The Nag Hammadi Scriptures

The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts
Complete in One Volume

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AUTHORITATIVE DISCOURSE

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Authoritative Discourse, a Coptic tractate based on an original Greek text, occupies thirteen pages in Nag Hammadi Codex VI. It is quite well preserved, but there are extensive lacunae in the first four or five lines of pages 22–28. The title is found at the end of the text (Authentikos Logos); we cannot know if the title was also mentioned at the beginning because of the lacuna on page 22,1–3. This title features two significant terms: logos probably refers to a speech or a teaching, given here in written form; authentikos can be understood either as a speech of authority containing true statements (probably in opposition to other non-Gnostic teachings) or as an authentic presentation of the Gnostic tradition. The title can also refer to the literary genre of logoi, well known in Hermetic circles.1 The present logos tells the story of the soul from her heavenly origin to her fall into the world and her return back to the realm of perfection, a place of rest where the light shining on her never sets (35,16–18).

Authoritative Discourse opens with a scene in which a fiancé (the Spirit) secretly nourishes his bride (the soul, Psyche), who has fallen into the world, and he heals her wounded eyes with an ointment so that she can see with her mind and perceive her true origin (22,23–25). The food and the medicine are constituted by the logos. The healing accomplished by the Spirit on the eyes of Psyche shows that she is literally blind. Through the metaphorical language of the text, we can distinguish the ignorance and forgetfulness that characterize the worldly sojourn of the soul. This major theme is resumed in Authoritative Discourse 27,25–29, where blindness is connected to ignorance and leads to darkness.

The most intense passages of Authoritative Discourse concern the soul’s prostitution, a theme common in other Nag Hammadi tractates and especially the Exegesis on the Soul of Codex II. Here prostitution seems to be the result of the free

1. George W. MacRae, “A Nag Hammadi Tractate on the Soul.”
choice of the soul, since death and life are set before everyone (24,6–13). The period of time the soul spends in the world is described in a metaphorical way: “When the spiritual soul was cast into a body, it became a sibling to lust, hatred, and envy, that is, to material souls” (23,12–17). The soul has fallen into bestiality and left knowledge behind (24,20–22). Veiled in metaphor, the mythical story of the text reflects the grim reality of life in the world: “If a lustful thought arises in a person who is a virgin, that person [already] has become contaminated” (25,6–9).

The author of Authoritative Discourse also characterizes the soul as a strong heroine. By virtue of the medicine she is to put on her eyes and in her mouth, she will be able to reject matter. She is now a triumphant woman, represented by the symbols of royalty and capable of overcoming the hostile forces that fight against her, and she can even blind them with her light (28,10–22). Since her adversaries are supernatural powers (the rulers, or archons, of Gnostic mythology), the refuge of the soul will be spiritual: a treasure-house, a storehouse, where she is secure and no stranger can enter (28,22–30).

But evil tempts the soul with seductive offers in order to entice her into ignorance and lead her to conceive material offspring. The themes of deceptive gifts and polluted offspring recall similar motifs in the Exegesis on the Soul. The author of Authoritative Discourse pays particular attention to the semantic field of poisons, hooks, and nets capable of capturing the soul and drawing her into ignorance (20,3–30; 28,1–31; 28,18–24).

According to the author of Authoritative Discourse, the soul is not a naive creature: she has tasted human temptations and realizes that sweet passions are transitory. She is conscious about evil and despises this life because, like human passions, this life is transitory. The soul is able to distinguish between healthy food, which will give her life, and unhealthy food, which will poison her and lead her to death (31,24–32,1). The soul also becomes conscious of her power, her original light, when she is endowed with her true spiritual clothing as a beautiful bride, having left behind the pride of flesh for the beauty of the mind (32,2–8). If she once was a slave, she now is a queen. As the author writes, “The soul returned the body to those who had given it to her. They were ashamed, and those who deal in bodies sat down and wept because they could not do their business with that body, and that was the only commodity they had. They had gone to great pains to shape the body for this soul, and they had intended to bring down the invisible soul” (32,16–27). The soul fools the dealers in bodies, keeping her superior nature, her spiritual body, secret from them (32,30–33,3). Their fault is their ignorance, because they do not seek after God (33,4–5). The soul, on the other hand, possesses gnosis because of her intellectual curiosity about God and her constant labor in seeking the inscrutable one (34,32–35,7).

The conclusion of the soul’s existential trip is marked by love and rest. In the bridal chamber she will eat of the banquet she has hungered for and partake of immortal food, and she will find what she has been looking for (35,8–15).

