

Marko Uršič
University of Ljubljana

The Creation of Man in the Gnostic *Nag Hammadi* Manuscripts

Abstract. In the Bible, the first man was created "in the image of God" – except that Adam was not allowed to eat from the Tree of knowledge; he was supposed to remain ignorant of the distinction between good and evil in order to stay in Paradise. However, as the Holy Scripture tells us, Adam and Eve, seduced by the serpent, chose knowledge and, consequently, the Fall. In some Gnostic versions of creation, discovered in the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts (1945), the story of the Tree is interpreted quite different: eating fruits of knowledge is considered as integral part of the creation, i.e. it was just this act which accomplished the birth of Adam and Eve as human beings *and* as the living images of God. In this way, the so-called "original sin" is actually the first step to deification and salvation of man. The principal aim of this paper is to present and comment these alternative interpretations from the point of philosophical anthropology.

I

In the Bible, the first man, Adam, was created by God and in the image of God. We read in the first chapter of *Genesis*: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish in the sea, and over the fowl in the air ..." (*Gen* 1:26). Since there is only one God, we may infer that the Lord addresses himself in the majestic plural. The likeness of the man to his Lord is based on dominion over all lower creatures: Adam is created to be a lord over fish and fowl etc. in analogy to God, the Lord of Adam and his successors. The first woman comes to the scene in the next sentence, after having repeated the 'definition' of man: "So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (*Gen* 1:27).

In the second chapter of *Genesis*, an important feature of the creation of man is added: "And the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (*Gen* 2:7). Here the difference between body and soul, matter and mind, is introduced: life is in the soul which was breathed into Adam's nostrils by God's creative mind. So, after all, the principal gift, given to man, was not the dominion over other creatures, but the soul - man's capacity of feeling, thinking, loving, and adoring the Lord, his creator. However, here difficulties begin: in the garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve were put by God, there is a tree of knowledge of good and evil – the forbidden tree. In fact, there are two relevant trees in Eden: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge; they are mysteriously linked together, as we shall see later.

Here, in the second chapter, a paradox is introduced: Adam, the first man, is supposed to be the image of God, but on the other hand, he is not allowed to share with his Lord the essential feature of soul and/or mind: knowing the distinction between good and evil. It is tacitly assumed that God himself has known this distinction since the days of creation, because every evening – except on the first and second days, when he separated light from darkness and the "firmament" above from the "waters" below – "God saw it *was* good": how could He see that, unless He knew the distinction between good and evil. The Lord of *Genesis* has eaten of the tree of knowledge, and He obviously wants to prevent his creature following him, so He

commands to Adam: "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (*Gen 2:16-17*). But why? And how could man be the image of God without *knowledge*? This is the main paradox of *Genesis*.

In the third chapter, devil in the form of the serpent offers to Adam & Eve a solution to the paradox: "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be gods, knowing good and evil" (*Gen 3:4-5*). A very remarkable offer indeed! And what is actually wrong in *knowing* good and evil? It seems that the answer to this question is that knowing means "being gods" – and *that* is supposed to be wrong from the point of the Lord who wants to remain the only God. It is the devil in the form and body of the serpent who initiates Adam & Eve into knowledge. From the Lord's point of view, it is better for them to stay in paradise, to remain innocent and happy as children in the garden of Eden, ignorant in the primordial innocence, and not to enter the way of knowledge which leads to death. It is interesting that the Holy Scripture at its very beginning teaches that knowledge is essentially satanic by origin; and that is, presumably, the reason why God as a good father tries to prevent his children from losing their happy heavenly home. But does He really have such benevolent intentions when he threatens Adam with death, in case Adam eats the forbidden fruit? We may feel some doubt about that, since the good Lord – after having cursed the serpent, the woman and the man ("cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life [...] for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return", *Gen 3:17,19*) – seems to be rather envious to his creature: "And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken" (*Gen 3:22-23*). In this passage, it is strange that the Lord speaks in plural; it seems not to be just a majestic plural like in the first chapter – but who are 'we', that is not at all clear (we-gods?). We will return to this point later. Here we can infer from the quoted passage that the real aim of the prohibition seems not to be in sparing man from something bad and painful, but in staying him away from the eternal life. (When we have in mind not only *Genesis*, but the whole Bible, we might say that then time has not come yet for eternal life of man, that man had still to earn it, etc. – but is this really convincing?) Indeed, having eaten of the tree of knowledge, Adam & Eve have *died* for the paradise, they were expelled out of it by the flaming sword of a Cherubim, but in the same time, they were *born* for life, for the stupendous adventure of knowledge.

