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"I revealed my mysteries to those who are mine": Transmission and Interpretation of Jesus' Words in some Johannine Writings (2nd-3rd century CE)

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**«I revealed my mysteries to those who are mine»:
Transmission and Interpretation of Jesus' Words
in some Johannine Writings (2nd – 3rd century CE)**

Abstract

Some early Christian writings deeply enrooted in a Johannine worldview and religious practice, and usually labeled “Gnostic”, cite or allude to words attributed to Jesus as authoritative utterances. The article attempts to shed light on the process of transmission and production of such Johannine or Johannine-like sayings of Jesus. It appears that such a process might predate the redaction of texts and surely continues irrespective of the written tradition of Jesus' *logoi*, both “canonical” and “apocryphal”. Conclusions are finally drawn on the ideological matrix fostering the process, as well as on the socio-religious scenario which it presupposes.

Keywords

Johannine literature – “Sethian” texts – transmission of Jesus' words – teachers and exegetical debates in Alexandrian Christianity

Introduction

The present paper aims to provide a preliminary survey of quotations and possible allusions to words of Jesus in so-called Gnostic texts. Before delving into textual analysis, two terminological clarifications are needed: by «words of Jesus» I refer to any sayings explicitly attributed to Jesus or ascribable to the Jesus tradition that are preserved in any early Christian writing (including so-called *agrapha*) or that reasonably appear to be presupposed in a text. Furthermore, I will mainly focus on works, such as the longer version of the *Apocryphon of John* (= *AJ* from now on) and the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1), originating among Christian groups which scholars now variously label “Sethian”, “classic Gnostic”, “(biblical) demiurgical”, or “Sethian-Barbeliote”, depending on their respective group definition and their position on the controversial issues of what “Gnosticism” is and what should actually be counted as “Gnostic”.¹

¹ For these labels, see respectively H.-M. Schenke, “The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism,” in B. Layton (ed.) *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism. Proceedings of the International*

Why did I then prefer my much broader title, substituting any other possible and academically legitimate option with the adjective “Johannine”? First of all, because I am firmly convinced that including these texts within the broader frame of old (John and 1 John) and recent (*Acts of John*) Johannine literature is pivotal to fully understanding them as literary products;² then, because I have already made an attempt to demonstrate that religious practices and experiences, as well as the very worldview of the Johannine movement, played a decisive role in inspiring and shaping authors, groups, and individuals who wrote or read such writings.³ This conclusion might be extended to the Alexandrian Christian environment between 2nd and 3rd century CE as a whole, where, just as others and I myself believe, the production and the first circulation of the texts under focus probably took place.⁴

Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Conn., March 28-31, 1978 2: *Sethian Gnosticism* (Leiden, 1981) 588-616, and J.D. Turner, “Typologies of the Sethian Gnostic Treatises from Nag Hammadi,” in L. Painchaud and A. Pasquier (eds) *Le textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification. Actes du colloque tenu à Québec du 15 au 19 septembre 1993* (Laval/Leuven, 1995) 169-217; B. Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in L.M. White and O.L. Yarbrough (eds) *The Social World of the First Christians. Essays in Honor of W.A. Meeks* (Minneapolis, 1995) 334-50, and D. Brakke, *The Gnostics. Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge/London, 2010); Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: an Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, 1999), and, more recently, “A Life Full of Meaning and Purpose: Demiurgical Myths and Social Implications,” in E. Iricinschi et al. (eds) *Beyond the Gnostic Gospels. Studies Building on the Work of Elaine Pagels* (Tübingen, 2013) 19-59; A. Magris, *La logica del pensiero gnostico* (Brescia, 2011).

² Cp. P.J. Lalleman, *The Acts of John: a Two-Stage Initiation Into Johannine Gnosticism* (Leuven, 1998). *AJ* even seems to explicitly refer back to narrative Jesus traditions as we find them related in the *Acts of John*: cp. *AJ* 3,1-10, with *Act.Io.* 89-91. Quotations from *AJ* follow the numbering system devised by K.L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

³ D. Tripaldi, “Tra Alessandria e Roma: narrazione cosmogonica e forme comunitarie nell’Apocrifo di Giovanni,” *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 28/1 (2011) 77-116, esp. 115-16. See also M. Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques. Codex de Berlin* (Paris, 1984) 38-39 and 42-43, though not convincing in every detail of his reconstruction; G. Filoramo, *Il risveglio della gnosi, ovvero diventare dio* (Roma/Bari, 1990) 141-69, discussing more generally the «elective affinities» between John and “Gnosticism”; J.-D. Dubois, “La tradition johannique dans l’Apocryphe de Jean,” *Adamantius* 18 (2012) 108-17. All in all, then, I fully concur with the late F. Bovon, “The Emergence of Christianity,” in Id., *The Emergence of Christianity. Collected Studies* 3 (Tübingen, 2013) 1-16, that «the primitive *Acts of John* and the *Apocryphon of John* may be part of the sacred literature of the left wing of the Johannine movement» (7).

⁴ On the *Acts of John*, see É. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli, *Acta Johannis. Textus alii – Commentarius – Indices* (Turnhout, 1983) 469-72. 686-87. 689-94 [with references to *AJ* as an Egyptian Christian writing!], followed by J.N. Brenner, “Women in the Apocryphal Acts of John,” in Id. (ed.) *The Apocryphal Acts of John* (Kampen, 1995) 37-56, esp. 54-56, and more recently by A. Jakab, *Ecclesia alexandrina. Evolution sociale et institutionnelle du christianisme alexandrin (Ile et IIIe siècles)* (Bern et al., 2004) 86-89. Lalleman, “The Acts of John,” 256-66, discusses all the options and argues instead for Asia Minor. On *AJ*, I follow M. Simonetti, “Teologia e cristologia nell’Egitto cristiano,” in A. Camplani (ed.) *L’Egitto cristiano. Aspetti e problemi in età tardo-antica* (Rome, 1997) 11-38, esp. 12-15 and 22-24; King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 16; Z. Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe*.

On God, the World to Come, and Other Mysteries: “Non-Canonical” Jesus Sayings

Right after the long prologue, the main body of 1 John opens with a well disguised saying of Jesus. However, both the context of the passage and the formulaic ending leave few doubts as to its origin:

1 John

1,5: Καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἀκηκόαμεν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς **φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία.**

Act. Io.

94,4-17: 4. Κελεύσας οὖν 5. ἡμῖν ὡσπερ γύρον ποιῆσαι, ἀποκρατούντων τὰς ἀλλήλων χεῖρας, ἐν 6. μέσῳ δὲ αὐτὸς γενόμενος, ἔλεγεν· τὸ ἀμὴν ἐπακούετε μοι. 7. Ἦρξατο οὖν ὕμνον ὑμνεῖν καὶ λέγειν· 8. Δόξα σοι πάτερ. 9. Καὶ ἡμεῖς κυκλεύοντες ἐπηκούομεν αὐτῷ τὸ ἀμὴν. 10. Δόξα σοι λόγε· 11. δόξα σοι χάρις. Ἀμὴν. 12. Δόξα σοι τὸ πνεῦμα· 13. δόξα σοι ἅγιε· 14. δόξα σου τῇ δόξῃ. Ἀμὴν. 15. Αἰνοῦμέν σε πάτερ· 16. εὐχαριστοῦμέν σοι **φῶς** 17. **ἐν ᾧ σκότος οὐκ οἰκεῖ.** Ἀμὴν.

