THE NAG HAMMADI SCRIPTURES

THE REVISED AND UPDATED TRANSLATION OF SACRED GNOSTIC TEXTS
COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME

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INTRODUCTION BY ELAINE H. PAGELS
The tractate Exegesis on the Soul, extant only in the Coptic version preserved in Nag Hammadi Codex II, is a translation from an original Greek treatise, as is indicated by the Gnostic technical terminology preserved most often in Greek. The ten pages of the manuscript are in a good condition apart from a few lacunae. The title, which is given both at the beginning and the end of the text, reflects perfectly the purpose of its anonymous author: to offer an interpretation (“exegesis”) of the story of the soul, built on the Gnostic myth of Psyche, from the account of her heavenly origin and her fall into the world to the description of her return to heaven. The author has chosen to tell this myth as a symbolic tale, whose heroine, the soul, is portrayed with female features.

The soul, the Exegesis on the Soul recounts, has a feminine name and a female nature (she even has a womb). She is virginal and androgynous in form when she is alone with her Father, but when she falls into a body and comes to life, she pollutes herself with many lovers. The soul’s deceptions are many, and her lovers—brigands and bandits—treat her as a whore. She suffers when she understands that they are taking undue advantage of her, and she seeks other lovers. But even these compel her to live with them and make her their slave, for their sexual satisfaction. Though ashamed, the soul remains enslaved and submissive; her dwelling places are brothels, her steps lead her from one marketplace to another. The only gift she receives from her lovers is their polluted semen, by means of which she bears sick and feebleminded children (127,19–128,26).

The sexual and psychical captivity of the soul continues, the text maintains, until the day she becomes conscious of her unhappy situation and repents (128,26–30). She asks for help from her Father, and reminds him of the time when she was still a virgin in her maiden’s quarters and stood by him (128,34–129,2). Seeing the soul so forlorn, the Father counts her worthy of his mercy: he makes her womb turn inward (131,19–24) so that the soul will regain her proper feminine character. In fact, the life of prostitution had changed the natural shape of her sexual organs: “The womb of the soul is turned to the outside like male sex
organs, which are external” (131,25–27). This turning inward protects her from further sexual contamination. But this action is not sufficient to lead her to reproduce an unblemished offspring, so the Father sends her a bridegroom from heaven, who is her brother, the firstborn of the house of the Father (132,6–9).

As the bridegroom comes down to the soul, she cleanses herself of the pollution of the adulterers. She adorns herself in a bridal chamber, after having filled it with perfume, and sits there, waiting for her true lover. Her anxiety for his arrival combines with fear: she no longer remembers anything about him, just as she had forgotten everything about her Father’s house. Nevertheless, a dream will restore the memory of the lover to her. The moment when bride and bridegroom meet again is sensually described, and the passionate love joining them, even if spiritual, is told in terms more proper to carnal intercourse (132,9–35). Good and beautiful children (meaning, in allegorical interpretation, virtuous ideas) are the fruit of this marriage (133,35–134,3). Finally, the soul regenerates herself and returns to her former state, coming back in the end to where she was in the beginning (134,6–11).

The special feature of the Exegesis on the Soul is the way in which it narrates the Gnostic myth of the soul as a romance, leaving aside the complex philosophical and theological language that is otherwise typical of this kind of literature. This tale seeks to explain the doctrine of gnosis in a rather simple and attractive manner, so that the metaphors and images that are used may be understood not only by philosophers and intellectuals but also by ordinary readers (see Exegesis on the Soul 131,31–34: 132,2–5).

Furthermore, the female heroine in the Exegesis on the Soul is dressed in the garb of Sophia, whose myth, as related in a general way by Irenaeus of Lyon (Against Heresies 1.1.1–9.5, about the doctrine of Ptolemy, a teacher of the school of Valentinus), is found here presented in a literary adaptation. The itinerary of the soul closely recalls Sophia’s own journey: having left the perfection of the Pleroma, searching for new experiences, Sophia goes from wantonness to repentance, and finally she is accepted once again into her Father’s dwelling. This myth, one of the key building blocks of Gnostic speculation, has often been interpreted in elaborate ways within Nag Hammadi literature and in the accounts of the church fathers. The myth finds in the Exegesis on the Soul a fresh and attractive presentation.