Authoritative Discourse recalls, in its literary genre, homilies with a didactic goal, as it proclaims to its readers how to deal with the soul’s adversaries in order
Authoritative Discourse is built upon a series of motifs typical of Gnostic speculation (bride and bridegroom; the bridal chamber; union in love; the opposition of the malicious archons; a material way of life of the soul culminating in prostitution). The themes of forgetfulness and drunkenness are emphasized as well, and although they recall similar statements in Gnostic texts, these themes are also present in Philo of Alexandria.

The descriptions of the soul in Authoritative Discourse, first as a whore and then as a bride, are often interspersed with quotations of proverbs or sayings typical of a well-schooled writer of the Greco-Roman world. Among the wise sayings are those that make use of the metaphors of wheat and chaff and of the good shepherd. The insertion of elements that do not belong to the narrative creates some awkwardness in the Gnostic account of the soul, and stylistic breaks (25,26) and changes in person (26,20: plural “we”) suggest that the text is a collection of separate accounts.4

The struggle of the soul against the archons is described with metaphors that are somewhat unusual in comparison with Christian or Greco-Roman sources. The image of those who fish for people may be based on Habakkuk 1:13–17, and other similar occurrences may be found in Qumran and Manichaean literature.5 The image of the dealers in bodies, who are deceived by the soul, may be an allusion to slave traders.6

One of the main themes of Authoritative Discourse is the sickness of the soul. This sickness is blindness, which wounds the soul’s eyes. Blindness is the symbol of ignorance in Gnostic speculation, while the ability to see is the image of true knowledge.7 The sickness of the soul is provoked by the forces of matter, and the remedy is provided when the bridegroom anoints the eyes of the soul with medicine (22, 22–34); later it is said that the soul applies the medicine herself (27,25–33). This seems to be both a medical and a ritual act, and it is reminiscent of the account in the book of Tobit.8

3. Madeleine Scopello, Femme, grose et manichéisme; “Jewish and Greek Heroines in the Nag Hammadi Library.”
4. George W. MacRae, in Douglas M. Parrott, ed., Nag Hammadi Codices V,2–5 and VI.
5. MacRae, “A Nag Hammadi Tractate on the Soul.”
7. Ménard, L’Authentikos Logos; Scopello, Femme, grose et manichéisme.
8. Scopello, Femme, grose et manichéisme.
The themes of the illness of the soul, her feeble state, and her poverty bring to mind Valentinian concepts, as do descriptions of the bridal chamber. The story of the soul also recounts in a simplified way the myth of Sophia — her fall from her Father's place, her sojourn into the world, and her return to glory.

This story of the soul in Authoritative Discourse applies to everybody. The soul is the image of every Gnostic, whether a man or a woman, who, while reading this literature, sees his or her own personal story retraced in a mythical mode. The journey of the soul from prostitution to virginity is, at the same time, the journey made by every Gnostic from ignorance to knowledge, from the material world to the realm of spirit.

Authoritative Discourse, a tractate written with the goal of simplifying and proclaiming the Gnostic myth of the soul, may have been composed in Alexandria at the end of the second century or the beginning of the third. Some scholars deny any philosophical background to this text, while others maintain that it finds its rightful place in the Platonic tradition.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


10. Ménard, L'Authentikos Logos; Scopello, "Jewish and Greek Heroines in the Nag Hammadi Library."

Authoritative Discourse

The Origin of the Soul Is from Above (22.1–22)

... in heaven ... in him ... anyone appears ... the hidden heavens ... appear, and [before] the invisible, ineffable worlds became visible. From these came the invisible soul of righteousness, one member with them, one body with them, one spirit with them. Whether she is coming down or is in the realm of Fullness, she is not apart from them, but they see her and she looks at them, through the invisible word.

The Word Is Like Food and Medicine for the Soul (22.22–23.4)

Secretly her bridegroom obtained the word. He held it to her mouth to make her eat it like food. He applied it to her eyes like medicine to make her see with her mind, and perceive those who are kin to her, and learn about her root, that she may be able to hold on to the branch from which she has come, receive what is hers, and renounce matter [23] ...

The Soul Is Like a Child Among Stepchildren (23.4–25.12)

[When a man marries a woman] who already has children, the natural children [of the man], conceived from his semen, call the children of the woman “our siblings.” Similarly, when the spiritual soul was cast into a body, it became a sibling to lust, hatred, and envy, that is, to material souls. So the body came from lust, and lust came from material substance. That is why the soul became a sibling to...

them. Yet they are stepchildren, unable to inherit from the male, but they will inherit from their mother alone.  

When the soul wishes to inherit along with the stepchildren—for the possessions of the stepchildren are exalted passions, life’s pleasures, hateful jealousies, boastful expressions, foolish experiences, reproachful words [24]. . . . .  

...[If a soul who is ignorant chooses a spirit of prostitution], he casts [her] out [and throws] her into a brothel. He [has left] her to [corruption, because] she [has abandoned] modesty.  

