case. Eve is described as “the first virgin, not having a husband” (114,4). After giving birth she sings a hymn, the last line of which is, “I have borne a lordly man” (114,15). This appears to refer to Cain, for Gen. 4:1 (esp. the Hebrew: הָאֹת אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ בְּאֵשְׁתָּי מִדְאָבִיר) is in the background.31 In a later passage the rape of the earthly Eve by the seven archangels is narrated (117,2–15), followed immediately by the birth of Abel and others: “First she was pregnant with Abel, by the first ruler. And it was by the seven authorities and their angels that she bore the other offspring” (117,15–18).

Whether Seth was meant to be included in this reference is impossible to say; in any case he is not mentioned in the text. Nothing is said, either, of the birth of Norea. Her name is mentioned only in the title of a book referred to earlier, “The First Book of Noraia” (102,10–11) or “The First Treatise of Oraia” (102,24–25).32

We turn to The Apocryphon of John. The longer recension (NHC II,1) has the fuller account of the birth of Seth, and I follow that version here.33 This account is preceded by the story of the birth of Cain and Abel. The seduction of Eve by the chief archon results in the birth of two sons, Eloim called “Cain,” and Yawe called “Abel” (24,15–26). The result is the planting of “sexual intercourse” in the world (24,27–31).

That both Cain and Abel are the product of Eve’s illicit union with the chief archon probably reflects a Jewish interpretation of Gen. 4:1–2, to which both Cain and Abel were sons of the devil rather than of Adam.34

The birth of Seth is narrated as follows:

And when Adam recognized the likeness of his own foreknowledge, he begot the likeness of the son of man. He called him Seth according to the way of the race in the aeons. Likewise the mother also sent down her spirit, which is in her likeness and a copy of those who are in the pleroma, for she will prepare a dwelling place for the aeons which will come down... Thus the seed (σπέρμα) remained for a while assisting (him) in order that, when the Spirit comes forth from the holy aeons, he may raise up and heal him from the deficiency, that the whole pleroma may (again) become holy and faultless. (24,34–25,16)

31. MacRae suggests that this passage is a “probable allusion to the birth of Seth” (Seth,” 19). See now chap. 6 in this book.
32. Cf. chap. 5 in this book.
34. Cf. Klijn’s discussion of Gen. Rab. 24.6; Pirge R. El. 22; Zohar 1.55a; Adam and Eve 22.3; 1 Enoch 85:6–8; and the Samaritan Malef in Seth, 7–10, 16, 21, 28–30.

In this passage the focal text in Genesis is not 4:25 but 5:3. The key word is “likeness” (εἰμί), rendering both ἰδεα and ἵκανον in Gen. 5:3 (LXX). The product of Adam’s begetting is “the likeness of the son of man,” and he is called Seth, “according to the way of the race in the aeons.” The text is here referring back to the “race” or “seed” of the heavenly Seth (cf. 9,11–16). The “Son of Man” in whose “image” Seth is begotten would seem, at first glance, to be a heavenly Seth, but this will have to be tested in another context to be discussed later. In any case, we have here an interpretation of Gen. 5:1–3:55 earthly Seth is an “image” of his heavenly prototype, the Son of Man.36

It is to be noticed that the “Mother” plays a special providential role in The Apocryphon of John, and in that connection we read of the descent of her “spirit” (πνεῦμα) and the “seed” (σπέρμα). The use of the latter term here may reflect interpretation of the key term τέκτων σπέρμα in Gen. 4:25. The heavenly counterpart of the “seed” below is the aforementioned “seed of Seth,” dwelling in the third light. The “Mother,” of course, is Sophia, who is obliged to intervene in the world below “in order to rectify her deficiency” (cf. 23,20–26).37

The patristic reports of Gnostic interpretations of the birth of Seth present ideas similar to those encountered in our primary sources, although there are some differences in detail. The “others” discussed by Irenaeus (Haer. 1.30), in contrast to The Hypostasis of the Archons and The Apocryphon of John, attribute the birth of both Cain and Abel to the sexual intercourse of Adam and Eve (1.30.9). The birth of Seth is treated as follows:

After these they say that Seth was generated by the providence of Prunicus (secondum providentiam Prunic), then Norea. From these were generated the remaining multitude of men. (1.30.9)

These Gnostics had a version of the birth of Seth showing points of similarity to both The Hypostasis of the Archons and The Apocryphon of John. In common with the former Norea is mentioned; and in common with the latter the providential role of Sophia (“Prunicus”) is stressed. However, nothing is said of a special “seed” of Seth; all mankind is derived from Seth and Norea.

