

## **TEACHINGS OF SILVANUS**

The fourth of five works in the Nag Hammadi Codex VII (4:84.15-118.7), it was entered into the Coptic Museum at Old Cairo on 9 June 1952, was declared national [property](#) in 1956, and received inventory number 10546 in 1959. Its state of preservation is excellent, there being only small lacunae mostly at the bottom of the pages. Codex VII consists of only one quire, containing 127 written pages, so that the fourth tractate belongs entirely to the second half of the codex.

The pages measure 29.2 cm in height and 17.5 cm in width at most. The fibers of the pages of the fourth tractate run horizontally on the odd pages. The average number of the lines per page is 32 to 33. The title appears at the beginning of the tractate and is marked by indentation, by some horizontal strokes above and underneath, by a koronis to the left and a colon with a set of diple signs to the right, so that there is a decorated title. Dated documents used for the cartonnage of the binding make dating the codex to the third quarter of the fourth century A.D. probable.

The contents of this tractate point to some connection with monastic life, as does the site of the find, not far from a monastery of Pachomius. Another link with anchorite life arises from the passage 97.3-98.22 (which also occurs on a sheet of parchment in the British Museum, BM 979), dating from the tenth or eleventh century and ascribed to Saint ANTONY, the father of monasticism in Egypt. The Greek original could perhaps be dated as early as 200 A.D.

The contents are certainly not Gnostic (although some ideas could be combined with gnosticism) but resemble Hellenized [Alexandrian](#) theology, so that they are compatible with ideas of CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA and ORIGEN, although the author is less philosophic than they. The name of the author is almost certainly pseudepigraphic and possibly derived from Paul's companion. The author was influenced by

current popular philosophy, which was a blend of middle Platonism and Stoicism. Like Clement and Origen, he is Platonic in his conception of the transcendent God and [Stoic](#) in his ethics.

The tractate has the literary form of [wisdom](#) literature. The author addresses the reader as his “son” (85.1-2), asking him to accept his education and teaching (87.5). The fool is opposed to the wise men (88.35-89.1; 89.26; 97.7-9). Wisdom is personified (89.5; cf. Prv. 1:20; 8:1). As in [Stoic](#) ethics, rational conduct is opposed to a life in passions and desires (84.20; 90.4; 105.23). Man shall follow the mind as his guiding principle (*hegemonikon*, 85.1; 108.24), an idea inspired by middle Platonism and late Stoicism. Mind and reason are man’s guide and teacher (85.24-26), a “pair of friends” (86.14-15), “divine” faculties in man (88.4; 91.24-25). The mind is divine because man was created in conformity with the image of God (92.23-26).

This conception concurs with Hellenistic [Alexandrian](#) theology and resembles the [Stoic](#) idea of the *logos spermatikos*. Mind and reason steer man as a helmsman or a rider, a notion that agrees with Plato’s imagery of the mind as a charioteer (90.12-17). Although mind and reason may give man a certain natural knowledge of God, he needs the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (107.35) and God’s revelation through Christ (100.24-25) in order to receive full knowledge of God. [Christ](#) is the Savior, “the Tree of Life” (106.21-22), “the good Shepherd” (106.28) who died “as a ransom” for man’s “sin” (104.13). This is a biblical point of view. There are many cases in which “Silvanus” refers to biblical passages. Christ is the true vine (107.26-27; cf. Jn. 15:1). “Do not give sleep to your eyes nor slumber to your eyelids, that you may be saved like a gazelle from snares and like a bird from a trap” is an almost literal quote from Proverbs 6:1.

The tractate is certainly not Gnostic. Some passages contain perhaps [anti-Gnostic](#) polemics. “Strange kinds of knowledge” (94.32) and “spurious knowledge” (96.3) are rejected. The world was not made by a fallible [demiurge](#) but by the Father, who used [Christ](#) as his hand

(115.3-6); thus the Creator is not ignorant (116.5-9). On the other hand, there are passages in which a Gnostic could recognize himself. The [essence](#) of sin is ignorance (87.20), which is characterized as “death” (89.13-14) or “drunkenness” (94.20-22). The “bridal chamber” is the place of origin of the Christian (94.27-28). Sometimes the visible world is evaluated negatively (98.1-2). The lower faculties in man are female, the mind is male (93.12).

God’s transcendence is described in a Platonic way when it is said that God is not at a place and that nothing can contain God (99.29-100.4). “For that which contains is more exalted than that which is contained” (100.3-4). We find the same idea with Clement of Alexandria. Christ’s incarnation is pictured as his descent into Hades (103.34-104.5; 110.18-29). In doing so [Christ](#) showed humility (110.32), which is also a basic Christian virtue (104.19). Humility was also a monastic ideal. Christ humiliated himself in order that man might be exalted and become like God (111.1-13). “He who guards himself . . . makes himself like God [108.21-27] . . . according to the statement of Paul who has become like Christ” (108.30-32; cf. Gal. 2:20). This idea of becoming equal to God is also familiar to Clement of Alexandria who refers to Plato, *Theaetetus* 176ab.

In summary, “Silvanus” was a biblical Christian, influenced by contemporary philosophy, a popular thinker of the [Alexandrian](#) type, and not a Gnostic.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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