Death and life are placed before everyone, and people choose for themselves which of these two they want.  

That soul will fall into drinking too much wine in a corrupt manner. Wine corrupts. The soul forgets her siblings and her father, and sensual pleasures and sweet things deceive her. She has abandoned knowledge and has fallen into the life of an animal. A person devoid of sense lives like a beast, not knowing what one should say or should not say.  

The gentle child inherits with joy from the father, and the father rejoices over his child, because everyone praises the father on account of the child, and the child also looks for a way to duplicate what was received.  

The stepchildren [25] . . . . . . . 13 [Their lust cannot] mix with [sobriety].  

If a lustful thought arises in a person who is a virgin, that person [already] has become contaminated. This sort of appetite cannot mix with moderation.

*This Is Like Wheat Mixed with Chaff* (25,12–27)  

For if chaff is mixed with wheat, it is not the chaff that is contaminated but the wheat. Since they are mixed together, no one will buy the contaminated wheat. They will coax the dealer and say, “Give us this chaff,” for they see the wheat mixed with it. Then they will take the chaff and throw it out with the rest of the chaff, and that chaff will become mixed with all other material stuff.  

Pure seed is kept in storehouses that are secure.  

We now have discussed all these things.  

*The Father Establishes a Contest in the World*  

(25,27–26,end or 27,beginning)  

Before anything was, the Father alone existed, before the worlds in the heavens appeared, or the world on earth, or principalities or authorities or powers [26] . . . . . . . 16 appeared . . . and [they produced others].  

Nothing came to be without the Father’s will.  

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The Father wished to reveal his [wealth] and his glory, and so he established a
great contest in this world. He wanted to make the contestants come up and leave
behind what is of the created world, and despise these things with exalted, in-
comprehensible knowledge; and run to the one who is. We are to be triumphant
over the ignorance of those who contend with us, the adversaries who contend
against us, through our knowledge, for we already have known the inscrutable
one from whom we have come.18 We have nothing in this world, or else the
world’s authority that came to be might hold us back in the worlds of the heavens,
where death is universal,19 surrounded by individual [27] \ldots\ldots\ldots 20

We Withdraw from the World (27, beginning-25)
... [the powers] of the world, [who oppose us].
We now have been put to shame [in the] worlds, but we are not interested in
them when they speak ill of us. We ignore them when they curse us. We stare at
them in silence when they treat us shamefully, directly to our face.
They go about their business, and we go about in hunger and thirst, looking to
our dwelling place, which we perceive through our lifestyle and our conscience.
We do not hang on to created things, but we withdraw from them. Our hearts are
set on what truly is, and although we are sick, weak, and in pain, there is great
strength hidden within us.

The Word Heals the Soul’s Blindness (27,25–28,22)
Our soul is sick because she lives in a house of poverty, and matter strikes her eyes
in order to blind her. For this reason the soul pursues the word and applies it to
her eyes as medicine, and she <opens> her eyes and casts off [28] [blindness]
\ldots\ldots 21 thought of \ldots blindness \ldots after that, if such a one is in ignorance once
again, that one is in complete darkness and is a material being. That is why the
soul always [takes] a word and applies it to her eyes as medicine, so that she may
be able to see.22 Then her light may overwhelm the foes that oppose her, and
she may blind them with her light, capture them in her presence, make them
collapse in exhaustion, and act boldly with her strength and her scepter.

The Soul Finds Shelter in Her Treasure-House
(28,22–29,3)
While her enemies look at her in shame, she flees up to her treasure-house,
where her mind is, and to her storehouse, which is secure. No one in creation has
been able to grasp her, and she has taken no stranger into her house. Many of

18. On athletic imagery, cf., e.g., Philippians 1:30; Hebrews 12:1. 19. On not belonging to this world, cf. the
Gospel of John, e.g., 15:19. 20. About three and a half
lines missing. 21. About three and a half lines missing. 22. Cf. Authoritative Discourse 22.
those born in her house oppose her day and night, and they do not rest [29] day or night, for their lust oppresses them.21

We Are Like Fish That May Be Caught in Nets (29,3–17)

This is why we do not fall asleep and forget about the nets, hidden from view, that are lying in place to catch us. For if we are caught in a single net, it will swallow us down within it, and water will wash over us and splash into our faces, and we shall be pulled down into the dragnet. We shall not be able to come up from the deep, because the water is high above us, flowing down from above, making our hearts sink down in filthy mud. We shall not be able to get away from them.24

We Shall Be Consumed by Man-Eaters (29,17–30,4)