The Sethians described by Ps.-Tertullian attribute the generation of both Cain and Abel to the angels. Klijn reads Ps.-Tertullian’s obviously

36. For discussion of the “birth” of the heavenly Seth see below.
37. On Gnostic Sophia see above all MacRae, “Gnostic Sophia Myth.”
The Sethians described by Epiphanius evidently attributed the birth of Cain and Abel to Adam and Eve (ἕως ἀνθρώπου, Haer. 39.2.1). The death of Abel was caused by the quarreling of the angels (39.2.2). Afterward the “Mother” caused Seth to be born, “and in him she placed her power, depositing in him the seed (σπέρμα) of the power from on high and the spark (σπερμή) which is from above, sent for the first deposit of the seed and the formation” (Haer. 39.2.4). This account of the birth of Seth resembles that of The Apocryphon of John, though it differs from the latter on the origin of Cain and Abel. Epiphanius later reports that these Sethians also taught that Seth had a wife named Horaia (39.5.2), a detail that puts us in some contact with The Hypostasis of the Archons, according to which Norea is the sister of Seth. “Horaia” and “Norea,” of course, are one and the same.

Epiphanius reports the Archontics that they had a myth according to which Cain and Abel were children of Eve and the devil (Haer. 40.5.3). Seth, on the other hand, was the real son of Adam (φύσει ἄνω ἀντοῦ νήσου). Afterward the “Power” (δύναμις) from above snatched up Seth and taught him heavenly revelations. The “Power” referred to here may be a reference to Sophia; if so we are again in contact with the account in The Apocryphon of John.

As we have seen, all of the various Gnostic accounts of the birth of Seth (and of Cain and Abel) consist of reinterpretations of key passages in scripture; and we have also seen that Jewish exegetical traditions are sometimes to be seen in the background.

B. Names and Titles of Seth

A number of special names or titles are attached to Seth in Gnostic literature. In this section, which necessarily overlaps other portions of

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38. Klijn, Seth, 82.
39. See chap. 5 in this book.
42. Cf. MacRae, “Seth,” 20. It should be noted here that the Gnostic Sophia is a similar kind of projection of Eve, the “Mother of the Living.” Cf. MacRae, “Gnostic Sophia Myth,” esp. 99–101.
The Egyptians the heavenly Seth gives praise to yet another, even more exalted, heavenly Seth figure, “the thrice-male child, Telmael Telmael Heli Heli Machar Machar Seth” (III 62,2–4), also called “the incorruptible child Telmael Telmachael Eli Eli Machar Machar Seth” (IV 59,18–21), “the great power Heli Heli Machar Machar Seth” (III 65,8–9), and “the great power Telmachael Telmachael Eli Eli Machar Machar Seth” (IV 77,2–4).

Klinh has suggested an etymology for “Emmacha,” מַמָּחַ, namely, “servant,” but this does not seem likely. An Egyptian etymology has also been suggested. But in dealing with nomina barbara etymological analysis is hazardous at best.

3. “Son of Man”?

The problem of the Gnostic “Son of Man” is very complex, and certainly cannot be treated here in the detail it deserves. We shall have to be satisfied with a consideration of those texts in which Seth appears to be called “Son of Man,” or something similar.

As an example of the complexity of this problem we refer first to the passage from The Apocryphon of John quoted earlier in connection with the birth of Seth (II 24,34–25,16). We saw evidence there of an interpretation of Gen. 5:1–3, and indicated that at first glance one might tend to identify the “Son of Man” in whose image the earthly Seth is begotten as the heavenly Seth. However, a closer look at Gen. 5:3 itself, wherein Seth is born as “a son in his own (i.e., Adam’s) likeness,” will clarify the identity of the “Son of Man” in The Apocryphon of John. The title “Son of Man,” in fact, applies to a heavenly Adam (“Man”), not a heavenly Seth. Earlier in the text of The Apocryphon of John a voice comes from heaven as a rebuke to the creator-archon Ialdabaoth: “Man exists and the Son of Man” (II 14,14–15). “Man” in this bath qôl is none other than the Highest God; the “Son of Man” is another Anthropos figure called “Adamas,” “Pigeradamas,” and so on. His son, in turn, is the heavenly Seth (cf. Ap. John II 8,28–9,14). The heavenly Seth would then, more consistently, be called “the Son of the Son of Man.”

