

Revelation as Book and Book as Revelation: Reflections on the *Gospel of Truth*¹

by
Einar Thomassen

To the author of the *Gospel of Truth*, salvation came with a book. When the Saviour appeared, and gave instruction to the believers, "There was manifested in their heart the living book of the living" (19:34-36).² This is the decisive moment of the salvation history: "No one could have become manifest from among those who believed in salvation unless that book had appeared" (20:6-9).

In *Gos. Truth*, the notion of a book as the bringer or the vehicle of salvation has given rise to a rich, multi-faceted symbolism.³ I shall therefore use this text as the point of departure for a survey of the forms which the image of the salvific book takes within that segment of late Hellenistic religion which we vaguely call gnosticism. I shall then go on to ask whether the imagery of the book can tell us something about the function of literature in actual gnostic communities, and whether this function in turn can help explain some of the formal characteristics of this literature.

I

The image of the book in *Gos. Truth* is highly multivalent, and the conventional notions on which the imagery draws are many and diverse. I shall focus here on five aspects: (1) The idea of the hidden and rediscovered book, (2) the "book of the living," (3) the calling letter, (4) the divine decree, and (5) the book as text.

1. In the second quotation from *Gos. Truth* above we learn that the revelation of the book

coincided with the "manifestation" of the believers. What we have, then, is an eschatological event where the community of the elect is finally established on earth, and this event is dependent on the revelation of a book which previously was hidden. In its general form this idea has affinity to a *topos* which was quite widespread in the ancient world. Literary compositions of religious or pseudo-scientific content frequently claimed to reproduce a recently discovered book or tablets inscribed by legendary sages, magicians and heroes of the distant past, or even by the gods themselves.⁴ What is particularly relevant here, however, is not so much this common literary fiction as such, as the use which was made of it by certain religious groups, who in it saw a means for defining their sociological and religious distinctiveness by regarding themselves as the proper recipients of this kind of book revelation.

In this form, the idea can be found associated with such mythical figures as Seth and Hermes. Thus the *Gospel of the Egyptians* ends by declaring that it was written and inscribed by Seth in primordial times:⁵

The great Seth wrote this book with letters in one hundred and thirty years. He placed it in the mountain called Charaxio, in order that, at the end of the times and the eras, by the will of the divine Autogenes and the whole pleroma, through the gift of the untraceable, unthinkable, fatherly love, it⁶ may

come forth and be revealed to this incorruptible, holy race of the great savior, and those who dwell with them in love.

In their translation of this text Böhlig and Wisse wrote “in order that ... it may come forth and reveal this incorruptible, holy race.” This is probably not correct from the grammatical point of view— $\bar{\nu}\tau\epsilon\epsilon\iota\gamma\epsilon\mu\epsilon\alpha$ in $\bar{\nu}\tau\omicron\upsilon\gamma\omega\eta\eta\zeta$ $\bar{\nu}\tau\epsilon\epsilon\iota\gamma\epsilon\mu\epsilon\alpha$ more likely represents an indirect object (a Greek dative) rather than a direct object.⁷ However, Böhlig’s and Wisse’s understanding of the text is nevertheless meaningful in an implied sense. The unearthing of the book and the appearance of the incorruptible holy race are mutually related components of the same eschatological event, the one presupposes the other. Thus it may reasonably be inferred that the manifestation of the book here involves the manifestation of those for whom it is destined.

The tradition about the books, or tablets, which the wise Seth (or Seth’s sons, or Enoch) inscribed and deposed for posterity in the time before the Flood, is Jewish, as several scholars have shown.⁸ With those groups who considered themselves as the “seed of Seth,”⁹ however, this tradition took on a special significance, in that the revelation of these books or tablets became a part of the decisive salvation-historical event, which also comprised their own manifestation as the sons of the revealer.

Another Nag Hammadi text actually claims to be *The Three Steles of Seth*, and begins as follows:

The revelation of Dositheus of the three steles of Seth, the father of the living and unshakeable race, which he (Dositheus) saw and understood, which he read and remembered, and gave to the elect, being as follows, just as they were inscribed there.¹⁰

Again we find that the revelation of the steles, assumed to have been concealed since ante-

diluvian times, is linked with the appearance of the elect seed at the decisive moment in history.