It is the main thesis of this paper that the essential part of the creation of man, following the book of *Genesis*, is the so-called Fall, if the latter is to be understood as the price for knowledge. In eating of the tree of knowledge, not before, the human being has become the image of God. However, this point is not very clear in the Holy Bible. I will not enter here into the discussion why it is so, I just take it as a fact. (Of course, I also admit that the proposed interpretation may be wrong, but that is a trouble of every interpretation.) My intention in the following is to present some Gnostic versions of genesis which reveal my point more clearly, compared with canonical text. I have in mind especially two versions of the story of creation, which are available in the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts. In order to avoid possible

misunderstandings, I have to stress that I do *not* want to argue against the Holy Bible – I feel well the greatness of it and the limits of my thought – but my aim is to throw new light on some quite opaque passages of the *Genesis* by having in mind their "apocryphal" Gnostic versions. Before going to these versions, I should give some general information concerning the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts which may be unknown to some readers.

II

The *Nag Hammadi Library* of Coptic manuscripts was discovered in 1945 at the place named Hag Hammadi in the Nile valley, upper Egypt. It includes 13 books (codices) in Coptic, i.e., Egyptian language of the early centuries A.D., written in Greek alphabet with some additional letters. By means of various modern technics the manuscripts were dated in the 4th century, having been put in a big jar and buried around 400 A.D. The discovery of the jar sounds like a legend: two brothers, simple Arabian peasants, came upon it while looking for *sabak*, a sort of soil for fertilizing their fields. At first they were afraid to open the jar, because they thought a demon might be inside; but the other thought, namely that it might be a treasure, prevailed, so they opened the vessel - and they found neither demon nor gold, but a dozen very old books. After many peripeteias the codices came into the hands of scientists, and nowadays they are exhibited in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. They were translated in English and other European languages relatively late: the first integral edition appeared in 1977 under the editorship of James M. Robinson.¹

The *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts are much younger as the canonical biblical texts – so, how can they be compared with them, or even considered as different versions of Jewish and Christian holy books? In fact, the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts are not versions of the "original" texts themselves, but they provide some different interpretations of the biblical events. Nevertheless, Coptic texts were mostly translations from earlier Greek originals, dating back to the late 1st century A.D.; this was demonstrated by comparing passages from the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts with some previously known fragments, quoted and criticized mostly by Christian Fathers. The whole library consists of 52 works, among which there were 40 newly discovered texts; it was probably the property of some Christian-Gnostic community, and the reason for burying the codices might have been the persecution of "heresies" after the great Church Council at Nicea in 325.

Most of the *Nag Hammadi* treatises are *gnostic* in their teaching. Gnosticism was a broad and heterogeneous spiritual movement of the early Christian centuries - actually, it was the first important "heresy" inside Christianity (although not limited only to it). Before the discovery of the *Nag Hammadi* library, gnostic teachings were known very superficially and mainly in their "negative" sides, reported by Christian Fathers (Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, & al.); there were also a few integral texts available, but they gave only a partial and distorted view on Gnosticism, since they were taken out of their integral context. James M. Robinson, editor of the English translation, has presented the *Nag Hammadi* library with the following words: "This library has much in common with primitive Christianity, with eastern

¹ Here we use the second edition: *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1984.

religions, and with holy men of all times, as well as with the more secular equivalents of today, such as the counter-culture movements coming from the 1960's."²

This paper is too short for presenting the Christian Gnosticism as a whole, however, we should outline it shortly. *Gnosis* means in Greek 'knowledge' – not in the modern sense (as an abstract knowledge of some truth or theory), but knowledge that encompasses three main spiritual functions: knowing, seeing and feeling. In *gnosis*, vision is especially important, i.e., the vision of inner "archetypes" which reveal truth beyond words and abstract categories of logic and science, even beyond faith, based on sacred scriptures. *Gnosis* is a personal revelation, an individual way to the realm beyond any individuality, a way to God as the inner enlightener and savior (*phostér, sotér*). The ultimate gnostic experience is universal light - and this light itself is salvation of soul.