Two forms of literary tradition have certainly influenced the author in the composition of this treatise. These are Hellenistic and Jewish romance literature. Love and adventure are the chief ingredients of Hellenistic novels, and love produces action. These novels are governed by a single motif: the tragic separation of two lovers and their final reunion after many misadventures, with various tricks, storms, or brigands tempting the chastity of the heroine. Comparisons can be made between the Exegesis on the Soul and Chereas and Callirhoe by Chariton of Aphrodisia, Leucippe and Clitophon by Achilles Tatius, Theagenes and Chariclea (The Ethiopics) by Heliodorus, Anthea and Abrocomes by Xenophon of Ephesus, and Daphnis and Chloe by Longos.1

Nevertheless, two features can be observed in the *Exegesis on the Soul* that do not correspond to aspects of the Greek texts. First of all, the heroine of the Gnostic text is uniquely singular, and all of the meaning converges on the female heroine, while the male partner (the Spirit) plays a secondary role. In Greek novels the primary role is always given to a couple, a man and woman or a bridegroom and bride. Second, in Greek novels, the heroines wish to preserve their virginity at any cost: they are wise, virtuous girls. The heroine of the *Exegesis on the Soul*, however, has led, for a time, a life of prostitution.

Jewish influence is present as well in the *Exegesis on the Soul*. Jewish literature has preserved several stories and tales about women who symbolize, beyond their historical meaning, the search of the soul for God. Some such stories about women, who are said to have a questionable past but who return to God in repentance, are recounted in the Jewish scriptures and are picked up with great interest in the apocrypha and the pseudepigrapha: we may recall the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (all of whom are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew 1:1–6).

The influence of themes typical of trends in Jewish literature is even deeper. The intense focus on physical and spiritual pollution in the *Exegesis on the Soul* recalls Essene psychology (cf. the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and Qumran literature). In the present Gnostic text as well as in Essene spirituality, purification and repentance are the only remedies for impurity. The turning inward of the womb of the female soul in the *Exegesis on the Soul* (131, 19–31) can be compared with spiritual circumcision (cf. the Qumran *Community Rule* 5:5; this theme is also present in Gospel of Philip 82, 26–83, 2). Both of these images express a will to abandon what is on the outside, a symbol of worldly temptation.

In the *Exegesis on the Soul*, the narrative is supported by another sort of narration, worked into the first one and built upon references to the Hebrew prophets and the poet Homer. This "parallel story" takes up the three key moments of the soul's life: the virginity in the beginning, prostitution on earth, and the return to the primal existence. Each moment is described in a series of quotations that were not collected by the author but were probably drawn from an anthology of quotations, traces of which have been preserved by Christian authors of Alexandria: Clement, Origen, and Didymos. This helps to establish the milieu of the author of the *Exegesis on the Soul*. The author is dependent on an academic culture in which anthologies form an important part of an intellectual education. The use of biblical and Homeric references shows that Greek wisdom and Jewish wisdom have the same prophetic value for the Gnostic author. This standpoint is quite original, since Gnostic teachers generally employ a very critical approach toward the Jewish scriptures, which were written, according to the Gnostic teachers, under the inspiration of the demiurge. All these literary references in

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4. Madeleine Scopello, "Les 'Testimonia' dans le traité de l'"Exégèse de l'âme.""
the Exegesis on the Soul were meant to attract the attention of contemporary readers having a certain knowledge of biblical tradition as well as Greek culture. If the quotations drawn from the Hebrew prophets, which are rich in powerful imagery, provide a perfect completion to the Gnostic myth of the soul, the two references from Homer, which depict Helen and Odysseus far from their homeland, paint the despair of Gnostic humanity exiled on earth.5