The source of the message heard and reported by the «we» referring the author(s) of 1 John can be no other than the very Word and Life seen, heard, touched, witnessed and proclaimed, which the first three verses of the prologue bring to the fore (1,1-3). Moreover, in the letter, other words of Jesus are introduced by means of the same or slightly different formulas (cp. 1 John 3,11.23 with John 13,34, and 1 John 4,21 with Matt. 22,37-39). Therefore, 1 John seems to presuppose the existence and knowledge of a teaching circulating under the name of Jesus and speculating on the pure luminous essence of the God of Israel.⁵

This saying is unknown to the Synoptic tradition, as well as to John, but surfaces again on Jesus’ own lips in the *Acts of John*. Notwithstanding a more concise wording in the *Acts of John* and different lexical choices by the authors of the two works, we are probably dealing with one single saying, as a linguistic comparison does not fail to show: in both passages God is explicitly referred to as φῶς, with no

Narrative and Cosmology in the Apocryphon of John (Leiden/New York/Köln, 2006) 275; M. Lang, “Das frühe ägyptische Christentum,” in W. Pratscher et al. (eds) *Das ägyptische Christentum im 2. Jahrhundert* (Münster, 2008) 9-43, esp. 34, n. 145. A more skeptical view on the possibility of locating “Gnostic” writings in Alexandria was expressed by A. Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellen-Religion: die Anfänge des Christentums in Alexandria* (Stuttgart, 2007) 94-96, and more recently by W. Löhr, “Christliche ‚Gnostiker‘ in Alexandria im zweiten Jahrhundert,” in T. Georges et al. (eds) *Alexandria* (Tübingen, 2013) 413-33, esp. 417-18.

⁵ See R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, 1982) 193-94, who correctly reminds us that, seen from the perspective of a Johannine worldview, it is pointless to distinguish between the “historical” Jesus and the celestial Jesus speaking through the Spirit.

trace of darkness (1 John: σκοτία / *Act.Io.*: σκότος) being or abiding (1 John: οὐκ ἔστιν / οὐκ οἰκεῖ) in it (1 John: ἐν αὐτῷ / *Act.Io.*: ἐν ᾧ).

We now come to assess the relationship between these two versions of the saying: as É. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli have demonstrated in their commented edition of the *Acts of John*, sometimes 1 John and *Act.Io.* bear traces of common traditions as the source of parallel passages, and sometimes the more recent source, *Act.Io.*, depends on the older source, the letter. In our case, syntactical and lexical variations make things even more complicated. Nonetheless I think that the balanced judgment of the two scholars can be trusted. Therefore I would argue for a direct link between the two writings, be such a link further specified as “copying” the written source or as reproducing an already re-oralized version of it.⁶ Be that as it may, it cannot be far wrong to claim at least that both 1 John, in the second half of the 1st or at the beginning of the 2nd century, and the *Acts of John*, by the end of the 2nd century, witness the widespread “production” and circulation of Johannine words of Jesus which are not otherwise attested, not even by John itself.⁷

My next example is another good piece of evidence of such “production” that can be added to this dossier in the making.

AJ(NHC II,1 // IV,1)⁸

John

2,12: «For what did he mean about it by saying: “The eternal place we shall go to

14,2-5: 2. ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς μου μοναὶ
πολλά εἰσιν· εἰ δὲ μή, εἶπον ἅν ὑμῖν ὅτι

⁶ Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Johannis*, 487-89. 632. 646. Our saying is probably also referred to in *Evangelium Veritatis* (NHC I,3) 35,4-6, and the anonymous author of this early 2nd century work (Valentinus himself?) does seem to know 1 John (see 30,24-31). On his part, Lalleman, “The Acts of John,” 245-56, argues that the author of the *Acts of John* takes the same position as the Jesus followers opposed in the Johannine epistles, and insists that his work «may have originated at the same time as the Johannine and Ignatian epistles, or later, in case *AJ*’s spiritualizing type of Christology survived» (255). If Lalleman is right, it is possible that *Acts of John* and 1 John have independent access to a common bulk of Jesus traditions. On the complex interplay between orality and literacy in cases such as this, see S.E. Young, *Jesus Tradition in the Apostolic Fathers. Their Explicit Appeal to the Words of Jesus in Light of Orality Studies* (Tübingen, 2011) 103-106.

⁷ Cp. P.Oxy. 840 and P.Egerton 2 in M. Pesce, *Le parole dimenticate di Gesù* (Milan, 2004) 133-39 and 620-26. More evidence for Johannine Jesus and eschatological traditions circulating in the 1st–2nd century CE outside the Fourth Gospel is collected and discussed by Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Johannis*, 488-89, and E. Norelli, “Da dove emerge l’Anticristo? Riesame dell’ἀντίχριστος nelle Lettere di Giovanni,” in A. D’Anna and E. Valeriani (eds) *L’ultimo nemico di Dio. Il ruolo dell’Anticristo nel Cristianesimo antico e tardoantico* (Bologna, 2013) 15-46, esp. 19-34. Earlier, B. Barc already collected the most probable allusions to the *Gospel of John* to be found in the text of *AJ*’s short redaction: see B. Barc and W.-P. Funk, *Le Livre des Secrets de Jean. Recension brève (NHC III,1 et BG,2)* (Québec et al., 2011) 36, n. 38.

⁸ The English translation of *AJ* is mine, as are the translations of all the other Coptic texts which I cite in this article.

was shaped according to the image of the eternal world which **does not** decay”? But in the end he **did not** teach us what it is like».

Cp. *Trim.Prot.* 41,36–42,2: «And I have prepared a shape for the ineffable Lights that dwell in me» (49,36–37: «and the Thought of the creation, which is now scattered all over, will have one single shape»)

πορεύομαι ἐτοιμάσαι τόπον ὑμῖν;⁹ 3. καὶ ἐὰν πορευθῶ καὶ ἐτοιμάσω τόπον ὑμῖν, πάλιν ἔρχομαι καὶ παραλήμψομαι ὑμᾶς πρὸς ἑμαυτόν, ἵνα ὅπου εἰμι ἐγὼ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἦτε. 4. καὶ ὅπου [ἐγὼ] ὑπάγω οἴδατε τὴν ὁδόν. 5. Λέγει αὐτῷ Θωμᾶς· κύριε, οὐκ οἶδαμεν ποῦ ὑπάγεις· πῶς δυνάμεθα τὴν ὁδὸν εἰδένα;

14,23: ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ἐάν τις ἀγαπᾷ με τὸν λόγον μου τηρήσει, καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ἀγαπήσει αὐτόν, καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐλευσόμεθα καὶ μονὴν παρ’ αὐτῷ ποιησόμεθα.

There is no other extant early Christian writing citing these words or reporting similar ideas on the eschatological destination of the elect as a saying of Jesus. The very wording of the *logos* points at a direct knowledge of the farewell dialogues between Jesus and his disciples as related in John 14–17: the relative phrase «the place we’ll go to» in *AJ* 2,12 clearly presupposes and sums up the cluster πορεύομαι / ἐτοιμάσω τόπον ὑμῖν / πάλιν ἔρχομαι καὶ παραλήμψομαι ὑμᾶς πρὸς ἑμαυτόν/ ἵνα ὅπου εἰμι ἐγὼ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἦτε in John 14,3, πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐλευσόμεθα in John 14,23, and ἵνα ὅπου εἰμι ἐγὼ κάκεινοι ὧσιν μετ’ ἐμοῦ in John 17,24, the following *ptaiōn* transposing the mention of the Father in John 14,23 into the idiom and worldview of the new text (cp. *AJ* 4,37 and 5,3: the Father is *aiōn*), and thus intertwining even more tightly the Johannine idea of preparing a place with that of dwelling by the Father.¹⁰

However, it is probably even more important to note that both *AJ* and John refer back to words attributed to Jesus which are not found in the written text of the fourth Gospel (see John 11,40!). Ultimately, it looks as if a literary reference is missing, which implies the existence of traditional material not reported in the written sources.¹¹ Everything becomes clearer, if we surmise that the first addressees of the two writings might have had access to a Johannine tradition of Jesus sayings that was still alive, a tradition that had existed before and irrespective of any text.¹² In other words: probably far more Jesus *logoi* circulated among Johannine groups

⁹ I concur with H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Tübingen, 2005) 619, who argues that it is «die plausibelste Lösung», if εἶπον ἄν ὑμῖν ὅτι πορεύομαι ἐτοιμάσαι τόπον ὑμῖν is understood as an interrogative sentence. See already M. Theobald, *Herrenworte im Johannesevangelium* (Freiburg, 2002) 32–34.

