὶς...” (1.30.1).

6. On Norea see chap. 5 in this book.
8. Ibid., 83-86.
Epiphanius, and had gotten access to some of their books (Haer. 39.1.2). He reports that the Sethians trace their race (γίνος) from Seth, son of Adam, and identify him with Christ (39.1.3). Seth was born at the instigation of the Mother (= Sophia) after Abel’s death, and received the spark of divine power (39.2.4.7). The Mother destroyed Cain’s wicked race in the Flood and preserved the righteous race of Seth (39.3.1), though the wicked angels installed Ham into the ark in order that wickedness might be preserved (39.3.2–3). Jesus Christ, appearing in the world miraculously, is none other than Seth (39.3.5). The Sethians have seven books in the name of Seth, as well as other books (39.5.1). They honor a certain Horaia (= Norea) as the wife of Seth and regard her as a spiritual power in her own right (39.5.2–3).

Two other groups described by Epiphanius, the “Archontics” (“Ἄρχοντικος, Haer. 40”) and the libertine “Gnostics” (Γνωστικοί, Haer. 26) of various stripes, seem clearly to be related to the Sethians (Haer. 39). Indeed, Michel Tardieu has recently argued that the three sects described by Epiphanius in chapters 26, 39, and 40 of his opus against heresies are ultimately manifestations of one and the same Gnostic ideology.

Epiphanius locates the Archontics in Palestine. In their system Cain and Abel are the product of a liaison between Eve and the devil (40.5.3), but Seth is the real son of Adam (40.7.1). This Seth, also called “Allogenes,” was endowed from on high with spiritual power, and therefore recognized the highest God in distinction from the creator of the world and his archons (40.7.2–3). The Archontics have books in Seth’s name and in the name of his seven sons, who are also called “Allogenes” (40.7.4–5). Of the “Gnostics” Epiphanius reports that they, too, have books in the name of Seth (26.8.1). “Noria” (= Norea) also plays a role in their system (26.1.3–9).

Hippolytus’ description of a group he identifies as Sethians (Σηθιανοί) is remarkably different from the accounts of Ps.-Tertullian and

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9. Cf. Irenaeus, Haer. 1.30.9, and n. 6 above.
11. Ibid., 87 n. 21.
13. Cf. nn. 6 and 9 above, and chap. 5 in this book.
14. Cf. n. 5. Klijn mentions this group in a footnote; see Seth, 89 n. 32.
15. Irenaeus, Haer. 1.7.5; Exc. Theol. 54.1; Tertullian, Adv. Val. 29.
Zostrianos (NHC VIII,1), Melchizedek (NHC IX,1), The Thought of Norea (NHC IX,2), and Trimorphic Protennoia (NHC XIII,1). In two of these the name “Seth” does not occur (Norea, Trim. Prot.). In Melchizedek the name occurs only in the isolated phrase, “the children of Seth” (5,20); other tractates similarly designate the spiritual race (i.e., Gnostics) as the “children,” “seed,” or “race” of Seth (Ap. John, Zost., Steles Seth, and Gos. Eg.). The birth of Seth is mentioned briefly in The Hypostasis of the Archons.

One of the most important of the tractates usually labeled as “Sethian” is The Apocalypse of Adam. In this work Adam is represented as giving his son Seth a testamentary revelation. He reveals the future course of the world’s history and the fact that Seth will be the progenitor of the Gnostic race.

Two of the Nag Hammadi tractates bear titles with Seth’s name, The Second Treatise of the Great Seth (NHC VII,2) and the Three Steles of Seth. No mention is made of Seth in the text of the Treatise, though Seth may (perhaps secondarily) be regarded as the putative revealer = “author” of the document. In The Three Steles of Seth one Dositheus is represented as interpreting the “steles.”

In The Apocryphon of John Seth is the (heavenly) son of the perfect Man, Adam, and is placed over the second pleromatic light, Orioael. The preexistent souls constituting the seed of Seth dwell in the third light, Davethe. The heavenly Adam and Seth have their earthly counterparts as well, and the birth of Seth is narrated in the text.

The Gospel of the Egyptians contains a highly developed doctrine of Seth. This tractate is represented as a book written by the “Great Seth” and placed on a high mountain to be reserved for the elect of the last times. The “Great Seth” is the heavenly son of the incorruptible Man, Adamas. He also plays a savor role, for he is sent into the lower world to rescue the elect, “putting on” Jesus for that purpose.

As we shall see, there is reason to include in our purview documents that have not hitherto been labeled as Sethian, or in which Seth is not named. In two versions of The Apocryphon of John Seth is referred to as the “image” of the Son of Man; the latter could, at first glance, be taken as a designation for the heavenly Seth. The “Son of Man” terminology occurs in Eugnostos the Blessed (NHC III,3; V,1) and The Sophia of Jesus Christ (NHC III,4; BG 3). We shall therefore have to consider whether Seth, though unnamed, lies in the background.

Two additional tractates present special problems: The Paraphrase of Shem (NHC VII,1) and Allogenes (NHC XI,3). The Paraphrase of Shem contains material related to the “Sethian” system described by Hippolytus and supposedly derived by him from a document called “the Paraphrase of Seth.” We shall have to consider, therefore, whether The Paraphrase of Shem in the Nag Hammadi collection should really be called “the Paraphrase of Seth,” even though Seth is never mentioned in the text. Allogenes could be regarded as a “Sethian” document on the testimony of Epiphanius that the Sethians possessed books called “Allogenes” (Haer. 39.5.1) and that Seth himself was called “Allogenes” (Haer. 40.7.7).