The author of the Exegesis on the Soul also turns to allegory, a typical method of interpretation within the Platonic tradition of his time, in order to signify, through the career of the soul, the existential itinerary of every Gnostic seeking for his or her true origin. This allegory is easy to interpret, and its structure reveals the purposes of the writer, who wishes to communicate the message to a wider public and not only to the members of a Gnostic group. Exotericism, not esotericism (a frequent feature in Nag Hammadi literature), permeates this treatise on the soul.6

The attention given to the theme of marriage and the nuptial chamber in the Exegesis on the Soul, in which the soul and the Spirit ultimately come together in an androgynous union, leads us to situate the writer of the tractate in a Valentinian Gnostic context.7 The text also gives some attention to the sacraments, though not to the extent of other Valentinian texts within the Nag Hammadi scriptures. All these elements suggest that the Exegesis on the Soul was composed in Alexandria, at the beginning of the third century, by a writer with a cultivated, syncretistic background.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Exegesis on the Soul

The Female Soul (127,18–22)
The sages who came before us gave the soul a feminine name. She is also feminine in nature, and she even has a womb.

Fall of the Soul (127,22–129,5)
While the soul was alone with the Father, she was a virgin and androgynous in form. When she fell down into a body and entered this life, she fell into the hands of many robbers. These shameless men passed her from one to the other and violated her. Some raped her, others seduced her with gifts. They defiled her, and she [lost her] 128 virginity.

In her body she became a whore and gave herself to everyone, and she considered each sexual partner to be her husband. After she gave herself to shameless, faithless adulterers for them to abuse her, she sighed deeply and repented.

But when she turned her face from those adulterers, she ran after others, and they made her live with them and serve them in their beds as if they were her masters. She was ashamed, and then she did not dare to leave them. For a long time they fooled her into thinking they respected her like faithful, true husbands. But finally they left and abandoned her.

She became a poor lost widow. She was helpless, and no one even gave ear to her in her pain. She got nothing from the adulterers except the filth they left when they had sex with her. The children she had from the adulterers are mute, blind, and sickly. They are disturbed.

Her Father on high noticed her. He looked down on her and saw her sighing in pain and disgrace and repenting of her prostitution. She began to call on him for help, and [she sighed] with all her heart and said, “My Father, save me. Look,
I shall tell [you how I] left home and [129] fled from my maiden’s quarters. Restore me to yourself.’

When he sees her in this condition, he will consider her worthy of his mercy. For many afflictions have come upon her because she left home.

On the Prostitution of the Soul (129,5–131,13)

The holy Spirit prophesies in many places about the prostitution of the soul. The Spirit said in the prophet Jeremiah:

If a husband divorces his wife and she goes and takes another man, can she ever go back to him again? Has not such a woman utterly defiled herself? “You played the whore with many shepherds and you returned to me,” said the Lord. “Lift up your eyes and see clearly where you went whoring. Were you not sitting in the streets defiling the land with your whoring and your vices? And you took many shepherds as a way of stumbling for you. You were shameless with everyone. You did not call on me as companion or father or guardian of your virginity.”

It is also written in the prophet Hosea:

Come, accuse your mother, for she is not to be my wife nor I her husband. I shall remove her whoring from my presence and her adultery from between her breasts. I shall make her naked as on the day she was born and desolate as a waterless land. I shall make her childless with a [longing for children]. I shall show her children no pity, for they are children of prostitution. Their mother played the whore and [shamed her children]. She said, “I shall be a whore to my lovers. They gave me bread, water, garments, robes, wine, oil—everything I needed.” Look, I shall block them so that she will not be able to run after her adulterers. When she seeks them but does not find them, she will say, “I shall go back to my former husband, for I was better off then than now.”

Again, it is said in Ezekiel:

It happened that after much wickedness, the Lord said, you built yourself a brothel and made yourself a beautiful place in the streets. You built brothels in every alley and you wasted your beauty, you spread your legs in every alley and multiplied your acts of prostitution. You were a whore for the sons of Egypt, your neighbors, well-endowed men.