¹⁰ The restitution of the verbal form in *AJ* 2,12 after the relative converter seems certain, on the basis of the preceding verse as transmitted by BG 8502 and NHC III,1: by mentioning *ptaiōn* a second time, 2,12 clearly refers back to 2,11, and further articulates John’s reasoning (see the significant addition of *gar* in the longer version, in order to clarify the logical transition!), which makes the repetition of [*nnabōk erof*] also the likeliest guess.

¹¹ Similarly, Theobald, *Herrenworte*, 506–11.

¹² See above and n. 6.

than is usually assumed, and only a selection of them ended up being committed to writing, incidentally, just as is explicitly declared in John 20,30 and 21,24-25, and confirmed by our analysis of 1 John 1,5. Paraphrasing M. Pesce, we can go a step further and more generally suppose that the informants on whom the authors of John, 1 John, and *AJ* drew did not transmit and elaborate only what the latter regarded as appropriate to record, but kept on handing on and developing everything they knew, wherever they went and settled. On their part, the authors of John, 1 John and *AJ* selected what they knew was handed down, and then adapted it to their own literary sensibilities and distinctive religious worldview.¹³

Comparing *Trim.Prot.* 41,36–42,2 and 49,36–37, two passages from the long monologue of God's first Thought manifested as Jesus (50,12–16), with each other and with John, proves that *Trim.Prot.* 41,36–42,2 represents one further literary variation on John 14,2–5,23, interpreting these verses in light of the eschatological *reductio ad unum* of the scattered divine principle: *sobte* in *Trim.Prot.* 41,36 echoes *ἑτοιμάσαι* / *ἑτοιμάσω* in John 14,2–3 (see Crum 323), whereas its direct object, *ou[s]mo[t]*, the «one single shape» referred to in *Trim.Prot.* 49,37, specifies *τόπον*. Such a *reductio ad unum*, as a core expectation in 2nd–3rd century CE Christian philosophical speculation (cp. also *Act.Io.* 95,35–38; 98,1–3; 100,2–7 [in 95 and 100 Jesus is speaking!], and Orig. *Princ.* 1,6,4; 2,1,2; 3,5,4–6, 8), seems to be working as an exegetical principle and de-stabilizing factor in the transmission and reproduction of the Johannine Jesus tradition. As a matter of fact, the almost obsessive focus on the “being one” motif in John 14–17 (cp. also 11,53: Jesus dies ἵνα καὶ τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ τὰ διεσκορπισμένα συναγάγη εἰς ἓν!) probably functioned in the tradition itself as a starting point for further elaboration, and fuelled such a re-adaptation among educated hearers / readers and writers.¹⁴

The next two tables need just a few remarks:

Trim.Prot. 41,27–28: «And I told my mysteries to those who are mine»

Trim.Prot. 46,33–35: «But, behold, I will reveal to you [my mysteries], because you are my fellow-[brothers]»¹⁵.

Clem. *Strom.* 5,10,63,5,7: εὐλογητὸς <ὁ> κύριος ἡμῶν, ἀδελφοί, ὁ σοφίαν καὶ νοῦν θέμενος ἐν ἡμῖν τῶν κρυφίων αὐτοῦ [...]. οὐ γὰρ φθονῶν, φησί, παρήγγειλεν ὁ κύριος ἕν τι ἐὺαγγελίῳ· μυστήριον ἐμὸν ἐμοὶ καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς τοῦ οἴκου μου

Ps.-Clem. *Hom.* 19,20: Μεμνήμεθα τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν καὶ διδασκάλου ὡς ἐντελλόμενος εἶπεν ἡμῖν· τὰ μυστήρια ἐμοὶ

¹³ Cp. M. Pesce, *Da Gesù al Cristianesimo* (Brescia, 2011) 41.

¹⁴ Cp. John 3,5–6 with P.Oxy. 1081,11–16 (verso), and comments by Pesce, *Le parole dimenticate*, 632.

¹⁵ For different reconstruction proposals of the Coptic text, all of which however agree in restituting the words *mystērion* and *son*, see the critical apparatus in P.-H. Poirier, *La Pensée Première à la Triple Forme* (Quebec et al., 2006) 160. Here I follow the text printed in that edition.

καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς τοῦ οἴκου μου φυλάξατε·

Exp.val. (NHC XI,2) 22,16-18: «I [will] tell my mystery [to those who are mine] and [those who will be]»

Test.Dom. 1,18: «For my mysteries are given to those who are mine»

Io.Dam. *Sacr.par.* 9,1: Περὶ τῆς θείας μυσταγωγίας. Τὸ μυστήριον ἐμοὶ καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς

Trim.Prot. 42,25-28: «I settled among those who are worthy in the thought of the eternal, changeless world. For I will tell you a mystery concerning that eternal world».

Ev.Thom. 62,1 (= NHC II,2 43,34-44,1): «Jesus said: “It is to those who are worthy of my mysteries that I tell my mysteries”»

Orig. *Comm.Matt.* 14,14: ὁ μὲν τις παρέδωκε τοῖς ὑποχειρίοις μυστήρια καὶ τελετὰς οὐκ ἐπαινετῶς, ὁ δὲ τις μυστήρια θεοῦ τοῖς ἀξίοις

In the above listed passages, the author of *Trim.Prot.* picks up and merges two similar but distinct sayings of Jesus, the one on the mystery / mysteries given to those said to belong either to him, or to his household (the fellow brothers of 46,35! Cp. 41,30-33: «I bore fruit in them, which is the memory of the eternal, changeless world, my home and home of their Father. I descended to those who are mine from the beginning»), and the one on the mystery / mysteries to be revealed to those who are worthy of it / them.¹⁶ In the two occurrences of the former in the Nag Hammadi *corpus*, including *Trim.Prot.*, the elsewhere ubiquitous briefer version is expanded with a *verbum dicendi*, aligning it to the wording of the latter.

Or.mund. (NHC II,5) 125,14-19: «But the Word which is above everyone was sent only to proclaim the Unknown One. He said: “There is nothing hidden which is not apparent, and what has

Mark 4,22: οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν κρυπτὸν ἐὰν μὴ ἵνα φανερωθῆ, οὐδὲ ἐγένετο ἀπόκρυφον ἀλλ’ ἵνα ἔλθῃ εἰς φανερόν.

Matt. 10,26: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐστὶν κεκαλυμμένον ὃ

¹⁶ More parallels and a short commentary are found in Pesce, *Le parole dimenticate*, 694. On the second saying, see in detail M. Grosso, “A New Link Between Origen and the Gospel of Thomas: *Commentary on Matthew 14,14*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 65 (2011) 249-56. Grosso concludes: «It is likely, in my opinion, that while recalling the one who delivered the divine mysteries to the worthies, Origen was referring to the same saying attested in *Gos. Thom.* 62,1, where that very act is attributed to Jesus himself. Of course, this does not mean that Origen drew that expression directly from a copy of the *Gospel of Thomas* that he had in front of him, nor even that he purposely quoted from that writing» (256). Cp. also the results of the comprehensive analysis he has devoted to all possible Origenian allusions to *Ev.Thom.* in M. Grosso, *Deti segreti. Il Vangelo di Tommaso nell'antichità* (Acireale/Rome, 2012) 145-79.

not been known will be known”». ¹⁷

οὐκ ἀποκαλυφθήσεται, καὶ κρυπτόν δὲ οὐ
γνωσθήσεται.

Luke 8,17: οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν κρυπτόν δὲ οὐ φανερόν
γενήσεται, οὐδὲ ἀπόκρυφον δὲ οὐ μὴ γνωσθῆ
καὶ εἰς φανερόν ἔλθῃ; 12,2: οὐδὲν δὲ
συγκεκαλυμμένον ἐστὶν δὲ οὐκ
ἀποκαλυφθήσεται, καὶ κρυπτόν δὲ οὐ
γνωσθήσεται.