In fact, the designation “the Son of the Son of Man” does occur in another Nag Hammadi tractate, Euginostos the Blessed:

43. Seth, 105 n. 137.
44. See below for discussion.
46. See esp. Schenke, Der Gott “Mensch,” 34–43. As Schenke has convincingly demonstrated, the Gnostic “Man” speculation consists essentially of interpretation of Gen. 1:26b. Cf. also “Das sethianische System.”

The Figure of Seth in Gnostic Literature

The first aeon, then, is that of Immortal Man. The second aeon is that of Son of Man, the one who is called “First Begetter.” (The third is that of son of Son of Man,) who is called “Savior.” (III 85,9–14)

Though the name “Seth” is not found in Euginostos the Blessed, there can be hardly any doubt that “the Son of Son of Man” in this passage is Seth. More specifically, he is the heavenly Seth. Curiously, the “third aeon” referred to as “the Son of the Son of Man” is missing from the Christianized parallel text, The Sophia of Jesus Christ. The figure of Seth has therefore disappeared altogether from the latter.

Something like a “Son of Man” title is given to the heavenly Seth in some Nag Hammadi tractates. In The Gospel of the Egyptians “the great Seth” is also called “the son of the incorruptible man, Adamas” (III 51,20–22; 55,16–18), but in this tractate, as in The Apocryphon of John, the “Son of Man” referred to in the voice from heaven (“Man exists and the Son of Man,” III 59,1–3) is probably not Seth, but a heavenly Adam/Anthropos, “Son” of the highest Deity (“Man”).

The heavenly Seth is called “the son of Adamas” in Zostrianos (6,25–26; 30,9–10; 51,14). And in the first stele of The Three Steles of Seth he addresses his father Geradamas (or “Pigeradamas,” 118,25–27). But, in fine, it does not appear that Seth is ever given the simple title “Son of Man,” either in his heavenly or his earthly manifestation.

4. “Allogenoses”

The names and titles for Seth already discussed are ultimately tied to speculative interpretation of Gen. 5:1–3 (in relation to Gen. 1:26–27), but in the case of the name “Allogenoses” we have an interpretation of the other key text, Gen. 4:25, with its reference to Seth as a ιερον σπέρμα (“other seed”).

In Epiphanius’s account of the Archontics we learn the name “Allogenoses” as applied to Seth (Haer. 40.7.1). The same name is given to Seth’s seven sons by the Archontics (Haer. 40.7.1). In addition, we are told in the same report that the Archontics make use of books called “Allogenoses” (καὶ τοῖς Ἀλλογένεσι καλομένοις, 40.2.2). Epiphanius later adds that the Archontics have written books in Seth’s own name, as well as others in his and his seven sons’ name (40.7.4).

47. The material in angular brackets is restored on the basis of the parallel in Codex V (13,12–13).
49. Unless the term “son of man” in Trim. Prot. 49,19 is to be understood as referring to a manifestation of Seth. Seth is not named at all in the tractate, however.
This coheres well with what we are told of the Sethians. While Epiphanius does not tell us directly that the Sethians call Seth "Allogenes," one can make that assumption nevertheless, for he speaks of seven books in the name of Seth, and "others" called "Allogenes" (Haer. 39.5.1). The seven books of Seth and the "others" are probably the same; Epiphanius has garbled his sources. Perhaps, too, the "many books in the name of Seth" mentioned by Epiphanius in use among the libertine "Gnostics" (Haer. 26.8.1) are the same books. Thus we can presume that the epithet "Allogenes" is a Sethian-Gnostic designation for Seth.50

Accordingly, it is reasonable to regard the Nag Hammadi tractate Allogenes as a "Sethian" book, and to assume that the revealer "Allogenes" is to be understood as a manifestation of Seth himself.51

A name similar to Allogenes is used once in Zostrianos, "Allogenos" (128,7). Allogenos, together with Eleeth, Kodere, and Epiphanius, constitute the fourth aeon of the fourth Light." This name is doubtless modeled on "Allogenes," but is not a designation for Seth.