A third occurrence of the theme is found in *Zostrianos*, from Nag Hammadi Codex VIII. *Zostrianos* in this text is identified with Seth, in accordance with an older tradition,¹¹ and in the concluding part of the writing he says: “I wrote three tablets and left them as knowledge for those who would come after me, the living elect” (130:1-4). The intended recipients of the tablets are in fact “the living, the holy seed of Seth,” to whom “*Zostrianos*” eventually appeared in incarnate form in order to wake them up from error (130:14ff).

My last example of an eschatological book revelation to a group of elect I take from Hermetism. According to the tractate *Kore Kosmou*,¹² the divine Hermes was the possessor of all knowledge, in a primordial age when the earth, or *Physis*, was not yet animated nor inhabited by living creatures. Hermes decided to commit his knowledge to books, which he then concealed in order that that they might be discovered in the future:

Hermes saw all things, and understood what he saw, and had power to explain what he understood. For what he had discovered he inscribed on tablets, and hid what he had inscribed, being firmly silent rather than speaking most of it, in order that all later generations of the world might seek it. ... Thus did he speak: ‘Ye holy books, which have been written by my imperishable hands, and whose master I am, having anointed you with the drug of imperishability, remain ye undecaying through all the ages, and be ye unseen and undiscovered by all men who shall go to and fro on the plains of this land, until the time when Heaven, grown old, shall beget organisms worthy of you, which the Creator has named souls!’¹³

These books, for whose contents the world was not yet ready, Hermes deposits “near the secret objects of Osiris” – presumably some place associated with the cult of this god¹⁴ – who himself has, however, not yet been born at this stage. At the end of the tractate we are told about those who are destined to uncover the books. They are the two divine emanations Osiris and Isis, “those who will know all the secrets of my writings and discern their meaning” (66).

It is well known that there are many redactional problems in *Kore Kosmou*.¹⁵ Festugière has argued that the tractate has been reworked by someone he calls “the Isiac redactor.” References to Isis and Osiris in the text may thus be the work of this redactor, although Festugière does not think this is so in the instances we have cited here. But whether the divine souls who are worthy of the hidden books were originally intended to be the members of the Hermetic community or to be the two Egyptian gods is not essential here, since in the latter case the gods can be interpreted as the symbolic projections of the community and its members. If the core text of *Kore Kosmou* itself is the book which was hidden by Hermes, then it follows that the actual Hermetic readers of the book are equivalent to those divine souls who in its mythological apocalyptic framework are represented as the book’s predestined discoverers.

Moreover, this symbolic relationship is exploited and expressed in the second frame of the tractate – due, according to Festugière, to the Isiac redactor – which presents it as an instruction given by Isis to her son Horus. In this way the core text becomes that which Isis read in the books of Hermes discovered by herself and Osiris, and now transmits to her son.¹⁶ Here it is Horus who comes to be the symbolic representative of the Hermetic initiate to whom the book is revealed. It is essential in this context to note that Horus is the *son* of Isis: this family relationship can be regarded as a kind

of meta-level symbolization of how Isis and Osiris in the *first* framework story symbolize the divine race.

These notions about a book which is revealed for a chosen race at the decisive moment of the salvation history help us, I think, to understand one aspect of the statement in *Gos. Truth* quoted at the outset: “No one could have become manifest from among those who believed in salvation unless that book had appeared.” In fact, a community of elect with special knowledge cannot come into being unless a vehicle containing this knowledge through which this community becomes aware of its true identity is also made available. The book which is spoken of in *Gos. Truth*, manifested in the heart of the believers is, to be sure, a metaphor, not a real book. But that metaphor would hardly have been possible without the existence of these conventional notions about revealed books which have been surveyed here.

2. Let us now pass to another aspect of the book in *Gos. Truth*. The book is called “the living book of the living” (19:35-36), “the book of the living” (21:4), and “the living book” (22:39). While the extended formula seems to be an original invention by the author of *Gos. Truth*, the term “book of the living” is familiar from the Bible. To have one’s name written in the book of the living means to be remembered by God for salvation.¹⁷ It is a metaphor formed by analogy with secular census rolls: the book is the register of the citizens of the kingdom of God. The expression ספר חיים occurs once in the Hebrew Bible (Ps. 69:28) – the idea as such more frequently¹⁸ – and is variously rendered as βίβλος ζώντων,¹⁹ or, as always in the New Testament, βιβλίον τῆς ζωῆς.²⁰

The traditional meaning of the expression as a roll of names is also used by the author of *Gos. Truth*. He refers to “the living who are inscribed in the book of the living” (21:3-5) and says that the Father “enrolled them in advance” (21:33). However, he also develops the notion

further in a particular direction by linking it with the idea of a *revelation* of the book. He says: “There was manifested in their heart the living book of the living – the one written in the thought and mind [of the] Father, which from before the foundation of the totality was within his incomprehensibility” (19:34-20:3). But how can the manifestation of the book in which the names of the elect are inscribed be the decisive event of salvation?