Ev.Thom. 5 (= NHC II,2 33,12-14): «Jesus says:
“Recognize what lies in front of you, and
what is hidden from you will become
disclosed, for there’s nothing hidden that

¹⁷ *Or.mund.*, as we now have it, cannot be dated to a time before the end of the 3rd century CE but incorporates a 2nd century written source; it was certainly composed in Egypt, probably in Alexandria (see B.A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism. Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis, 2007) 221-25). Whether it belongs to the “Sethian” corpus or not is still hotly debated: M. Tardieu, *Trois mythes gnostiques: Adam, Eros et les animaux d’Égypte dans un écrit de Nag Hammadi (II, 5)* (Paris, 1974) 33-37, relates *Or.mund.* to the literary production of Ephiphanius’ “Archontics” or “Sethians”; L. Painchaud, “L’Écrit sans Titre du Codex II de Nag Hammadi (II.5) et la *Symphonia* d’Epiphane (Pan. 40),” in E.A. Livingstone (ed.) *Studia Patristica*, xviii/1 (Kalamazoo/Oxford, 1986) 263-71, and “The Redaction of The Writing Without Title (CG II⁵),” *Second Century* 8 (1991) 217-34, ascribes only its final redaction to a Christian “Gnostic” or “Sethian” milieu; Turner, “Typologies of the Sethian Gnostic Treatises,” 173, excludes it from membership of the group of “Sethian” gnostic treatises, but admits that «it is nonetheless closely related to the *Hypostasis of the Archons*; indeed, both may stem from a common Sethian parent»; A. Camplani, “Sulla trasmissione dei testi gnostici in copto,” in A. Camplani (ed.) *L’Egitto cristiano. Aspetti e problemi in età tardo-antica* (Rome, 1997) 122-74, esp. 155. 160-61. 167-68, echoes Painchaud’s conclusions; Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, though counting our text among the Coptic Gnostic writing of uncertain affiliation, acknowledges that «much of its mythology is based on early Sethian literature» (222) and posits a common source for *Or.mund.* and *Hyp.arch.*, which he groups as properly Sethian; Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 43 not unambiguously assures us that the author of *Or.mund.* «shows no interest in the identity or practice of a religious community and was probably not an adherent of the Gnostic school of thought, or if he was, he was not very concerned to maintain its distinctive traditions (at least in this work)»; according to A. Logan, “The *Apocryphon of John* and the Development of the ‘Classic’ Gnostic Myth,” *Adamantius* 18 (2012) 136-50, esp. 136, n. 4, *Or.mund.* depends on *AJ’s* mythology and should be regarded as fully entitled “Gnostic” treatise developing the former’s demonology and anthropology. Adopting the concept of text constellation might probably help clarify further discussion on the subject: «In our opinion, emphasis should be on the occurrence in the texts (complete or fragmentary) of a supposed constellation of a shared system of questions, performances and conflicts, rather than on the simple presence or absence of a literary unit, or the completeness of a narrative, or again the number of rhetoric similarities and sequences» (A. Destro and M. Pesce, “Constellations of Texts in Early Christianity. The Gospel of the Savior and Johannist Writings”, *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 22/2 [2005] 337-53, esp. 341). Viewed from this perspective, *Or.mund.* meets in my opinion all the above mentioned criteria to be admitted into the corpus of so-called Gnostic writings – notwithstanding, of course, its peculiarities.

will not become disclosed”» (P.Oxy. 654,29-30: οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν κρυπτόν δὲ οὐ φανε[ρόν γενήσεται] καὶ τεθαμμένον δὲ οὐκ ἐγερθήσεται))

Ev.Thom. 5 (= NHC II,2 33,21-23): «There is nothing hidden that will not become disclosed, and there is nothing covert that will not become shown up» (P.Oxy. 654,38-40: [οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐστὶ]ν ἀ[π]οκρυ[υ]μμένον δὲ οὐ φανερω<θή>σεται])

Mani, *Keph.* 65: «The Saviour gave his disciples a hint of the mystery which had been concealed from the other doctrines (saying): “Grasp what is in front of you, and what is hidden from you will become disclosed to you!”».

Or.Mund. offers a new variant of a Jesus word known to the Synoptics. Two prominent formal features distinguish it from its parallels: the whole first *colon* is in present tense, whereas the second centers on the opposition “unknown” / “known”, which is nowhere else documented, and at the same time breaks up the double negation structure so typical of all the other occurrences, except for Mani, *Keph.* 65.

Despite its analogies with some formulations in Matthew and Luke (cp. δὲ οὐ γνωσθήσεται in Matt. 10,26 and Luke 12,8, and δὲ οὐ μὴ γνωσθῆ in Luke 8,17), the innovative opposition introduced by *Or.mund.* should be regarded as a “redactional” intervention: our Jesus quotation is explicitly meant to support and legitimate the preceding statement, namely that the divine Logos was sent to proclaim what / who had by then been ignored. However, the variability of the second member as such belongs to the ongoing process of the tradition being handed down over time, inevitably leading to other “unpredictable” non-canonical formulations such as *Ev.Thom.* 5, according to P.Oxy. 654,29-30. The pair “unknown” / “known” should therefore be added to the series “veiled” / “unveiled”, “hidden” / “manifest” / “known”, “buried” / “resurrected”, as characterizing a fourth way of transmitting this saying of Jesus.¹⁸

Between Tradition and Interpretation: Remembering Canonical Words of Jesus

We now turn to possible echoes of Jesus traditions which at the time of *AJ* had already been committed to writing in that Gospel literary production which was

¹⁸ I am following the classification proposed by Pesce, *Le parole dimenticate*, 559.

later sanctioned as “canonical”. I have arranged the test cases I wish to discuss from the least to the most probable allusion.

AJ(NHC II,1)

23,1-12: «1. I asked the Savior: “Master, will all souls be saved and enter into the pure light?”. 2. He said: “Huge questions have come to your mind! 3. Indeed, it is hard to explain them to small ones, except for those who stem from the immovable race. 4. Those on whom the Spirit of life will descend in order to mingle with the power of the Mother, they will be saved 5. and will become **perfect** (*šōpe °nteleios*), and will be worthy of majesty and greatness; 6. in that place, they will be cleansed from every wickedness and longing for evil, 7. because they have no other concern than immortality alone, 8. to which they devote themselves from now on, without anger or envy, jealousy or desire, or insatiable greed. 9. By nothing else are they constrained than by their own individual existence in a fleshly body, which they bear, 10. looking forward to the day they will be visited by those who come and take souls away. 11. Such men are worthy of the eternal life which **does not** decay, as well as of the calling, 12. enduring everything, suffering everything, that they might **carry out what is good**, and thus **inherit eternal life** (*dēkaas eunaḏōk ebol °mpagathon* [*contra* NHC IV,1 // III,1 // BG 8502,2: *°mpathon*] *°nseklēronomei °nouōnh ša eneh*)¹⁹».

Matt. 19,16-22

16. Καὶ ἰδοὺ εἰς προσελθῶν αὐτῷ εἶπεν, Διδάσκαλε, τί ἀγαθὸν (sa: *agathos*) ποιήσω ἵνα σχῶ ζωὴν αἰώνιον (v.l. sa82: *eieklēronomei °mpōn°h °nša eneh*); 17. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Τί με ἐρωτᾷς περὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ; εἰς ἐστὶν ὁ ἀγαθός. εἰ δὲ θέλεις εἰς τὴν ζωὴν εἰσελθεῖν, τήρησον τὰς ἐντολάς. 18. λέγει αὐτῷ, Ποίας; ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν, Τὸ Οὐ φονεύσεις, Οὐ μοιχεύσεις, Οὐ κλέψεις, Οὐ ψευδομαρτυρήσεις, 19. Τίμα τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὴν μητέρα, καὶ Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν. 20. λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ νεανίσκος, Πάντα ταῦτα ἐφύλαξα. τί ἔτι ὑστερῶ; 21. ἔφη αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Εἰ θέλεις **τέλειος εἶναι** (sa: *e°rteleios*), ὑπάγε πώλησόν σου τὰ ὑπάρχοντα καὶ δὸς τοῖς πτωχοῖς, καὶ ἕξεις θησαυρὸν ἐν οὐρανοῖς, καὶ δεῦρο ἀκολούθει μοι. 22. ἀκούσας δὲ ὁ νεανίσκος τὸν λόγον ἀπῆλθεν λυπούμενος, ἦν γὰρ ἔχων κτήματα πολλά.