5. "Sethesus"

This variation on the name Seth—essentially a Graecization of the Hebrew name—is found in the untitled tractate of the Bruce Codex (passim).52 In that tractate Sethesus is an aspect of the highest God, and has a demiurgic function.53 As Klijn says, "He has clearly lost all contact with the historical setting in which he was originally placed in the beginning of Genesis." The name Sethesus is, in fact, is an advanced point along the trajectory of Gnostic speculation on Seth as a heavenly being.

The name Sethesus occurs also in Zostrianos of a figure in the "third light" of the "third aeon" (Zostrianos 126,12-16). Here the name seems to be applied to a figure other than Seth, but along the lines of "Allogenos" discussed above.

All of the names and epithets we have discussed refer to the heavenly aspect of Seth, and are to be seen as the product of Gnostic reflection on the transcendent meaning of those key references to Seth in Gen. 5:1-3 and 4:25. Thus far, however, we have not discussed the question of Gnostic attempts at wordplay or etymology of the name "Seth," such as occurs in the text of Genesis itself: "She bore a son and called his name 'Seth' (σῆθος), for she said, 'God has set (στήτος) for me another offspring instead of Abel.'" A variety of such wordplays on the name "Seth" is displayed in Jewish and Christian literature, and we might therefore expect to find examples of the same kind of thing in Gnostic literature.

Klijn discusses one possible wordplay of this kind, based on Coptic, in The Apocalypse of Adam (65,6-9), where Adam says to his son Seth, "I myself have called you by the name of that man who is the seed of the great generation or from whom (it comes)." Klijn, following a suggestion made by Rodolphe Kasser, finds a wordplay based on the similarity of the name Seth (σήθος) to the Coptic word for "seed" (στήτος). But this suggestion has to be rejected, not only because the original language of The Apocalypse of Adam was Greek rather than Coptic, but also because the word for "seed" in this passage is the Greek word σπόρα, not στήτος. Adam is telling his son Seth here that he is named for the heavenly progenitor (i.e., the heavenly Seth) of the Gnostic race; the word "seed" reflects a Gnostic interpretation of Genesis 4:25 (Τέκνον ουρανικό).

Another wordplay suggested by Klijn is more likely. In The Gospel of the Egyptians it is said that the number of the aeons brought forth by the great Seth is "the amount of Sodom" (III 60,9-12). The text goes on to say:

Some say that Sodom is the place of pasture of the great Seth, which is Gomorrah. But others (say) that the great Seth took his plant out of Gomorrah and planted it in the second place to which he gave the name Sodom. (60,12-18)

The word "plant" (τέκνος, both verb and noun) is to be understood as a play on the meaning of the name "Seth" according to a traditional Jewish

50. It might be added here that the Sethians, contrary to Klijn (Seth, 35), did not call Seth ἄνωτέρας ἁλογένες (cf. Haer. 39.5.7). This designation is Epiphanius’ own interpretation of the name Seth (ὅπως ἐρωτεύεσθαι ἄνωτέρας ἁλογένες), based on the phrase ἄνω "Αβέλ" in Gen. 4:25.
52. Cf. n. 23.
53. This is a very peculiar development in Gnostic speculations on Seth, but the Mandaean Seth, Still, plays a similar role in the Mandaean Book of John. See, e.g., M. Liddbarski, Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1915) 93, 7; pp. 213,24-216,3; cf. Pearson, "Egyptian Seth and Gnostic Seth" (cf. n. 1), 34.
54. Klijn, Seth, 112.
55. Ibid., 33.
56. Ibid., 92.
58. Seth, 102 n. 122.
explanation, wherein the words ἔκτερον in Gen. 4:25 (“he has established for me”) are related to the word for “plant,” ἔκτερον.