Some of the elements used here are derived from Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions. Thus in the Book of Revelation the names of the righteous are said to be written in the book of life ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου (13:8, 17:8), and the words in the passage just quoted clearly allude to these texts (Ⲡⲓⲛⲉⲗⲁⲑⲏ ⲛⲧⲕⲁ [ⲧⲁ]ⲃⲟⲗⲁⲛⲧⲉ ⲛⲧⲉⲛⲧⲉⲛⲧⲉⲛⲧⲉ, 20:1-2). The notion of an eschatological unveiling of the book of the living is a development sometimes found in apocalyptic literature, but then the distinctiveness of the book of the living idea is mostly blurred, and it is merged or combined with other kinds of books which are traditionally thought to be opened on the day of judgment – the books of good and evil deeds, the heavenly tablets of God’s plans (cf. *1 Enoch* 47:3f, *Rev* 20:11f, both modelled on *Dan* 7:9f). An interesting formulation which illustrates how the idea can be eschatologically exploited is found in *4 Ezra* 14:35: *iustorum nomina parebunt et impiorum facta ostendentur*.

However, the eschatological revelation of the book of the living in *Gos. Truth* does not take the form of a public proclamation. Instead, it takes place in the heart of the believers. Since the book is a list of names, it is easy to imagine the revelation of the book as a calling out of names, a summons. This is in fact how the author uses the idea: “Those whose name he knew in advance were called (ⲁⲗⲏⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲁⲣⲁⲗ) at the end, so that one who has knowledge is the one whose name the Father has uttered” (21:25-30).

This is perhaps not quite unparalleled – I am

thinking of a passage in *2 Apoc. Bar*, which Charles translated “those who are in the numbers named can be called” (75:6).²¹ But in the present gnostic context, being called means something very special.²² It means to be awakened, so as to acquire knowledge of one’s true identity. In the passage from *Gos. Truth* just quoted, we note that being called by name is in fact to have knowledge. The author goes on:

For he whose name has not been spoken is ignorant. Indeed, how is one to hear if his name has not been called? For he who is ignorant until the end is a creature of oblivion ... If one has knowledge, he is from above. If he is called he hears, he answers, and he turns to him who is calling him, and ascends to him. And he knows in what manner he is called (21:30-22:9).

In sum: The book which is revealed as a bringer of salvation provides knowledge of one’s true identity. *Gos. Truth* uses the traditional term of the book of the living, in which the names of the elect are inscribed, so as to portray this revelation as a call.

3. This recalls another use of the symbol of a written document in gnosticism. I refer to the way in which the notion of the awakening call sometimes takes the form of a letter. The most famous example is perhaps the letter in the so-called *Hymn of the Pearl*, sent by his royal parents to the prince who has forgotten why he was sent down to “Egypt”:

It flew in the form of an eagle, the king of all birds. <It flew and landed by me and became entirely speech.> And at the sound and sight of it I started up from sleep, took (it), kissed (it) tenderly, and read. And it had written in it just what was written down in my heart. And immediately I remembered that I was a son of kings, and my freedom longed for its kind (vv. 51-56).²³

In Mandaean texts we sometimes hear about letters or books of *kushta* which represent the awakening call.²⁴ In the Manichaean *Kephalaia*, ch. 75 an exchange of letters is described, beginning with the call from the Living Spirit to the First Man.²⁵ Another well-known instance of the symbol of the letter is found in the 23rd *Ode of Solomon*: "And His thought was like a letter, And His will descended from on high" (v. 5). It should be pointed out, however, that the letter here represents less a call than a royal decree manifesting supreme authority ("The letter was one of command," v. 17a).²⁶

Moreover, as far as *Gos. Truth* is concerned, we should not over-emphasize the symbolism of the letter, since the book of the living is not there described as something which has been *sent out* from the Father and down to earth, and the notion of a call is only secondarily introduced as an implication of the fact that the book contains the names of the elect.