As has already been noted in the citations, two of the Nag Hammadi tractates already discussed (The Apocryphon of John and The Sophia of Jesus Christ) occur also in the Berlin Gnostic Codex (BG). Of the other extant Coptic Gnostic codices, the Askew Codex contains no reference to Seth; but Seth does occur as a divine being, under the name “Sethus,” in the untitled tractate of the Bruce Codex.

In what follows, the sources surveyed above will be utilized to build a typology of the Gnostic figure of Seth, and comparable non-Gnostic

20. Böhl includes Allogenes in his list of Sethian books, and Schenke adds it to his list in his more recent treatment. Cf. n. 18.
24. A similar procedure is followed by George MacRae, “Seth” (cf. n. 1, above);
materials will be considered in order to achieve some clarity regarding the sources of Gnostic speculation on the figure of Seth, son of Adam.

TYPOLÓGY OF THE GNOSTIC SETH

Our typology will be arranged according to what the texts tell us of the identity of Seth (A–C) and the function of Seth (D–E). Under each heading, we consider the primary sources first, and then bring in the patristic testimonies.

A. The Birth of Seth

There are several Gnostic accounts of the birth of Seth, and all of them consist of midrashic restatements of the key passages in Genesis 4 (esp. 4:25) and 5 (esp. 5:3). These accounts of the birth of Seth are also designed to counterbalance similar midrashic restatements of the story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1–16).

The Hypostasis of the Archons (91,11–92,2) contains a midrash on Gen. 4:1–15, which is especially important for our purposes. The births of Cain and Abel are narrated as follows:

Now afterwards (i.e., after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise) she (Eve) bore Cain, their son; and Cain cultivated the land. Thereupon he (Adam) knew his wife; again becoming pregnant, she bore Abel. (91,11–14; parentheses added)

In this passage, interpreting Gen. 4:1–2, Cain is identified as the son of the archons ("their son"). The rape of Eve by the archons had been reported earlier in the text (89,18–30). This idea of the parenthood of Cain is based on a widespread Jewish haggadic tradition according to which Cain was the product of a liaison between Eve and the angel of death or the devil, Sammael. Targum Ps.-Jonathan follows this tradition in its rendering of Gen. 4:1–2:

And Adam was aware that his wife had conceived from Sammael the angel, and she became pregnant and bore Cain, and he was like those on high, not like those below; and she said, "I have acquired a man, the angel of the Lord." And she went on to bear from Adam, her husband, her twin.

MacRae's paper has been of particular help to me in my own treatment of the figure of Seth.

27. See chap. 6 in this book.

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sister and Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a man working in the earth. 28

The birth of Seth is recounted in The Hypostasis of the Archons as follows:

And Adam [knew] his female counterpart Eve, and she became pregnant, and bore [Seth] to Adam. And she said, "I have borne [another] man through God, in place [of Abel]." (91,30–33)

This passage is an interpretative restatement of Gen. 4:25; and the restorations of the names "Seth" and "Abel" in the lacunae are therefore certain. However, it is to be noted that Gen. 4:1 is reflected here, too, in the saying attributed to Eve: "I have borne [another] man through God." Cf. Gen. 4:1 (LXX): εἰκοσάβα εὐφρατον διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ. "Another man" interprets σφέαρα ἔφερον in Gen. 4:25. The Hypostasis of the Archons does not, therefore, extrapolate from σφέαρα ἔφερον a doctrine of a special race or seed of Seth, as a number of other Gnostic texts do. Instead, special significance for Gnostic humankind is derived from the birth of the heroine Norea, sister of Seth:

Again Eve became pregnant, and she bore [Norea]. And she said, "He has begotten on [me a] virgin as an assistance [for] many generations of mankind. She is the virgin whom the Forces did not defile. (91,34–92,3)

Norea, sister of Seth, thus renders for mankind the "assistance" (βοήθεα; cf. Gen. 2:18) requisite for salvation. Her begetting is from God; "he" in Eve's exclamation is clearly a reference to God, the Father of the All. As a virgin she is "undefiled," in contrast to the earthly Eve, whose rape by the archons is narrated earlier in the text.

In view of the notable parallels between The Hypostasis of the Archons and On the Origin of the World (NHC II,5), one would expect to find in the latter some reference to the birth of Seth. But that is evidently not the case.

29. So Layton, "Hypostasis," 62. This narrative of the birth of Norea has a parallel in the reference to the birth of Cain's unnamed twin sister in Tg. Ps.-f., quoted above.
30. See Alexander Böhlig and Pahor Labib, Die Koptisch-Gnostische Schrift ohne Titel aus Codex II von Nag Hammadi im Koptischen Museum zu Alt-Kairo (DAWBO 58; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962). My references are to the codex pagination, and not to the pagination assigned by Böhlig, following Pahor Labib's publication of plates, Coptic Gnostic Papyri in the Coptic Museum at Old Cairo (Cairo: Government Press, 1956).