

## ***ON THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD***

A Gnostic scripture, handed down in several copies ([Nag Hammadi Codex II](#), 5; 97.24-127.17; NHC XIII, 2, 50. 25-34 [fragm.]; [British Library](#), Or. 4926 [1] [fragm.]) and by comparison with other texts quite well preserved. In spite of its parallels, for instance, to Irenaeus (*Adversus omnes haereses* 1.30), to testimonies of the Sethian and Valentinian *gnosis*, as well as to Manichaeism, it represents none of these known systems. Neither does it offer its own system.

It is a compendium of significant Gnostic thoughts, particularly about cosmogony, anthropogeny, and eschatology, based on various sources and traditions and partly presented in a quasi-scientific style with numerous etiologies and etymologies, making it appear outright encyclopedic. In addition, with a view to appealing to the public, it employs the style of an [apologetic](#) treatise. Yet the story of the earth, as well as the representation of the upper world and its development, are largely excluded. Based on the initially stated and then realized intent of the author, whose name is not noted or known, the title *On the Origin of the World* was given to this writing by its investigators.

Starting from the assumption that the work is a conscious and planned composition without extensive secondary alterations and is not a work that grew from long tradition and the historical process, the *terminus a quo* may be given as the beginning of the influence of [Manichaeism](#) in Egypt, that is, at the end of the third century. As for the *terminus ad quem*, the time between the Greek prototype of the document, its written transmission, and translation into Coptic, and the transmittal subsequent to the copying of Codex II from Nag Hammadi suggests the middle of the fourth century.

Thus the time of its composition is possibly the early part of the fourth century. The text joins Jewish notions of a different character—among them clear parallels to literary testimonies of the early Jewish

apocalypses—with Manichaeian elements, with Christian ideas, with Greek philosophical concepts, and with figures of Greek or Hellenistic mythology. The practice of magic and astrology and a clearly accented emphasis of an Egyptian body of thought are incorporated as well. All point to Alexandria as the presumed place of origin of the Greek form of the document.

The author goes back in his work to sources of varying character, both Gnostic and non-Gnostic, without the reader being able to identify them precisely, or even to reconstruct them in the literary-critical sense. In so doing, the author at times creates tensions, imbalances, and contradictions, because some of his sources presuppose a specific and different viewpoint. The working method of the writer shows especially in direct and indirect quotations, references, summaries, etymologies, explanations, and systematized summaries that are in noticeable contrast to his otherwise prevailing narrative style. Employing this system, the author presents an objective and convincing argument and attempts to [strengthen](#) his opinion by appealing to and referring to other works.

Owing to a remarkable number of parallels and similar style, even down to details, a relationship undoubtedly exists between the HYPOSTASIS OF THE ARCHONS (NHC 11, 4) and *On the Origin of the World*. But because of the unequal character of both documents, their differing concepts of the world, and variations in details, one can hardly prove direct literary connections. However, both documents might be based on the same source material.

*On the Origin of the World* opens with a philosophical discussion about primeval chaos, but moves at once to a description of primeval events, reviewing at first the establishment of the boundary between the upper and lower world, as well as the formation by Pistis Sophia of Yaldabaoth, the first created and the main protagonist of the upper world. The cosmogony, and later the anthropogeny, are partly oriented to the early chapters of Genesis, but also to ideas known from several writings of the

pseudepigraphic literature of Judaism (e.g., Jubilees, I Enoch). Indeed, Jewish influences and background also surface in the author's angelology, demonology, and eschatology, as well as in his etymologies.

However, the Gnostic interpretation of the materials at hand is different in that it ranges from a complete reassessment of the arrogance of the demiurge or creator god—integrating [Isaiah](#) 45:5 and 46:9—and events of Genesis 3, to a relatively unbroken integration of existing Jewish thoughts and motifs, as found in the description of paradise.

The high point of primeval events is the creation of an earthly man, which must be seen in connection with the doctrine of the primeval man in *On the Origin of the World*. This teaching is difficult to understand because it utilizes different motifs and heterogeneous ideas. Borrowing from Genesis 1:26 and 2:7, early man is said to be created by the [archons](#) or rulers according to the [image](#) of the archons and in the likeness of the Light-Adam, a heavenly primeval man who corresponds in a certain way to the Third Messenger in [Manichaeism](#) or to the “Anthropos of Poimandres.”

In a countercampaign in the light world, the Sophia (Zoê), who functions in our document as [savior](#) and who also completes the archons' unfinished creation of man, fashions a “spiritual” man who is manifested in different ways as the bringer of the gnosis: as the spiritual wife of Adam, as the serpent (“the beast”), and as the instructor in paradise who is viewed favorably. Fundamentally, all of these beings are the Sophia (Zoê) herself.

In spite of the detailed account of primeval events, *On the Origin of the World* has overall an eschatological orientation that is universal in character. This is seen in numerous references to the end of time as well as in a broad description of final events, along with a large number of thoughts, motifs, concepts, and terms from apocalypses. The final state, which is brought about by the upper world with the redemption of the

Gnostics—in differing degrees— and the destruction of the creation of the archons, qualitatively surpasses the primeval state and makes impossible a recurrence of events described in the text, even similar events.

In many respects, *On the Origin of the World* is a significant Gnostic work. Through this rather extensive writing, we gain insight into an educated author's thinking, working methods, and logic regarding a fundamental theme. This document also shows the high degree of liberality and independence with which a Gnostic writer assimilates foreign, even non-Gnostic and heterogeneous bodies of thought, in an effort to demonstrate the primacy of his position about existence and the world, for example, in the face of its mythological fashioning. Moreover, it can help us understand why and how the Gnostic view of reality persisted, and frequently even prevailed, in its interaction with other religious and intellectual currents.

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