In any case, the book reveals knowledge about the recipient's true identity. But the names listed in the book of the living are more than just a source of information. They are themselves in fact the recipients' true identities in a real sense. This is implied in the following passage:

Those who are to receive teaching [are] the living who are inscribed in the book of the living. It is about themselves that they receive instruction, receiving themselves²⁷ from the Father, turning again to him. Since the perfection of the totality is in the Father, it is necessary for the totality to ascend to him. Then, if one has knowledge, he receives what are his own and draws them to himself (21:3-14).

To receive instruction is, then, to receive oneself, and to have knowledge is to receive what is one's own, which is one's perfection. Thus when it is said that "one who has knowledge is

the one whose name the Father has uttered" (21:28-30; cf. above), this not only implies that the revelation of knowledge takes the form of a call, but also that the name actually represents the perfect self which the believer receives when the book of the living is revealed to him.

In another passage the manifestation of the book is compared to the opening of a will: the fortune of the deceased master of the house is concealed as long as his will has not been opened. In the same way the "totality" was hidden as long as the book was not made manifest (20:14-22). It is clear that the "totality" is both the contents of the book and its recipients, or, as generally in *Gos. Truth*, the term refers both to those who need salvation and will be saved, and to that perfection by which and into which these are saved.

Thus to return to our initial quote, "No one could have become manifest from among those who believed in salvation unless that book had appeared," we now see how literally this may be taken. The appearance of the book is not only the logical condition for the manifestation of the elect, but the book actually contains the true selves of the recipients, the totality, without which they have no real existence, so that the manifestation of the contents of the book not only coincides with, or causes, but *is* the manifestation of the believers in their authentic existence.

Historically I believe that this soteriology is developed from notions of predestination in Jewish apocalypticism, where the community of saints is sometimes beheld by the visionary as existing concretely and timelessly in heaven. For the idea of pre-existent names in particular one may refer to some passages in *I Enoch*, where the names of the righteous are said to be preserved in heaven (65:12, 104:1), or to exist as stars in the sky (43). *I Enoch* (i.e. the Book of the Similitudes), it may be added, also has the notion that this mythologically hypostatized community of the righteous will

be made manifest on the last day (38:1, cf. 53:6).

But this line of inquiry will not be pursued here. Rather, I would like to redirect the attention to the fact that the manifestation of the true identities of the believers takes place as the revelation of precisely a book. We already said that a characteristic of the gnostic idea of a book revelation is that it provides knowledge about the recipient's own identity. Therefore one cannot be who one is until this knowledge has been made available. From there to go on to say that the book actually *consists of* the true identities of the recipients is but a small step of symbolic hypostatization which is quite possible in a gnostic context. Something of the same was the case in the *Hymn of the Pearl*, where the awakening letter "had written in it just what was written down in my heart" – the letter is a hypostatization of the real self of the prince.

4. There are two more aspects of the book symbolism in *Gos. Truth* with which we must deal. First of these is the relationship of the revealed book with the revealer. The book does not appear by itself, but is revealed, i.e. opened, by the Saviour. The book is described as

the one which no one was able to take, since it was ordained that the one who would take it would be slain. ... The merciful one, the faithful one, Jesus, was patient in accepting sufferings until he took that book, since he knows that his death is life for many (20:3-14).

As many scholars have said, there is an allusion here to *Rev 5*, where the Lamb is found and declared to be the only one capable and worthy of opening the book of seven seals: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to break its seals, for you were slain and by your blood you purchased for God men of every tribe and lan-

guage, people and nation" (5:9). This is the notion of a book which contains the decisions and decrees of God, and is handed over to a chosen representative who as king thereby receives the authority to implement them on earth. The theme has a long history in the Near East, and has been studied by Geo Widengren in his book *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book*.²⁸ It is the same theme that we find in a text to which we have referred already, and which also is quite close to *Gos. Truth*, the 23rd *OdSol*:

And His thought was like a letter,
And His will descended from on high.
And it was sent like an arrow
Which from a bow had been forcibly shot.
And many hands rushed to the letter,
In order to catch (it), then take and read it.
But it escaped from their fingers;
And they were afraid of it and of the seal
which was upon it.
Because they were not allowed to loosen its
seal; for the power which was over the seal
was greater than they (vv. 5-9).²⁹

Here the letter is said to be the thought of the Lord, which reminds us that the book of the living in *Gos. Truth* was pre-existent within the Father's thought and mind (19:36-20:1). In both cases the book/letter is God's will, or decree; and only a chosen one can take and open it, i.e. execute the decree. Now in *Gos. Truth*, and this may well be the case also with the *Ode*, the book is not distinct from the Saviour himself. In fact, the revelation of the book is considered to take place in the incarnation and the death of Jesus on the cross: "Jesus appeared; he put on that book; he was nailed to a tree; he published the edict of the Father on the cross" (20:22-27).