Man-eaters25 will grab us and consume us, and they will enjoy themselves like a fisherman who is casting a hook and line into the water. For a fisherman casts different kinds of bait into the water, because each kind of fish has its own food. The fish smells the food and swims after the fragrance of the food, but when it bites into the bait, the hook hidden within snares it and draws it up by force from the deep water. Nobody can catch that fish down in the deep water [30] unless a fisherman finds a way to trap it. By tricking the fish with food, the fisherman has caught the fish on the hook.26

The Adversary Tries to Poison Us with the Food of This World (30,4–25)

We live like this in the world, like fish. The adversary is on the lookout for us and is lying in wait for us, like a fisherman, to catch us. The adversary is delighted to consume us. [He dangles] many kinds of food before our eyes, the stuff of this world, because he hopes to make us desire just one kind of food and to taste only a little of it, that he then may catch us with his hidden poison and take us from freedom into slavery.27 For when he catches us with a single kind of food, we cannot help but desire the rest of the food. In the end, such things become the food of death.28

The Devil Lies in Wait with Food (30,26–31,24)

These are the kinds of food with which the devil lies in wait for us. First he plants pain in your heart so that you feel heartache over something trivial in this life.
and he catches us with his poisons. After that he introduces the desire for an article of clothing, so that you will be proud [31] of it, and then love of money, pride, vanity, envy rivaling envy, beauty of body, and covetousness. The worst of all these are ignorance and laziness.

All such kinds of food the adversary prepares in an attractive way and spreads it out before the body. The adversary wants to make the thought of the soul turn the soul to some kind of food, and thus he hopes to overwhelm her. 29 As with a hook he draws the soul by force, in ignorance, and deceives her, until she conceives evil and bears fruit of matter and behaves badly, pursuing many desires and cravings, seduced in ignorance by the pleasure of the flesh.

The Soul Finally Eats the Food of Life

(31.24–32.16)

The soul who has tasted these things has come to realize that sweet passions are fleeting. She has learned about evil, has forsaken these passions, and has adopted a new lifestyle. 30

After her experiences, the soul disdains this life, because it lasts only for a time. She seeks the kinds of food that will bring her life, [32] and she leaves behind the food of falsehood. She learns about the light, and she goes about and strips off this world. Her true garment clothes her within, and her bridal gown reveals beauty of mind rather than pride of flesh. She learns about the depth of her being. She runs into her sheepfold as her shepherd stands at the door. 31 In return for all the shame and scorn she experienced in this world, she receives ten thousand times as much grace and glory.

The Soul Has a True Shepherd (32.16–33.3)

The soul returned the body to those who had given it to her. They were ashamed, and those who deal in bodies sat down and wept because they could not do their business with that body, and that was the only commodity they had.

They had gone to great pains to shape the body for this soul, and they had intended to bring down the invisible soul.

Now they were ashamed of what they had done, for they lost what they had worked hard to accomplish. They did not realize that the soul has an invisible spiritual body, 32 but they thought, “We are her shepherd and we feed her.” They did not realize that she knows [33] another way, hidden from them. This is what her true shepherd taught her, in knowledge. 33

The Ignorant Are More Wicked Than Pagans (33:4–34:32)

Those, however, who are ignorant do not seek God, and they do not look for their dwelling place, which is a place of rest, but instead they live like animals. They are more wicked than pagans. To begin with, they do not inquire about God. Their hardheartedness drags them down so that they act in a cruel manner. Then, if they find someone asking about salvation, in their hardness of heart they work on that person. If the person keeps on asking, they kill him with their cruelty, and they think they have done something good for themselves. Without a doubt, they are children of the devil. Even pagans give to charity, and they know that God who is in the heavens exists, the Father of the universe, exalted over the idols they worship, [34] although they have not heard the word, so as to inquire about the ways of God.

The mindless person hears the call, but is ignorant of the place to which he or she has been called. He has not asked during the preaching, “Where is the temple into which I should go and worship my hope?” Such a person is mindless and worse than a pagan, for pagans know the way to their temples of stone, which will perish, and they worship their idol, with their hearts set upon it, because this is their hope. The word has been preached to this mindless person, and it has taught him, “Seek and inquire about the ways you should go, for there is nothing as important as this.” So the substance of the hardness of heart strikes the person’s mind, with the force of ignorance and the demon of error, and these things prevent the person’s mind from recovering and being capable of working at seeking and understanding hope.

The Rational Soul Learns About God and Comes to Rest (34:32–35:24)

The rational soul, on the other hand, [35] has worked at seeking, and she has learned about God. She has struggled to inquire, enduring bodily distress, wearing out her feet after the preachers, and learning about the inscrutable one.

She has found her rising.
She has come to rest in the one who is at rest.
She has reclined in the bridal chamber.
She has eaten of the banquet
for which she has hungered.
She has partaken of immortal food.
She has found what she has sought.

She has received rest from her labors, and the light shining on her does not set. To the light belongs the glory and the power and the revelation, forever and ever. Amen.