¹⁹ In Coptic, *dōk ebol* translates, among others, the Greek πληρῶ (see, for example, Matt.3,15 and Col. 1,25), in the meaning «to bring to a designed end or to full expression, fulfill, carry out, perform» a duty, a request, a law, a promise, an order, a fate, a virtue (BDAG 828-829 4b; cp. especially 4 *Macc.* 12,14: οἱ μὲν εὐγενῶς ἀποθανόντες ἐπλήρωσαν τὴν εἰς τὸν θεὸν εὐσέβειαν, with Isidorus, *fr.* 6,48-49 Löhr: τὸ καλὸν ἀπαρτίσαι!). According to W.-P. Funk (private e-mail), there are not so many occurrences of the expression *dōk ebol °mpagathon* in Coptic literature: he writes he has found «bloß noch eine andere Stelle: das ist in den manichäischen Kephalaia, 1 Keph 195:24, wo der Kontext etwas lakunös ist, wahrscheinlich ein Imperativ: “Wenn du [begreifen? / Fortschritte ma-

Let us start with a purely philological problem. NHC II is the only witness among the four manuscripts transmitting our passage (NHC III and BG 8502 [shorter version of *AJ*]; NHC IV [longer version]), which reads ΠΑΓΑΘΟΝ instead of ΠΑΘΛΟΝ (*AJ* 23,12). Scholars usually regard the former reading as a textual corruption, and more or less overtly opt for the restitution of the latter in NHC II.²⁰ I do not deny that this may indeed be the case, but, irrespective of the consensus of three manuscripts against one, it is still not clear to me how such a significant corruption could have occurred as a paleographical accident or scribal error: in a first talk, prof. Camillo Neri, chair of Greek Philology and Literature at Bologna University, suggested that the last two letters in ΑΘΛ might have been unintentionally inverted so as to produce ΑΛΘ, thus making the whole group read Α(Γ)ΑΘ. Fascinating as this suggestion is, one is left to wonder how the gamma came about and ended up being inserted between the alphas – just as prof. Neri himself wondered in a second, more recent talk.²¹

Granted then that the text might not be accidentally corrupt as it stands, is there any plausible explanation for the appearance of ΠΑΓΑΘΟΝ? In other words: is there any argument for the “authenticity” of this reading in our manuscript?

My hypothesis runs as follows: the lexical and thematic cluster linking together “doing what is good”, “coming to perfection” and “inheriting eternal life” appears as a distinct feature of the tradition of Jesus’ dialogue with the rich young man as recorded in Matthew (19,16-22).²² The text of Matt. 19,16 presupposed by *AJ* 23,12

chen?] willst, so *vollbringe das Gute* und [Nützliche], das ich dir gesagt habe”. Eine sehr seltene Stil-Variante des normalen Ausdrucks “tue das Gute”, im Koptischen mit dem Verb *eire*, wie es sich allerorten findet (nach dem *locus classicus* Ps 33:15 oder auch 36:22)». He refers also to our passage: «Nach *dōk ebol* findet man ja normalerweise, außer “Willen, Gefallen von ...” etc., vor allem auch *agōn* als Objekt. Und so erscheint denn auch die ursprüngliche Lesart des *AJ* an dieser Stelle, die *mpathlon* als Objekt hat, als weit natürlicherer Ausdruck (wenngleich *athlon* anstelle von *agōn* auch sehr selten anzutreffen ist)». See, however, the two comparable Greek expressions I have been able to find so far, cited above, and 2 *Jeu* 102,22-23 Schmidt (*dōk ebol nnetolouē etnanouou*), which all do make the Coptic *dōk ebol^empagathon* sound less unnatural.

²⁰ Cp. the translations of the verse in M. Waldstein and F. Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John. Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2* (Leiden et al., 1995) 149, their actual choice being even more evident in the German version, M. Waldstein and F. Wisse, “Das Apocryphon des Johannes,” in H.-M. Schenke et al. (eds) *Nag Hammadi Deutsch* 1 (Berlin, 2001) 141; B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures. A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (New York et al., 1995) 48; King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 25 and 71; B. Barc, “Livre de secrets de Jean. Version longue,” in J.-P. Mahé and P.-H. Poirier (eds) *Écrits gnostiques. La bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi* (Paris, 2007) 289. L. Moraldi, *Testi gnostici* (Turin, 1992) 158, seems to mix the two readings and translates «la buona battaglia», but in the end he subordinates ΠΑΓΑΘΟΝ to ΠΑΘΛΟΝ as well.

²¹ I cannot but sincerely thank prof. C. Neri for the many philological insights he gave me into this underestimated problem, as well as for the permission to briefly report here proposals and doubts that surfaced during our private talks.

²² Barc and Funk, *Le Livre des Secrets de Jean*, 310, trace such an allusion already in the text of *AJ*’s shorter version.

appears to be closer to the wording of Mark 10,17 and Luke 18,18 than the one printed in Nestle-Aland. In addition, the same text was the basis of one Sahidic translation (82), as well as of the Bohairic manuscript tradition, which confirms its existence and circulation in Egypt throughout Late Antiquity.²³ Therefore, if I am not missing the point, the philosophical-religious ideal which this passage of *AJ* tries to sketch along the lines of the Alexandrian Christian tradition (cp. especially 23,7-10, with Clem. *Strom.* 7,13,83, and Orig. *Princ.* 1,3,8) should be reading NHC II,1, as deliberately creating a contrast with the negative depiction of the human counterpart who once failed to stand up to Jesus' challenge.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that, when dictating his *Quis dives salvetur*, Clement of Alexandria formulated similar conceptual clusters and proposed to his educated audience an analogous project of a philosophically perfect and happy life, in the form of exegetical comments on our Gospel episode (see especially 7-10 [πληρώω and ἐκτελέω occur!]; 12; 25,4; 36; 40,5-6). About fifty years later, in his own exegesis of the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man (*Comm.Matt.* 15,10-27), Origen argues that deficits in the human concept of Good and in the resulting efforts to do good deeds should be filled, thus allowing real Good to be carried out (11 [τὸ ὑποδεέστερον; τὰ ὑποδεέστερα ἀγαθὰ] and 13-14 [πληρώω]). Furthermore, he underscores that such a perfection means leaving all passions behind (16 [Origen mentions fear, desire of every sort, pleasure, anger, mundane sorrow and boasting] and 18 [lust for riches and glory]: cp. *AJ* 23,7-8). Taken together, these lexical, exegetical, and ideological convergences seem to be no mere accident, pointing instead at a common Alexandrian tradition underlying the treatment of Matthew's narrative by the author of *AJ*'s longer version, Clement, and Origen.

At what point in the long transmission history of *AJ* did this tradition enter the text? Answering this question satisfactorily would require a thorough investigation on its own, involving a fresh, detailed comparison of NHC II,1 and NHC IV,1, into which I cannot delve here for obvious reasons. However, if Waldstein and Wisse were basically correct when asserting that NHC II,1 and NHC IV,1 are «clearly copies of same translation (*sic!*)», but «do not appear to stand in a “sister” or “mother-daughter” relationship»,²⁴ no other choice is left but to ascribe the intentional

²³ Manuscripts checked in G.W. Horner, *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Northern Dialect 1: The Gospels of S. Matthew and S. Mark* (Oxford, 1898), and Id., *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect 1: The Gospels of S. Matthew and S. Mark* (Oxford, 1911).