In this way the book which brings knowledge and which actually consists of the true, the archetypal selves of those who receive it, is also

identical with the Saviour, who personifies the mind and will of the Father and acts as his appointed representative.

5. Finally, we come to the last aspect of the book, which might be called the book as text. The Father, *Gos. Truth* says, revealed his will

for a knowledge with which all its emanations are united. This is the knowledge of the living book which he revealed to the aeons, at the end as [its letters], revealing how they are not vowels nor are they consonants, so that one might read them and think of something foolish, but they are letters of the truth which they alone speak who know them. Each letter is a complete truth like a complete book, since they are letters written by the Unity, the Father having written them for the aeons in order that by means of its letters they should know the Father (22:36-23:18).

Here the book is conceived as a unified multiplicity, being like a book which is a unity although it consists of numerous individual letter signs. This provides a way of reconciling the seemingly contradictory ideas that the book is both something which contains knowledge, the ideal selves of the believers, and the Saviour himself. The book not only gives knowledge about the Father, but his emanations form part of it themselves. Each of the Father's offspring is, then, like a letter in the book, whereas the book as a unity is the Saviour (the Son, Jesus, the Word). At the same time each letter is a complete truth, i.e. it contains or mirrors the whole of which it is a part.

This leads us to ask and try to answer the following question: What is the real meaning of the book of the living in *Gos. Truth*? I believe this to be a legitimate question, inasmuch as it can be answered in terms of an underlying Valentinian soteriology for *Gos. Truth*. A clue to the right answer can be found in the formula-

tion "he put on that book" in connection with Jesus' appearance and incarnation. Now what the Saviour-Jesus "puts on" in Valentinianism, at the moment of his descent to earth, is usually his body, and this body contains the Church.³⁰ Thus he puts on the spiritual seed of Sophia as he passes through the Ogdoad, and, according to Western Valentinianism, the psychic Christ, son of the Demiurge, when he reaches the Hebdomad. The incarnation of the Saviour is thus at the same time the manifestation of his body on earth in the form of the Church. The Saviour is, then, a unity as well as a plurality. The work of the Church on earth consists in making each individual member of the Church participate in the unity, through realizing the unification of the empirical church member with his archetypal counterpart come down together with the Saviour. This, of course, is the unification of the Bridal Chamber, where the spiritual believer is united with his *syzygos*.

The book of the living, I would suggest then, is that archetypal congregation of the real selves of the elect, the spiritual Church, who descend with the Saviour to cause their earthly counterparts not only to recognize their own identity, but also actually to attain that identity through the unification of *syzygies*, which at the same time also manifests and brings about perfect interrelationship of wholeness and parts in the Saviour.

II

So much for the symbolism of the book in *Gos. Truth*. The question I would like to ask now is whether that symbolism can help us in any way to understand the religious function and significance of actual gnostic literature. In other words, can these ideas about revelation in the form of a book tell us anything about the *Sitz im Leben* of gnostic writings which claim to bring revelation to the reader/listener? What

in fact seems to be suggested by this symbolism is that the reading of a gnostic writing which purports to give *knowledge about* the reader's/listener's real identity is also to be thought of as an act which aims at *establishing* that identity. What the reader finds in such a writing is himself, in such a way that reading it becomes a sacramental act through which he is transformed into a new being. Thus one could say that the way in which the book in *Gos. Truth* is represented as the *syzygos* of the believer symbolizes the actual capacity to transform that a revealed book has when used in a cultic setting.