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What does “the sons of Egypt, well-endowed men” mean if not the realm of the flesh and the senses and the things of the earth by which the soul is defiled in this world? She receives from them bread, wine, oil, clothing, and the other external stuff surrounding the body, the things she thinks she needs.

But as to this prostitution, the apostles of the Savior commanded,

Guard yourselves against it, purify yourself from it.6

They were speaking not just of the prostitution of the body but especially that of the soul. That is why, the apostles write [to the churches] of God so that such things might not go on among us.

The greatest [struggle] is the prostitution [131] of the soul. From it comes the prostitution of the body. Thus Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said:

I wrote to you in my letter, “Do not associate with whores,” not meaning the whores of this world or the greedy or thieves or idol worshipers, since then you would have to leave the world.7

Here he is speaking spiritually:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood—as he said—but against the world rulers of this darkness and the spirits of evil.8

**Restoration of the Soul (131,13-132,27)**

As long as the soul keeps running here and there having sex with whomever she meets and defiling herself, she will suffer what she deserves. But when she perceives the trouble she is in and weeps before the Father and repents, the Father will pity her. He will make her womb turn from the outside back to the inside, so that the soul will recover her proper character. It is not so with a woman. The womb of the body is inside the body like the other internal organs, but the womb of the soul is turned to the outside like male sex organs, which are external.

When the womb of the soul, by the Father’s will, turns to the inside, she is baptized, and at once she is free of the external pollution forced upon her, just as dirty [clothes] are soaked in [water and] are moved about until the dirt is removed and they are clean. The soul is cleansed so that she may regain what she had at first, [132] her former nature, and she may be restored. That is her baptism.

Then she will begin to rage like a woman in labor, who writhes and rages at the time of delivery. But since she is female and cannot conceive a child by herself, her Father sent her from heaven her man, her brother, the firstborn. The

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bridegroom came down to the bride. She gave up her former whoring and cleansed herself of the pollution of adulterers, and she was restored to be a bride. She cleansed herself in the bridal chamber. She filled it with perfume and sat there awaiting the true bridegroom. She no longer went around the marketplace having sex with whomever she desired, but she stayed and waited for him, saying, "When will he come?" And she feared him. For she did not know what he looked like. She no longer remembered from the time she fell from her Father's house. Yet, by the Father's will, she dreamed of him like a woman who loves a man.

**Marriage of the Soul to Her Beloved (132:27–133:31)**

Then, by the Father's will, the bridegroom came down to her in the bridal chamber that had been prepared. And he decorated the chamber. This marriage of the soul is not like a marriage of the flesh. In a marriage of the flesh, those who have sex with each other become satiated with sex, and so they leave behind them the annoying burden of physical desire and [turn their faces] from each other. This marriage of the soul is different. When the partners join [with each other], they become a single life. [133]

Thus the prophet said about the first man and woman,

They will become a single flesh.9

These partners were originally joined to each other when they were with the Father, before the woman led astray10 the man, her brother. This marriage has brought them together again, and the soul has joined her true love and real master, as it is written:

The master of the woman is her husband.11

Gradually she recognized him. She was happy again, and she wept in his arms when she remembered the disgrace of her former widowhood. She adorned herself even more, so that he might be pleased to stay with her.

The prophet said in the Psalms:

Hear, my daughter, see and give ear,
and forget your people and your father's house,
for the king has desired your beauty,
and he is your master.12

Her master has her turn her face from her people and the many adulterers with whom she once was, to devote herself to her king, her real master, and to

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forget the house of the earthly father, with whom things went badly for her, but to remember her Father in heaven.
So also it was said to Abraham:

Leave your country and your relatives and your father’s house.13

**Rebirth of the Soul (133.31–135.4)**

When the soul [adorned] herself again in her beauty, she [was eager] to enjoy her beloved. [He also] loved her. When she made love with him, she received [134] from him the seed,14 which is the life-giving spirit. She bears good children by him and brings them up. This is the great, perfect, wonderful birth.

This marriage is consummated by the Father’s will.

The soul needs to regenerate herself and become as she formerly was. So the soul stirred, and she received the divine from the Father; that she might be restored and returned to where she was before.