So we may say that the principal aim of the early Christian *gnosis* is the salvation of man in the light of the "pristine" teaching of Christ. His words to the disciples are understood by Gnostics in many respects differently as in the canonic Gospels; for example, the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* (discovered in its integral version among the *Nag Hammadi* codices) teaches that the kingdom of heaven is already here, in this world, around us; the *Gospel of Philip* reveals that the highest point of *gnosis* is attained in the mystical place, called "the bridal chamber" where the union between male and female cosmic principles is fulfilled, etc. Gnostic "gospels" and other treatises refer mainly to events and themes of the New Testament, and their principal aim is the salvation of soul in present and future times; topics known from the Old Testament, i.e., the history of the human race, past times of creation, fall, communicating with angels, etc., are also present, however, generally speaking, they are not in the first plan of Gnostic endeavors. But there are some important exceptions - among them two texts which will be in the focus of our attention here, since they are versions (or alternative interpretations) of the story of the creation of man: *Apocryphon of John* and *On the Origin of the World*.

III

Apocryphon of John is one of the most controversial Gnostic texts. We find it in the *Nag Hammadi* library in three (very similar) versions, but it has also been known before the discovery of this library. Some Church Fathers were obviously also acquainted with its teaching; one of the main early critics of "heresies", Irenaeus of Lyon, argues against it in his large work *Against Heresies* (about 185 A.D.). The main charge against the *Apocryphon* has been that it considered the creator of the world as an evil demon, demiurge called Yaltabaoth (or Yaldabaoth), which came into being by "mistake" of Sophia (Wisdom). Christians, as well as Greek pagans, were outraged by the idea that our magnificent world with all the stars above and the living creatures below was a product of some evil, satanic will, even if this will was supposed to be released by a fatal mistake of Wisdom. That thought is really hard to swallow for Western man, although such an attitude towards this world is a starting point of some great Eastern philosophies, especially Buddhism. There are indeed some evident parallels between Buddhism and Christian Gnosticism: so, for example, the main role of the savior (*sotér*) Christ in Gnosticism is very close to the role of Buddha in the East. The redeemer Christ was sent by

² *Op. cit.*, p. 1. (These words were written in 1977.)

the Father of Heavens – i.e. by the good transcendent God who is *not* the creator of this world – to conquer the powers of evil (Yaltabaoth himself and his fallen angels), redeem humanity from the fall, and bring us back to our heavenly home.

This teaching is dualistic: there is a continuous struggle between the powers of light and the powers of darkness for the possession of divine particles of the heavenly light in man. In this struggle knowledge (*gnosis*) is essential: Wisdom has to bring herself and at the same time human beings back to the eternal God who is quite beyond miseries of this world. In the *Apocryphon of John* Gnosticism reveals itself eminently as a religion of salvation. However, in some other Gnostic gospels and treatises, salvation is conceived otherwise (as, for example in the *Gospel of Thomas*, mentioned above); so we cannot subsume all Christian Gnosticism under the "satanic" teachings of the *Apocryphon* – that was, and unfortunately in some theological circles still is, the main prejudice against *gnosis* in general and *Nag Hammadi* teachings in particular; but it is a fact that the teaching of the evil creator is only *one* of the ways in Gnostic thought. And, after all, Gnosticism of the *Apocryphon* might be considered as the most radical consequence of the learning of the canonic Christian Gospels themselves: it can be argued that the main motive of Christian learning is salvation from this world of sorrow. But, if so, if our world is bad, wicked, full of sorrow, how could it have been created by the good and almighty God? The answer of the *Apocryphon* is straight: world was *not* created by God, but by fallen angels, wicked demons, servants of an evil demiurge; on the other hand, the Son of the real God, Christ, has been sent as a messenger and teacher of humanity, in order to bring, by the help of Sophia, sons and daughters of Adam & Eve back from darkness of this world to the light of Heavens. It sounds quite logical, if we assume that this world has to be redeemed – and this *is* the main Christian assumption. Furthermore, it is interesting that in the *Apocryphon* and in some other *Nag Hammadi* texts, Christ is considered as the "saved savior": God himself has to be saved by his salvation of man.³

So, after this introduction to the *Apocryphon of John* (longer than planned, but necessary), let us go to some details from the text, concerning the creation of man. The story of creation, following the *Apocryphon*, begins with Sophia (Wisdom): "She wanted to bring forth a likeness out of herself without the consent of the Spirit" (9:28-29)⁴, "...and when she saw the consequence of her desire, it had changed into a form of a lion-faced serpent. And its eyes were like lightning fires which flash. She cast it away from her..." (10:7-11), "...and she called his name Yaltabaoth. This is the first archon <ruler> who took a great power from his mother." (10:18-20). Yaltabaoth created other "aeons" (powers, spirits; lit.: ages) with "a flame of luminous fire which still exists now" (10:25). This story is very much influenced by Plato's *Timaeus* where the demiurge (*demiourgos*) creates gods of heaven, and then the latter create everything else, including human beings. In the *Apocryphon*, which is a curious mixture of

³ This idea was analyzed in an interesting treatise of Carl Gustav Jung, *Answer to Job* (1952).