It is difficult to know anything precise about how gnostic literature was intended to be used. For one group of documents, the *Hermetica*, an authority such as Festugière has argued that they were not aimed at a religious community at all, since a sect of Hermetics did not exist. Therefore, Hermetic tractates were meant for private reading only. Thus CH XIII, On Regeneration, contains both a doctrine on regeneration (ὁ τῆς παλιγγενεσίας λόγος) and its practical realization, the γενεσιουργία.³¹ Having first exposed the doctrine, Hermes bids Tat to observe a moment of silence. The silence is in fact the womb in which the λόγος is sown, and from it the neophyte is reborn and unites with the powers of God in a hymn. Festugière comments: "Même distinction entre λόγος and πράξις dans la magie, entre λεγόμενα et δρώμενα dans les mystères, mais avec cette différence essentielle que l'opération de C.H. XIII consiste dans une expérience tout intérieure, sans l'aide d'aucun sacrement, rite ou représentation symbolique extérieure."³² Thus the rebirth of the person here takes place as an effect of having mentally and privately appropriated the λόγος. From the point of view of the function of the literary work this interpretation seems to rejoin Reitzenstein's notion of the *Lese-Mysterium*, which he developed in connection with this same text: "Wer [die literarischen Mysterien] als Bücher veröffentlichte, er-

wartete ..., dass der Leser, wenn Gott ihn begnaden will, dieselbe Wirkung beim Lesen empfinden werde, wie Tat angeblich beim Hören; die Wunderkraft der Gottesbotschaft wirkt auch in dem geschriebenen Wort: die Schau, das Erlebnis tritt ein."³³

This is one possible way of seeing the intended effect of a gnostic work, although it is not certain that Hermetism did not exist as communities with some sort of worship.³⁴ Where gnostic communities did exist, we can imagine that texts were read as part of religious services. It is true that we do not have many indications of such a practice, but I would like to point to one instance which suggests it. In the introduction to the *Apocryphon of James* from NHC I, James says:

You asked me to send you a secret teaching <which> was revealed to me [an]d Peter by the Lord. I could not turn you away, nor, however, speak with you, so [I have wri]tten it down in Hebrew characters. I send it to you, and to you only, but because you are a servant of the salvation of the saints. Be careful and take heed not to recite (jou) to many this writing, which the Saviour did not wish to divulge even to all of us, his twelve disciples. But blessed may they be who are saved through faith in this teaching (logos)! (1:8-28)

The writing is meant to be taken in charge by a person who has some institutionalized function in a gnostic community, and who in this capacity recites it to the followers. Since the teaching – λόγος, thus more accurately the reciting of the teaching – brings about salvation of the believers, it is natural to assume that this recitation has a sacramental character and that the reciter serves as a ritual functionary.

In such cases the recital itself becomes a performance, an act of ritual. But it is likely that for the most part the performance aspect was

reinforced by other specific acts, to which the text functioned as the *λεγόμενα* to the *δρώμενα* – to use, as Festugière appropriately did, the terminology of the mysteries. The text which is used in this way by a gnostic community reveals to the initiate who he really is, that he belongs to the elect race, and through that knowledge he acquires this new identity. This acquisition of a new identity, or, better, the unification with his real self, we can then imagine to have been ritually enacted in ceremonies representing (re)birth, a sacred marriage, and/or participation in the hymns offered to the Father by his transcendent aeons.

This means, however, that it is probably wrong to consider the reading of gnostic systematic treatises as only a catechetical preparation for the actual initiation ceremonies. Just as the *λεγόμενα* of the mysteries cannot stand on their own, but presuppose the *δρώμενα*, so the gnostic instruction is an integral part of the sacramental process itself. Becoming a Gnostic takes place at the moment the book is revealed, as much as in the ceremonies which symbolize the transformation by actions.

This religious function of the texts provides us with a perspective on how some of their formal aspects may be understood. Thus it is clear that the characteristic gnostic and Hermetic literary form of the revelation dialogue depends on the functional *Sitz im Leben* of these works as sources of illumination and personal transformation. The human interlocutors of the Saviour in these dialogues can easily be recognized as the literary representatives of their readers (or those to whom they are read). The relationship between the reader and the book is the same as that between the disciple and the Saviour in the book itself. Reader and disciple have the soteriological position of the imperfect or fallen soul who seeks to be perfected, i.e. reborn, through *gnosis*, while the book and the Saviour act as the *syzygos* who unites with the soul and brings forth the new man. This,

incidentally, is why, I think, female disciples such as Mary Magdalen figure so prominently in these dialogues: Their female gender makes them especially suitable as symbols of the fallen soul needing perfection.

Here we may recall the setting of the revelation of the book of the living in *Gos. Truth*: "In schools he appeared (and) he spoke the word as teacher" (19:19-20). His disciples are the little children: "Having been strengthened, they learned about the impressions of the Father. They knew, they were known; they were glorified, they glorified. There was manifested in their heart the living book of the living ..." (19:30-36). I think we may see this as a reference not only to the historical work of Jesus, but also to the cultic context of a gnostic community where teaching is transmitted. The two contexts are joined together by being situations of transmission of knowledge, just as the teacher and the book are symbolically the same.