Finally, in another passage not noticed by Klijn, we find an indication that some Gnostics were aware of the Hebrew word-play found in the text of Genesis itself, σπέρμα. Epiphanius reports that, according to the Sethians, the Mother “placed” (ἐθερό, cf. Gen. 4:25 Aquila)60 her own power in Seth, “setting down (καταβαλοντα) in him the seed (σπέρμα) of the power from above…” (Haer. 39.2.4). The use of the words τιθημαι and καταβάλλω would possibly indicate a knowledge of the original Hebrew wordplay on the name Seth in Gen. 4:25, σπέρμα, for the Hebrew word σπέρμα can be rendered with either of these Greek verbs. The LXX rendering of Gen. 4:25, on the other hand, uses the word ἐκατοστάσιμον.61

C. Seth as Progenitor of the Gnostic Race

Probably the most important feature of Gnostic speculation on Seth is the idea that Gnostics constitute a special race of Seth. Indeed this should be seen as “the fixed point of what may be called Sethian Gnosticism.”62

This idea is fully elaborated in The Apocryphon of Adam, wherein Adam reveals the future to his son Seth. In a passage already treated in another context (65.6–9), Adam tells Seth, “I myself have called you by the name of that man who is the seed of the great generation or from whom (it comes).” As we observed, “that man” is the heavenly Seth; he is the “seed” referred to in Gen. 4:25 (ἔκτερον σπέρμα), and from him there comes the “generation” (γενεὰ) of Seth, that is, the Gnostics. Later in the text it is said that the men who came from this seed, who have received the “life of the knowledge,” are “strangers” (ὑπομονέα) to the Creator (69.12–18), and in this we detect another allusion to the phrase ἔκτερον σπέρμα in Gen. 4:25.

The revelation to Seth in The Apocryphon of Adam consists largely of a

59. Cf. Klijn, Seth, 34. The source for this tradition is later—Klijn cites the Syriac Book of the Bee—but the wordplay in The Gospel of the Egyptians would seem to indicate that the tradition is at least as old as the latter. For additional discussion of this passage, see below.


“salvation history” of the race of Seth, its origin, its survival of flood and fire, and its final salvation through the coming of a savior, the “Illuminator.” This kind of “salvation history” is a regular feature in presumably “Sethian” Gnostic materials. In The Apocryphon of Adam we have something that seems to be an early stage of this tradition, modeled on Jewish apocalyptic texts and especially on the Jewish apocryphal Adam literature.63

The Gospel of the Egyptians presents similar features, though more highly developed. In a passage already treated in another context (III 51.5–22) the heavenly Adamas requests a son, “in order that he (the son) may become father of the immovable, incorruptible race” (III 51.7–9). Thereafter we learn of the birth of “the great incorruptible Seth” (III 51.20) and, in turn, the placing of his seed in the third great light, Davith (III 56.19–22). After the sowing of the seed of Seth into the created aeons (III 60.9–11) the "great incorruptible race" (cf. III 60.25–26) suffers through perils of flood and fire, and is ultimately saved by Seth himself. The great Seth passes through “three parousias” (flood, conflagration, and judgment) in order to save his race (III 63.48), “putting on” Jesus for that purpose (III 64.1–3).

In The Apocryphon of John, as in The Gospel of the Egyptians, we are told of the precosmic origin of the “seed (σπέρμα) of Seth” which consists of the preexistent “souls of the saints”; and, as in The Gospel of the Egyptians, Seth’s seed is located in the third light, Dauveh (II 9.14–17; cf. BG 36.1–7). However, in the “salvation history” that is subsequently revealed, the “seed of Seth” is not explicitly mentioned. We do, read of “the immovable race” (τῆς ἑκατοστάσεως II 25.23 et passim) in this connection, and we should probably take this as an implicit reference to the “seed” or the “race” of Seth.64

In The Three Steles of Seth the heavenly Seth is designated as “the Father of the living and unshakeable race” (118.12–13). In praise of his father, Geradamas, Seth says, “Thy place is over a race, for thou hast caused all these to increase, and for the sake of my seed” (120.8–10). Similarly in Zostrianos we read of “the sons of Seth” (7.8–9), the “living seed” that came from Seth (30.10–14), and the “holy seed of Seth” (130.16–17). On the other hand, at the beginning of the tractate the


64. On “the Immovable race” and other such Gnostic self-designations see chap. 8 in this book.