²⁴ Waldstein and Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John*, 1. See also K. King, *Approaching the Variants of the Apocryphon of John*, in J.D. Turner and A. McGuire (eds) *The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years. Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration, November 17-22, 1995* (Leiden et al., 1997) 105-37, here 124-26, who adds that «there are no clear cases where the differences between II and IV cannot be accounted for by scribal error or linguistic preferences, indicating a close linear relationship between these two manuscripts» (126). Despite this growing consensus, it suffices here to note that, comparing the four diverging Coptic translations of *AJ* 22,19, U.-K. Plisch, «The Right and the Left Penis. Remarks on Textual Problems in the *Apocryphon of*

substitution of *pathlon* with *pagathon* to the Coptic copyist / redactor of NHC II or its direct Coptic antigraph, in the late 3rd or early 4th century CE, always assuming, of course, that such an antigraph ever existed, after the “parting of the ways” of the two copies of *AJ*’s longer version.²⁵

Be that as it may, let us now move on to the next parallel:²⁶

AJ (NHC II,1 //IV,1) 23,25-36: «25. And I: “Master, the souls of those who did not get to know to whom they belong, where are they going to go?”. 26. He said: “When they went astray, the despicable Spirit increased in them: 27. he is going to oppress that soul and draw it toward wicked actions, thus casting it into oblivion. 28. After coming out of the fleshly body, that soul is going to be handed over to the Authorities who came into being by the Ruler of this world: 29. they will put it in chains and throw it into prison, 30. and wander about with it, until it awakes from oblivion and gains knowledge. 31. So reaching perfection, it will eventually be saved”.32. I asked him: “Master, how could the soul indeed get smaller and smaller and sneak back into its mother’s vagina or into a man?!?”.²⁷33. The Savior turned glad hearing my words and answered: “Truly you are blessed, because you have understood!34. That soul is made to follow another one in which the Spirit of life dwells: 35. it will be saved, 36. and will be cast down in no other fleshly body anymore”».

Iren. Haer. 1,24,5: Propter hoc dicunt (scil. the followers of Carpocrates) Iesum hanc dixisse parabolam: cum es cum adversario tuo in viam, da operam ut libereris ab eo, ne forte te det iudici et iudex ministro et mittat te in carcerem. Amen dico tibi, non exies inde, donec reddas novissimum quadrantem. Et adversarium dicunt unum ex angelis qui sunt in mundo, quem diabolum vocant, dicentes factum eum ad id ut ducat eas quae perierunt animas a mundo ad principem. Et hunc dicunt esse primum ex mundi fabricatoribus, et illum altero angelo, ei qui ministrat ei, tradere tales animas, uti in alia corpora includat: corpus enim dicunt esse carcerem. Et id quod ait: non exies inde, quoadusque novissimum quadrantem reddas, interpretantur quasi non exeat quis a potestate angelorum eorum qui mundum fabricaverunt, sed sit transcorporatus semper, quoadusque in omni omnino operatione quae in mundo est fiat; et cum nihil defuerit ei, tum liberatam eius animam eliberari ad illum Deum qui est supra angelos mundi fabricatores; sic quoque salvari et omnes animas, sive ipsae praeoccupantes

John, *Adamantius* 18 (2012) 65-70, here 70, has come to the conclusion that at least at one point «the Greek versions must have varied from one another». For more doubts on Waldstein and Wisse’s reconstruction, see H. Lundhaug, “The Nag Hammadi Codices. Textual Fluidity in Coptic,” in A. Bausi et al. (eds) *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies: An Introduction* (Hamburg, 2015) 419-23, here 421.

²⁵ We would be then in either stage 3 or 4 of the redactional activity which affected Nag Hammadi texts, according to the scheme devised by Camplani, “Trasmissione dei testi gnostici,” 123.

²⁶ For a more detailed analysis of all the parallels, see W. Löhr, “Karpokratianisches,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 49 (1995) 23-48, here 30-32, who however ignores *AJ*’s passage.

²⁷ John’s remark clearly echoes Nicodemus’ objection in *John* 3,4.

in uno adventu in omnibus misceantur operationibus, sive de corpore in corpus trasmigrantes vel immissae, in unaquaque specie vitae adimplentes et reddentes debita, liberari, uti iam non fiant in corpore.

Sent.Sext. 39: κακῶς ζῶντα μετὰ τὴν ἀπαλλαγὴν τοῦ σώματος εὐθυνεῖ κακὸς δαίμων, μέχρις οὗ καὶ τὸν ἔσχατον κοδράντην ἀπολάβῃ.

Cp. also Orig. *Hom.Luc.* 35 (commenting on Luke 12,58-59)

AJ 23,25-35 and the Carpocratian exegesis of the last “penny” saying (Matt. 5,25-26 // Luke 12,57-59), as recorded by Irenaeus, seem to share three basic features: the theme of the soul being led astray by an evil power during life and handed over after death to superhuman beings – angels? demons? – who are in charge of its punishment; the interpretation of the prison as the physical body, into which the sinful soul is bound to be cast and reincarnated again and again;²⁸ the hope of salvation envisaged at the end of such transmigrations, phrased by means of a common temporal clause («until ...»).

Sent.Sext., probably written between 180-200 CE also in Alexandria, presupposes a similar exegesis of our saying, providing us with further literary evidence of a reading of these words of Jesus, both contemporary and basically comparable to that proposed by Carpocrates’ followers.²⁹ Moreover, we find ourselves in the fortunate position of having Origen’s exegesis too, which, though complex and nuanced as usual, still shows traces of a common, not negotiated matrix: once more, the characters appearing in our saying are interpreted as superhuman beings; the sentence is to be executed after death; the theme of imprisonment resolves into several remarks on *labor*, *opus*, *poenae* and *supplicia* to be served throughout *infinita saecula*, until the debt has been paid and the sin forgiven (*Hom.Luc.* 35). Needless to say, any mention of metempsychosis or the like is deliberately avoided – whether by Origen himself or by his translator, Jerome, we do not know (cp. however the discussion on the whole problem in *Princ.* 1,6,2-3,8,4; 2,1,2,3,3,5; 3,1,17,23; 5,3,6,6).

I must admit that in *AJ* the decisive reference to the coin is lacking. However, the multiple attestation of the above highlighted recurrent features points to the existence of a “common source”, none other than the common matrix we have just referred to. This is probably to be found in an Alexandrian exegetical debate

²⁸ On the image of the body as prison in *AJ*, see also 19,1-12; 24,13-15; 26,21,25.

²⁹ On the date and provenance of *Sent. Sextus*, see P.-H. Poirier and L. Painchaud, *Les sentences des Sextus – Fragments – Fragment de la République de Platon* (Québec et al., 1983) 18-20.

on the correct interpretation of this saying of Jesus, which lay at the center of a wider ideological “conflict” on reincarnation as its possible “scriptural” proof.³⁰

We have thus finally arrived at my last test-case:

AJ(NHC II,1 // IV,1) 23,37-40:«37. And I asked once again: “Master, what about those who came to knowledge, but then turned away? Where are their souls going to go?». 38. He answered: “They are going to be brought to the place where the angels of poverty will go, a place where no repentance is possible: 39. there they will be kept until the day comes when **those who have blasphemed against the Spirit** will be tortured, 40. and they will be punished with **eternal** punishment”».

Mark 3,28-30: Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πάντα ἀφεθήσεται τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων, τὰ ἁμαρτήματα καὶ αἱ βλασφημίαι ὅσα ἐὰν βλασφημησῶσιν. **ὅς δ' ἂν βλασφημήσῃ εἰς τὸ πνεῦμα** τὸ ἅγιον οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ἀλλὰ ἔνοχος ἐστὶν **αἰωνίου** ἁμαρτήματος.

Luke 12,10: καὶ πᾶς ὃς ἐρεῖ λόγον εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ· τῷ δὲ εἰς τὸ ἅγιον **πνεῦμα βλασφημήσαντι** οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται.

Matt. 12,30-32: ὁ μὴ ὦν μετ' ἐμοῦ κατ' ἐμοῦ ἐστὶν, καὶ ὁ μὴ συνάγων μετ' ἐμοῦ σκορπίζει. Διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν, πᾶσα ἁμαρτία καὶ βλασφημία ἀφεθήσεται τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, **ἢ δὲ τοῦ πνεύματος βλασφημία** οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται. καὶ ὃς ἐὰν εἴπῃ λόγον κατὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ· ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ **κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος** τοῦ ἁγίου, οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ οὔτε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι οὔτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι.

Did. 11,7: καὶ πάντα προφήτην λαλοῦντα ἐν **πνεύματι** οὐ πειράσετε οὐδὲ διακρινεῖτε· πᾶσα γὰρ ἁμαρτία ἀφεθήσεται, αὕτη δὲ ἡ ἁμαρτία οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται.