I believe that this pattern can be extended even further. There is a systematic correlation not only between the sacramental practices and the salvation historical events which in the form of framed revelation discourses provide the mythical paradigm for these practices, but the mythical doctrines taught in these discourses can be shown to correspond to the same pattern. This is the case with, for instance, the myths of a pre-cosmic fall, in gnosticism centred around the figure of Sophia. Sophia represents the fate of the Father's offspring, who were brought forth in the intention that they should seek and find their perfect and divine origin, but went astray and had to be rescued by a Saviour from above. Sophia is thus the primary mythical archetype of the imperfect soul, to which correspond the disciples in the framework stories about the Saviour's work on earth, and on the ultimate level the individual gnostic initiate. The myth then explains to the Gnostic who he himself is in his imperfect state, but also

tells him how his perfect self originates in the Father and is brought to him by the Saviour. What happens to Sophia also happens to the disciples and to the gnostic believer. In the mythical world-view of these texts, this is more than just an analogy. Mythical parallelism is also a causal relationship, so that the unification of the Gnostic with his *syzygos* is at the same time the unification of Sophia with the Saviour, of the church with Jesus the Christ, and, ultimately, of the totality with the Father himself.

From here it is possible to go on to construe form and content as well as word and reality as inextricably and systematically joined together in gnostic texts. In a recent article Patricia Cox Miller has performed an analysis of passages from *Gos. Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate* of NHC I, in which she demonstrates how post-structuralist notions of writing as an unfolding of the dynamics of language itself can be read with some success into those texts.³⁵ Aware of the dissemination of meaning which inevitably takes place with the use of words, the gnostic authors wrote in such a way as consistently to avoid referring to realities outside the texts themselves. These writers may thus be said to concur with Derrida's *dictum*, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte." There is, I believe, a good deal of truth in this point of view. But this theoretical framework is probably too general to allow us to understand these texts in their specific religious characteristics. For this we have to regard them in relation to that extra-textual reality

which is their use in religious practice. It is this function of the texts which explains the inter-relationship in them of form and content, word and reality. Just as the gnostic ritually transcends himself to become a new person, his true self, so he, as it were, *becomes* the myth which is told as part of the enacted ritual.

It is in this context too, I should like to add here briefly, that we should place the prayers and hymns so much used by Gnostics and attested in the written sources. This literary genre, where the performative aspect of language is focused, was used by Gnostics as a vehicle of expressing the transformation of the person, the acquisition of the new self accomplished in their ritual. In reciting these hymns, often characterized as silent, i.e. the referential aspect of their words being bracketed out, the worshipper takes leave of his empirical self and becomes one with the words that are enounced, and thereby finds himself united also with the aeons whose very substance is the glory of the Father.

Let me end here these remarks which can serve only as a prolegomenon to the study of gnostic literary forms and not as a contribution to that study itself. What I would like to emphasize in concluding is that if we wish such a study to deal with forms that in their essence are truly *gnostic*, we need to relate them to the functions they fulfilled in gnostic congregational practices, as well as to the central ideological patterns of gnostic soteriology.

Notes

1. This paper is a slightly modified version of a lecture given in Copenhagen in 1990.
2. I quote the translation of H.W. Attridge and G.W. MacRae in *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex): Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Nag Hammadi Studies, XXII), Leiden 1985.
3. The symbol of the book in *Gos. Truth* has been often

- commented on, though along different lines than those which mainly interest us here; cf. in particular H.W. Attridge, "The Gospel of Truth as an Exoteric Text," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, ed. C.W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, Jr., Peabody, Mass., 1986, 239-255 (esp. 245ff).
4. Cf. F. Boll, *Aus der Offenbarung Johannis: Hellenistische*