This is resurrection15 from the dead.
This is freedom from captivity.
This is ascent to heaven.
This is the way up to the Father.

Therefore the prophet said:

My soul, praise the Lord, all within me, praise his holy name.
My soul, praise God, who forgave all your sins, who healed all your sicknesses, who freed your life from death, who crowned you with mercy, who satisfies your longing with good things.
Your youth will be renewed like an eagle’s.16

When the soul is renewed, she will arise and praise the Father and her brother, by whom she was rescued. In this way, through rebirth, the soul will be saved. This is not because of practical lessons or technical skills or learned books. Rather, it is the grace of the [Spirit],17 it is the gift of the merciful [God], for it is from above.

Thus the Savior calls out: [135]

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No one can come to me unless my Father draws and brings that one to me. I myself will raise that one on the last day.\(^\text{18}\)

**Praying with All Our Soul (135:4–136:16)**

So we need to pray to the Father and call on him with all our soul, not outwardly with our lips but with the spirit, which is within and has come from the depth,

sighing,
repenting for the lives we led,
confessing our sins,
recognizing the vain deception
and vain zeal we were in,
weeping over our lives
in darkness, as billows roll,
mourning for ourselves
that he might pity us,
hating ourselves
for what we are now.

Again, the Savior said:

Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be pitied.
Blessed are the hungry, for they will be filled.\(^\text{19}\)

Again he said:

One who does not hate one's own soul cannot follow me.\(^\text{20}\)

The beginning of salvation is repentance. Thus:

Before Jesus appeared John came and preached the baptism of repentance.\(^\text{21}\)

Repentance takes place in sorrow and grief. The Father is good and loves people, and hears the soul that calls to him and sends her the light of salvation.

Thus he said through the spirit to the prophet:

Say to the children of my people,
"[If] your sins reach [from earth to] heaven,

if they become [red] as scarlet and blacker than sackcloth, [and if] [136] you return to me with all your soul and say to me, 'My Father,' I will listen to you as a holy people."22

Again, elsewhere:

Thus says the Lord, the holy one of Israel, "If you return and sigh, you will be saved and know where you were when you trusted what is vain."23

And again he said:

Jerusalem wept and wept, saying, "Pity me." He will have pity on the voice of your lamentation. When he noticed, he listened to you. And the Lord will give you bread of affliction and water of oppression. From now on those who deceive will never approach you again. Your eye will see those who would deceive you.24

Repentance of Odysseus and Helen (136,16–137,11)

We need to pray to God night and day and lift our hands to him as people do who sail in the middle of the sea. They pray to God with all their heart without hypocrisy. Those who pray with hypocrisy deceive only themselves. For God examines what is within and searches the depths of the heart to find out who is worthy of salvation. And no one is worthy of salvation who still loves the place of deception.

Thus it is written in the poet:

Odysseus sat weeping and grieving on the island. He turned his face from the words of Calypso and from her tricks, and longed to see his village and smoke coming from it. If he had not [received] help from heaven, [he would not have been able to return] to his village.25

Again, [Helen also] says:

My heart turned away from me. [137] I want to return to my own house.26

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She sighed and said:

Aphrodite deceived me and brought me out of my village. I left my only daughter behind, and my good, understanding, handsome husband.27

When the soul leaves her perfect husband because of the deception of Aphrodite, which happens in the act of conception in this world, the soul suffers harm. But if she sighs and repents, she will be restored to her house.

Our Repentance (137, 11–27)

Israel would not have once been visited by God and brought out of the land of Egypt and the house of bondage if it had not sighed to God and wept about its oppressive labors.

Again, it is written in the Psalms:

I have been deeply troubled
in my groaning.
I shall drench my bed and cover each night
with my tears.
I have become old among all my enemies.
Depart from me, all you who do lawless things,
for look, the Lord has heard the cry of my weeping,
and the Lord has heard my prayer.28

If we truly repent, God, who is patient and abundant in mercy, will hear us. To God be the glory forever and ever.

Amen.

Exegesis on the Soul