I think I do not exaggerate if I remark that this time the allusion to Jesus material is self-evident: in Coptic, the nominalized relative phrase featuring the verb “to curse, blaspheme”(«those who have blasphemed against the Spirit») might presuppose either Mark’s or Luke’s, surely not Matthew’s, wording turned into a plural, whereas the occurrence of *ἡνεῖ* (= Greek αἰώνιος, see Crum 57a,II.) pushes *AJ* 23,40 close to Mark’s ἔνοχος ἐστὶν αἰωνίου ἁμαρτήματος.

This *logos* is echoed in *AJ* in order to trace and sanction new borders: the “apostates” of *AJ*s present and those who blaspheme against the Spirit, according to Jesus, belong together and share a common fate. In other words: turning away

³⁰ For more evidence on Christian theories of reincarnation spreading in 2nd-3rd century CE Alexandria, see Clem. *Strom.* 4,12,88,1, and *Exc.Theod.* 28, and Orig. *Comm.ser.Matt.* 38; *Comm.Rom.* 5,1; *Comm.Matt.* 10,20 and 11,17; *Princ.* 1,8,4; *Comm.Io.* 6,64.

from the group of those who attained knowledge means incurring the same curse that will also affect the blasphemers, whereby the authority of the teacher and group-founder who once uttered the curse functions as a permanent guarantee of divine justice.³¹

The Teacher and his Disciples: Forms, Images, and Social Environment of a Living Memory

It is time now to draw some conclusions from this brief survey: through a two stage cross-comparison of 1 John, *AJ*, *Act.Io.*, and *Trim.Prot.* we have ascertained the historical existence of at least two Johannine words of Jesus, which were not written down in John, but transmitted and circulating in the 2nd – 3rd century (most probably) Alexandrian environments betraying “Gnostic” tendencies. There begin to emerge the contours of a process of oral transmission or production of Johannine or Johannine-like sayings, which went on irrespective of written texts, be they John, 1 John, or our “Gnostic” sources, and by no means exhausted itself in text production. In light of the results of recent research in this field I should perhaps add that such contours *keep* emerging from other early Christian writings as well. They form a frame of reference with an ever clearer profile.³²

Furthermore, we have seen that *Trim.Prot.* and *Or.Mund.* are familiar with non-canonical sayings of Jesus centering on the concepts of mystery and revelation, and finding their oldest counterparts mostly in Thomasine literature (the *Gospel of Thomas* ranking first), as well as in traditions recorded by Alexandrian authors (i.e. Clement, who mostly seems to share traditional material with *Thomas*).³³

Finally, we have found out that *AJ* re-uses and applies Jesus’ words on blaspheming against the Spirit to the specific historical circumstances threatening the cohesion and survival of the group which *AJ*’s redactors address. More tentatively, we have proposed that our text with its long redactional history still bears traces of Alexandrian exegetical debates both on the “penny” saying as a key to articulating a doctrine of the reincarnation, and on the rich young man episode as the scriptural basis for developing a socio-religious ideal of Christian philosophical life.

³¹ Some useful remarks in Pesce, *Le parole dimenticate*, 599.

³² Cp. Theobald, *Herrenworte*, and D. Tripaldi and E. Stori, “La porta del cielo. Forme e contesti di trasmissione di una parola extra-canonica di Gesù tra Ps.-Ippolito, *Ref.* 5,8,21, e Afraate, *Dem.* 4,5,” *Adamantius* 15 (2009) 203-13, within the broader perspective envisaged by Pesce, *Da Gesù al Cristianesimo*, 38-45.

³³ See Pesce, *Le parole dimenticate*, 570-72. 574-75. 577. 581-82, and more recently M. Grosso, “Trasmissione e ricezione della parabola del pescatore (Vangelo secondo Tommaso 8,1-3),” in M. Pesce and M. Rescio (eds) *La trasmissione delle parole di Gesù nei primi tre secoli* (Brescia, 2011) 101-17, here 109-15, and *Deti segreti*, 109-44.

That being recalled, I wish to spend a few more words on the representation which *AJ* offers of the social context where such processes of transmission of Jesus words, as well as the intellectual efforts of producing and re-elaborating a living memory of the movement's founder, probably took place. I will focus first on the ideological matrix which fostered and fuelled such effort, and then on the socio-cultural scenario the latter presupposes.

In search for the ideological matrix we ultimately fall back into a full-blown Johannine worldview, although the following parallel does not come from John or any other Johannine writing:³⁴

AJ(NHC II,1 //IV,1)

27,2: «Now that you've heard these words of mine, I have accomplished everything (lit.: I have **accomplished** everything for you **in your ears**)».

Luke

4,21: ἤρξατο δὲ λέγειν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ὅτι σήμερον **πεπλήρωται** ἡ γραφή αὕτη **ἐν τοῖς ὠσιν** ὑμῶν.³⁵

Both *AJ* 27,2 and the Lukan passage center on the verbal syntagm “accomplish, carry out, fulfill(something) in the ears” of the hearers. In Luke, the syntagm occurs at the end of Jesus' reading in the synagogue of Capernaum, and explicitly refers to Isaiah's prophecy as fulfilled in him delivering that *midrash* and alluding to his preaching and miracle-working in Galilee (cp. Luke 4,14-15.18-19.23). In *AJ*, the phrase occurs at the closing of Jesus' monologue, as he finally sets out to ascend to the place he had come from (cp. *AJ* 27,1.13, with John 16,17.19.28 and 20,17), having delivered the new revelation to John, and thereby carried out and accomplished every promise he had formerly made.

The correspondences with Luke notwithstanding, however, the implicit literary and ideological background that we must keep in mind in order to fully appreciate the meaning of the whole scene *AJ* 27,1-5, is provided not by Luke 4, but by Jesus' farewell speeches reported in John 14-17. There, Jesus repeatedly promises the sending of a second consoler speaking in his name, i.e., as himself (John 14,25-26, and 16,6-7.13-15.25-26). *AJ*'s closing, in general, 27,2, in particular, therefore aim to stress that the whole truth about Being has now been revealed, and that the

³⁴ I base these considerations of mine on the concise profile of the seventh type of transmission of Jesus words sketched by Pesce, *Da Gesù al Cristianesimo*, 44-45. See also D. Tripaldi, *Gesù di Nazareth nell'Apocalisse* di Giovanni. *Spirito, profezia e memoria* (Brescia, 2010) 17-21 and 166-69. On the Johannine concept of revelation, which in my view is clearly reflected and further elaborated in *AJ*, cf. F. Bovon, “A Chapter of Johannine Theology: Revelation,” in Id., *The Emergence of Christianity. Collected Studies 3* (Tübingen, 2013) 54-63.

³⁵ K. Berger and C. Nord, *Das Neue Testament und frühchristliche Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M./Leipzig, 1999) 447, translate: «Er begann mit den Worten: „Diese Prophetie ist heute vor euch in Erfüllung gegangen“». See also FBJ, reporting Joüon's interpretation of the verse as «Aujourd'hui vous êtes témoins que cette Écriture est accomplie», and Fitzmyer's «[...] he began to speak to them: “Today this passage of Scriptures sees its fulfillment, as you sit listening”» (J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX* [Garden City, 1981] 525).

doubts and misunderstandings tormenting the disciples since that last evening spent together with their master, have finally been solved (cp. John 13,3; 14,5; 16,5.10.28 with *AJ* 2,3; John 16,6.20.22 with *AJ* 2,7; John 14,26; 16,13.25; 19,28 with *AJ* 2,9-10.13; 3,14-16; 27,2-3). In some sense – we may add –, the Fourth Gospel itself has now been completed, and all the blank spaces left therein filled with words and contents.³⁶ This complete and definitive teaching– Jesus continues – must now be committed to writing and kept safe under secrecy in the form of a book (*AJ* 27,3-10).