- Studien zum Weltbild der Apokalypse* (ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ, 1), Berlin 1914, 7-8; [A.-J.] Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. I, *L'Astrologie et les sciences occultes*, 3rd ed., Paris 1950, 319-24. A more extensive study has been made by W. Speyer, *Bücherfunde in der Glaubenswerbung der Antike* (Hypomnemata, 24), Göttingen 1970.
5. NHC III 68:10-23; I use the translation by A. Böhlig and F. Wisse in *Nag Hammadi Codices III,2 and IV,3: The Gospel of the Egyptians* (Nag Hammadi Studies, IV), Leiden 1975.
 6. As Böhlig and Wisse say (205-6), εϰ(ε)προελαθε must refer to ΤΕΘΕΙΒΙΒΛΟΣ in 68:10, and the gender is an error.
 7. Cf. Crum's dictionary, 486b.
 8. Josephus, *Ant.* I 68-71; *Jub.* 8:1-4; *Adam and Eve* 49-50, etc.; cf. W. Bousset, "Die Beziehungen der ältesten jüdischen Sibylle zur chaldäischen Sibylle und einige weitere Beobachtungen über den synkretistischen Charakter der spätjüdischen Literatur," *ZNW* 3 (1902) 44ff; Speyer, *op.cit.* 120; M. Tardieu, "Les trois Stèles de Seth, un écrit gnostique retrouvé à Nag Hammadi," *RSPT* 57 (1973) 553ff; B.A. Pearson, "The Figure of Seth in Gnostic Literature," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, ed. B. Layton (Suppl. to *Numen* 41), vol. II, Leiden 1981, 491ff; G.A.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Nag Hammadi Studies, 24), Leiden 1984, 106ff.
 9. For this designation cf. Pearson, *op. cit.* 489ff; Stroumsa *op. cit.* 125ff.
 10. NHC VII 118:10-19 (my translation).
 11. Cf. J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les Mages hellénisés*, Paris 1938, I, 45f; Pearson, *op. cit.* 494, 497f.
 12. Ed. Festugière in A.-J. Festugière and A.D. Nock, *Corpus Hermeticum*, IV, Paris 1954, 1ff.
 13. I use Scott's translation, with some modifications (W. Scott, *Hermetica*, I, Oxford 1924, 459-61).
 14. Festugière was unable to ascertain the precise meaning of πλησίον τῶν Ὁσίριδος κρυφίων; cf. *Corpus Hermeticum*, III, Paris 1954, CLV f.
 15. See the extensive discussion by Festugière, ib. CXXVIII-CCXIX.
 16. Her function thus resembles that of Dosithus in *Steles Seth* (see above).
 17. The concept has been studied by L. Koep, *Das himmlische Buch in Antike und Christentum* (Theophaneia, 8), Bonn 1952, in particular p. 31-39; cf. also TWNT I 618f (G. Schrenk).
 18. Ex 32:32-33; Is 4:3; Dan 12:1.
 19. LXX Ps 69:29; *1 Enoch* 47:3; *Apoc. Zeph.* 14:5; the Eighteen Benedictions, 12; Hermas, *Vis.* I 3:2, *Prec.* 8:6; *Sim.* 2:9.
 20. Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12.15, 21:27.
 21. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, II, Oxford 1913, 519. The passage is interpreted differently, however, in some of the more recent translations.
 22. Cf. H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd ed. Boston 1963, 74-75, who quotes the present passage in this context.
 23. I use S.G. Hall's translation in W. Foerster, *Gnosis*, Eng. tr. ed. R. McL. Wilson, I, Oxford 1972, 357.
 24. Cf. W. Sundberg, *Kusha*, Lund 1953, 65-67.
 25. Also cf. Epiphanius, *Pan.* XXXI 5f, where the idea of the call is not explicitly mentioned, however. These examples can also be seen as gnostic variants of the widespread phenomenon of the "letter from heaven." A study was made by R. Stübe, *Der Himmelsbrief*, Tübingen 1918; cf., more recently, Speyer, *op. cit.* 23-42.
 26. See below, section 4; this aspect is missed by Speyer, *op. cit.* 38f.
 27. There is no need to accept Till's emendation of ἦμαγ to ἦμας here, as do Attridge and Pagels.
 28. *Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift*, 1950:7.
 29. Translation by J.H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, Oxford 1973, 94.
 30. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* I 6:1; *Exc. Theod.* 1, 26:1, 58-59.
 31. *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, IV, *Le Dieu inconnu et la gnose*, Paris 1954, 203.
 32. *Ib.* n. 1.
 33. R. Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, 3rd ed., Leipzig 1927, 64.
 34. The importance of hymns in Hermetism suggests the existence of some kind of communal worship.
 35. "'Words With an Alien Voice': Gnostics, Scripture and Canon," *J. Am. Acad. Rel.* 57 (1989), 459-84.