⁴ *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, already quoted edition. Here I will use the standard style for references from *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts (similar to quoting from the *Bible*), which is included in the English translation. So the above passage is referred by: *NH* II, 1, 9:28-29. However, the Roman number 'II' means the second codex, and the first Arabic number '1' means the *Apocryphon of John* as the first text in this codex, which is why I will simplify references in this section just to a page (in the manuscript), in this case '9', and rows on the page, in this case '28-29'. (I will omit quoting pages from the English translation.)

Timaeus and *Genesis*, the "archons", created by the "chief archon" Yaltabaoth, "through the light saw the form of the image <of man> in the water" (14:33-34) and Yaltabaoth said to them:

“Come, let us create a man according to the image of God and according to our likeness, that his image might become a light for us.” And they created by means of each other's powers in correspondence with the indications which were given. And each authority supplied a characteristic by means of the form of the image which he had seen in its psychic form. He created a being according to the likeness of the first, perfect Man. And they said, “Let us call him Adam, that his name may become a power of light for us”. (15:1-13)

As we can see, some sentences in this passage are quite unclear, however, the main point seems to be the following: the archons wanted to capture light from heaven, and that's why they created Adam, whose image they had seen in the water; Adam, the perfect Man, is namely divine in origin. (Here it is still uncertain, if the archons want to capture the divine light in order to conquer it by their darkness.) "And they said to Yaltabaoth: 'Blow into his face something of your spirit and his body will arise.' And he blew into his face the spirit which is the power of his mother <Sophia>" (19:23-27), and so they have fashioned Adam "after the image of the One who existed from the beginning. The body moved and gained strength, and it was luminous" (19:31-33). But here a demonic jealousy bursts out:

And at that moment the rest of the powers became jealous, because he had come into being through all of them and they had given their power to the man, and his intelligence was greater than that of those who had made him, and greater than that of the chief archon. And when they recognized that he was luminous, and that he could think better than they, and that he was free from wickedness, they took him and threw him into the lowest region of all matter. (19:34 - 20:9)

By remembering the parallel canonic text from *Genesis* (quoted above), we are tempted to ask: is the *Apocryphon* just an explicit formulation of the implicit ('suppressed?') bad feelings of the furious Lord towards his disobedient creature Adam? And the mysterious plural, occurring in the third chapter of *Genesis* ("behold, the man is become as one of us") – isn't it 'explained' here? Anyway, in the *Apocryphon*, the "archons", fallen angels, "they brought Adam into the shadow of death" (21:4-5), and they tied him with "the bond of forgetfulness; and he became a mortal man" (21:12-13). Indeed, why should a good God the Father inflict those horrible punishments to his own children Adam & Eve? Just to 'educate' them for the future salvation in the heavenly Jerusalem? That would be really very strange.

But in spite of the "bond of forgetfulness", the divine light persists in man, and appearing in the form of Epinoia (Thought), "she is the one who will awaken his thinking". And here the serpent and the woman come into the scene – but in a quite different sense as in *Genesis*, namely, their role in Adam's awakening (*gnosis*) is explicitly positive, since "Adam knew that he was disobedient to the chief archon due to the light of Epinoia which is in him" (22:16-17). Epinoia is closely related to Eve:

Then the Epinoia of the light hid herself in Adam. And the chief archon wanted to bring her out of his rib. But the Epinoia of the light cannot be grasped. Although darkness pursued her, it did not catch her. And he brought a part of his power out of him. And he made another creature in the form of a woman according to the likeness of the Epinoia which had appeared to him. And he brought the part which he had taken from the power of the man into the female creature, and not the way Moses said, 'his rib-bone'. (22:28 - 23:4)

So, the famous story of Adam's rib is seen in quite a different light! Was this interpretation the product of the exuberant imagination of the Christian Gnostics, or does it reflect some deeper, hidden meaning of the original story? It is hard to say, but in every case we have to admit that the Gnostic version is more 'rational' in spite of its baroque formulation. And the next paragraph is perhaps the pinnacle of the *Apocryphon*:

And Adam saw the woman by him. And in that moment the luminous Epinoia appeared, and she lifted the veil which lay over his mind. And he became sober from the drunkenness of darkness. And he recognized his counter-image, and he said, 'This is indeed bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh.' Therefore the man will leave his father and his mother and he will cleave to his wife and they will both be one flesh, for they <archons> will sent him his consort, and he will leave his father and his mother... (23:4-16).