We thus arrive at my second point, as I turn to making an attempt to reconstruct the socio-cultural representation implied by *AJ*'s closing exchange between Jesus and John. Let me quote extensively a few remarks by H.G. Snyder: in all ancient gatherings

«written texts were part of the everyday business of teaching and learning. We have a vivid representation of one such occasion in a grave relief from Ostia [...]. Elevated above his audience, the speaker rises his right hand in a teaching gesture, while holding a closed bookroll in his left. The beard and bookroll suggest a philosopher rather than a rhetorician. [...]. The rapt attention of the figures to the teacher's right, and the apparent debate prompted by his remarks among those on his left testify to the effect of his speech on the hearers. Here we have a person who through his mastery of texts has integrated the wisdom of previous thinkers and who produces on his own authority a synthesis of his knowledge. Still, a book is present, even if closed. Strikingly, while this teacher has moved beyond reliance on texts, he is in the process of becoming a text himself: in the foreground two scribes busily commit the words of the speaker to tablets».³⁷

Such an iconographical representation finds its literary counterpart in the description of Plotinus' school penned by his pupil, Porphyry (*Vit.Plot.* 4-6.15-16.18). My educated guess is that *AJ*'s redactor builds on analogous experiences and cultural images, not only to sketch the farewell scene, but throughout the text to shape the relationship and the dialogue between Jesus and John, as well as to “announce” the book coming out of their conversation and fixing the latter's contents, i.e., *AJ* itself. As I wrote once, citing A. Magris, in *AJ* Jesus plays the role of the teacher / philosopher who, acting as a hierophant, hands down her / his doctrines partly by reasoning and arguing, partly by (re-)narrating myths and proposing allegorical interpretations of older religious traditions. In so doing she / he aims to offer an intuitive explanation of the fundamental issues underlying the cult, such as the nature of the divine as manifested in a single individual, the origin of life, the enigmatic interconnection of life and death, and the *post mortem* destiny of the souls.³⁸

³⁶ Tripaldi, “Tra Alessandria e Roma,” 85-86 and 112-13, with further literature.

³⁷ H.G. Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World. Philosophers, Jews and Christians* (London/New York, 2000) 1.

³⁸ Tripaldi, “Tra Alessandria e Roma,” 86 (quote from Magris, *La logica del pensiero gnostico*, 113). On the motif of philosophers as both initiates and hierophants, cp. Porph. *Vit.Plot.* 15,1-6, and

Against this literary and historical background, the transmission by allusion or direct quotation, and the exegesis of words attributed to Jesus are profiled as a self-revelation of the teacher: Jesus explains and clarifies himself, organizes his teachings into a system as coherent, full and encompassing as possible, and eventually wants to become a written text himself and be spread among his future disciples, thus embarking upon new hermeneutical process.³⁹ Specifically, this process took the form of redactional interventions and produced the different versions of *AJ* we now have.⁴⁰

Taking a step forward and leaving the textual world behind:⁴¹ at first, the memory of Jesus must have been kept alive and constantly actualized within a social grouping conceived as centering around this double-sided relationship of teacher-pupil and orality-writing, his own words being considered the last and fundamental mystery which embraces and discloses all others.⁴² Such actualization amounts to a memory performance answering the needs and problems of listeners / readers of the speech or written text, and responding to the stimuli of the environment in which both author and listeners / readers lived. The history being told and the words being transmitted and interpreted are taken as true for those listeners / readers and in that environment, insofar as the speaker / author of the written text purports to speak as the mouthpiece of Jesus himself and to disclose the exact meaning which the original, “authentic”, speaker had in mind when speaking.

As a matter of fact, Origen’s witness confirms the picture of the experience of teaching and expounding sacred tales and texts which we have just sketched: such experience is perceived, expected and prayed for as coming of Christ, God’s Word, or the Spirit of Wisdom, who alone can solve difficulties and reveal mysteries.⁴³

Plut. *Tranq.an.* 477c-e, with Plato, *Phaed.* 69c-d; *Symp.* 212; *Phaedr.* 250c; Philo, *Gig.* 54-55; Theon Smyrn. *Exp.* 14,17 – 16,2; Plot. *Enn.* 6,9,9,46-47,11,1-4; Eun. *Vit.Soph.* 23,5,3-5.

³⁹ Similarly H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels. Their History and Development* (Harrisburg, 1990) 189, on the *Apocryphon of James*, and Tripaldi, *Gesù di Nazareth*, 96-98 and 172-73, on John’s *Revelation*.

⁴⁰ L. Painchaud, “La classification des textes de Nag Hammadi et le phénomène des réécritures,” in L. Painchaud and A. Pasquier (eds) *Les textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification. Actes du colloque tenu à Québec du 15 au 19 septembre 1993* (Laval/Leuven, 1995) 51-85, provides many useful insights into such authorial praxis.

⁴¹ Tripaldi, “Tra Alessandria e Roma,” 84-88 and 112-15.

⁴² Such a social scenario is clearly presupposed by a handful of relevant passages scattered throughout Clement of Alexandria’s works, which purport Jesus as hierophant and head of a chain of secret transmission reaching up to Clement himself and his teachers via the apostles, their disciples and the teachers of Clement’s teachers (see *Protr.* 12,120,1-2; *Strom.* 1,11,3,13,1-2.4.22-24; *Hyp.* in Eus. *Hist.eccl.* 2,1,4; cp. also the traditions on Valentinus and Basilides preserved in *Strom.* 7,106,4 and *Ps.-Hipp. Ref.* 7,20,1 respectively).

⁴³ Cp. *Hom. II Ps* 15 *Cod.Mon.Graec.* 314, f. 24r-v; *Hom. III Ps* 36 *Cod.Mon.Graec.* 314, f. 63r-v; *Hom. IV Ps* 36 *Cod.Mon.Graec.* 314, f. 80r; *Hom. Ps* 67 *Cod.Mon.Graec.* 314, f. 83r-84r, with *Comm.ser.Matt.* 38; *Hom.Cant.* 1,7,24-31; *Princ.* 4,1,6-7; see also the vision of Valentinus reported by *Ps.-Hipp. Ref.* 6,42,2.

The now empowered teacher / exegete, uttering God's own words from his mouth, is appointed, among other things, to make the foundations of the earth quake, as the prophets of old did. In other words, following Origen's interpretation, Christian teachers or exegetes are called upon and inspired to overthrow the false *logoi* and the arguments of both the heretics and the Jews (*Hom.Ps* 81 *Cod.Mon.Graec.* 314, f. 368r-v). Then, as Origen's own literary production more or less explicitly reflects, they may "turn" themselves into a text, be it a homily, a commentary, or a treatise (cp. *Princ.* 1 *Praef.* 1-3,10 and 1,7,3). The analogies with the literary motifs building up the scenes of Jesus' appearance and farewell in *AJ* (cp. *AJ* 3 and 27,3-10.13-15), as well as the correspondences with the socio-religious scenario underlying the whole dialogical / monological structure of the work, cannot by now pass unnoticed. And we would probably not be far wrong to assume that such a scenario might easily be presupposed also for some of the other 2nd – 3rd century writings and writers that we have discussed here.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Cp. the intellectual profiles outlined by G. Quispel, "The Original Doctrine of Valentinus the Gnostic," in R. van den Broek and C. van Heertum (eds.) *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition* (Amsterdam, 2000) 233-63, esp. 250-52, and A.H.B. Logan, "The Apocryphon of John and the Development of the 'Classic' Gnostic Myth," *Adamantius* 18 (2012) 136-50, esp. 140-41. In one of his recently re-discovered homilies on *Psalms*, Origen indulges in remembering that when he was still a young man in Alexandria, «les hérésies fleurissaient, s'épanouissaient et l'on voyait beaucoup de gens s'y rassembler. Car tous ceux qui recherchaient avidement des savoirs du Christ, ne disposant pas dans l'Église de maîtres compétents, ressemblaient aux affamés qui en temps de disette mangeant de la chair humaine: séparés de la parole saine, ils s'attachaient à n'importe quels discours et leurs écoles (αὐτῶν τὰ διδασκαλεῖα) se constituaient. Mais lorsque la grâce de Dieu fit resplendir un enseignement supérieur, chaque jour les hérésies étaient dissoutes; ce qui passait pour leurs secrets (τὰ δοκούντα αὐτῶν ἀπόρρητα) est frappé d'infamie» (*Hom. II Ps* 77 *Cod.Mon.Graec.* 314, f. 233r; French translation by A. Le Boulluec).