Otherwise said, Adam, the first man, will leave behind his childhood in paradise by knowing the Epinoia of light in his woman Eve, and they will put themselves on the way of knowledge, on the stupendous way of mortal beings. The way of love. And precisely with this act is the creation of man accomplished.

IV

The title of the other text from the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts, relevant for our discussion, has been lost, so it has gained a new (editorial) title, *On the Origin of the World* (we will simply refer to it as the *Origin*). It is a sort of compendium of essential Gnostic ideas, concerning the history of the universe and mankind; so the content is quite similar to the *Apocryphon of John*. However, the *Origin* is not so demonic, and – we may say, from the human standpoint – much more optimistic in evaluation of the creation. Let us go straight to some details which describe the creation of man and woman. In the first of the chosen passages, Sophia (Wisdom) and her daughter Zoe (Life) play the essential role in the awakening of Adam:

After the day of rest, Sophia sent Zoe, her daughter, who is called 'Eve of Life', as an instructor to raise up Adam, in whom there was no soul, so that those whom he would beget might become vessels of the light. When Eve saw her co-likeness cast down, she pitied him, and she said, "Adam, live! Rise up on the earth!" Immediately her word became a deed. For when Adam rose up, immediately he opened his eyes. When he saw

her, he said, "You will be called 'the mother of the living' because you are the one who gave me life." (NH II, 5, 115:31 - 116:8)

This is fascinating, no doubt! Eve is presented as Adam's soul (*psyché, anima*) who gave him life. That is something quite different from her female misery in the *Bible*, where she is not much more as a slave of the patriarchal Lord and his patriarchally ordered society of the "chosen people". In the *Origin*, Eve is the daughter of Wisdom who leads man to knowledge and salvation. Here the "seven rulers" (archons) take the role of the cautioning Lord of *Genesis*:

Then the seven took council. They came to Adam and Eve timidly. They said to him, "Every tree which is in Paradise, whose fruit may be eaten, was created for you. But beware! Don't eat from the tree of knowledge. If you do eat, you will die." After they gave them a great fright, they withdrew up to their authorities. (118:16-24)

But beware: the threat is here spoken by the *evil demons*, not by the God of Heavens! So a modification of the story of the serpent is to be expected:

Then the one who is wiser than all of them, this one who was called 'the beast', came. ... He said to her <Eve>: "Do not be afraid! You certainly shall not die. For he <the chief archon, demiurge> knows that when you eat from it your mind will be sobered and you will become like god, knowing the distinctions which exist between evil and good men. For he said this to you, lest you eat from it, since he is jealous." (118:25 - 119:6)

The point of the story is reversed, in comparison with the Biblical text. The tree of knowledge is not forbidden, on the contrary, its fruits lead to salvation – and just this point is the essence of *gnosis*: the real task of a human being in this world is knowledge, conceived as integration of all human capacities, cognitive, perceptive and emotive, which culminates in meditation and contemplation of eternal truth(s), the highest form of devotion and the purest prayer to God. So, the tree of knowledge is "beautiful", being in fact the same as the tree of life, since its desirable fruit opens the mind of man and woman:

Now Eve believed the words of the instructor. She looked at the tree. And she saw that it was beautiful and magnificent, and she desired it. She took some of its fruit and ate, and she gave to her husband also, and he ate too. Then their mind opened. For when they ate, the light of knowledge shone for them. When they put on shame, they knew that they were naked with regard to knowledge. When they sobered up, they saw that they were naked, and they became enamored of one another. When they saw their makers, they loathed them since they were beastly forms. They understood very much. (119:7-19)

We may conclude that the moral of this lecture is the following: the right key to salvation of man is knowledge, inspired by love. Without fear, without terror of some demonic god. And also without the dominion of his so-called servants in this world. Every man and

woman is a servant of the heavenly God who surely does not want to destroy his earthly brothers and sisters in spirit, the human beings – but accepts them in love. Has the history of Christianity been revealing *this* God? We may seriously doubt it. That's why it is interesting to get acquainted with some 'curious' messages of the old Gnostics, the first Christian heretics. We conclude this paper with a little poem from the *Origin* (110:31-33):

*You are the tree of knowledge,
which is in Paradise,
from which the first man ate
and which opened his mind...*

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