Breaking the Bonds of Oblivion

An Analysis of the Role of Fate and Providence in the Apocryphon of John

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Abstract

This essay aims to investigate the role of fate in the Apocryphon of John – an issue which, with a few exceptions, has been surprisingly overlooked by modern scholarship. In the few modern publications available on the subject, the concept of fate has previously solely been examined in the light of the Greek Philosophical schools, often neglecting texts from a Jewish-Hellenistic context. Here it is argued that the depiction of fate in the Apocryphon of John, as well as the dualism between Pronoia – the providence of god – and its negative counterpart, the imitating spirit, is closely related to Jewish speculations about external influence and free will in literature such as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Community Rule from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Furthermore, it is argued that the author – much like Philo of Alexandria - presents Pronoia – the providence of god - as an extension of God, a concept which preserves his transcendence and at the same time allows him to intervene in earthly activities. Similarly, the imitating spirit, which is also presented as identical to fate, works as an extension of the demiurge. As a result of this reading of the text, the dualism between God’s providential activities carried out by Pronoia and the influence of fate over mankind, carried out by the imitating spirit, becomes more evident and radical.

It has recently been argued that the discourse of enslavement under fate only was applied to “the other” and that it was used primarily to draw boundary demarcations between the own group and the ones outside it. In this essay, I go against this hypothesis and suggest that the threat of enslavement under fate primarily appears in conjunction with paraenetic discourse and is used to exhort the followers to emulate a certain behavior.
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1.Background

1.1. Introduction and Purpose Statement

In ancient poetry, drama and in philosophical literature, one often finds fate portrayed as an unpredictable, sometimes even a chaotic and dubious force. Haphazardly, it seems, fate moves through the world of mankind, elevating the wicked, overthrowing the good, irrevocably changing people’s lives to the better and to the worse.\(^1\) Although the course of fate is often described as perplexing and beyond man’s ability to comprehend, it is – with a few exceptions – rarely depicted as something wholly negative. One of these notable exceptions is the *Apocryphon of John*. Here, fate is the source of injustice and blasphemy, of ignorance and oppression, a “bond of oblivion” in which the whole creation are held captives.\(^2\)

During the first half of the twentieth century, scholars such as E.R Dodds and Hans Jonas used the interpretive framework of modern continental philosophy to understand the negative depiction of fate. The Gnostics, they argued, felt alienated and estranged from the world, which they perceived as absurd “in the same sense which Camus gave to that term.”\(^3\)

In modern research, this reconstruction has been widely criticized by scholars such as Nicola Denzey Lewis, who argues that the adherents never understood themselves to be enslaved under fate and that the rhetoric of enslavement under fate was only used to describe the conditions of the non-believer.\(^4\) Furthermore, Denzey Lewis – who is one of few modern scholars who has written on the subject of fate in the *Apocryphon of John*\(^5\) - reads the speculations about fate and Pronoia – the providence of God – through the lens

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1 For a great overview of the conception of fate during antiquity, see Agatha A. Buriks’ article “The Source of Plutarch’s ΠΕΡΙ ΤΥΧΗΣ from 1950.
3 Dodds 1965, pp 12-13. See also section 1.3.3 “A Critical Discussion of Two Scholarly Trends: The Age of Anxiety Paradigm and Its Guilt Ridden Deconstruction” below for a more extensive discussion of the older paradigm.
4 See chapter five for a discussion in detail.
5 Apart from Michael Allen Williams’ article “Higher providence, lower providences and fate in Gnosticism and middle Platonism” Denzey Lewis is the only modern scholar who has written a study exclusively devoted to the subject. There are, however, other scholars who discuss subject of fate, although not as extensively as Denzey Lewis and only in relation to other issues.
of Middle Platonic speculations and argues that the author in fact advocates a world affirming cosmology. While I agree in much of Denzey Lewis' critique of the older scholarly paradigm, I am critical of her tendency to not just reject the views of the older scholarly paradigm, but to reverse them. Equally problematic, Denzey Lewis almost exclusively uses Christian and Platonic intertexts and thereby neglects many important Jewish sources.

Apart from Denzey Lewis' recently monograph *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Under Pitiless Skies*, Michael Allen Williams' article "Higher Providence, Lower Providences and Fate in Gnosticism and Middle Platonism" is the only modern scholarly work devoted to the subject of fate in the *Apocryphon of John*. As both Williams and Denzey Lewis have primarily used Christian and Middle Platonic intertexts in their studies, my study is the first to focus on Hellenistic-Jewish intertexts and discuss how the concept of fate in the *Apocryphon of John* relates to similar discussions in Judaism. Hopefully, this will enhance the understanding of the dualism between acts of fate and Pronoia in the *Apocryphon of John*.

Throughout this essay, I examine the roles of both fate and Pronoia, as well as discuss how they relate to each other and in which historical context they should be understood. As Pronoia throughout the text is defined against the imitating spirit, an adversarial entity created in the image of Pronoia and who appears in discussions related to the subject of fate, I also discuss the dualism between the imitating spirit and Pronoia – how the author presents the characters and how they relate to the concept of fate. Like Denzey Lewis, I also discuss the social function of fate in the text – how the author uses the concept to persuade his audience and which problems he seeks to solve.

**1.2. Research Questions**

The research questions addressed in this essay are:

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6 See section 1.3.3 “A Critical Discussion of Two Scholarly Trends: The Age of Anxiety Paradigm and Its Guilt Ridden Deconstruction” for a discussion of this issue.

7 There are, however, other scholars who discuss subject of fate, although not as extensively as Denzey Lewis and only in relation to other issues. See “Previous Research” for a more extensive discussion.
1. How does the concept of fate in the *Apocryphon of John* relate to similar speculations, contemporary to the text? How does the text respond to the surrounding geographical and historical context?

2. How does the author present the imitating spirit and Pronoia? How do these characters relate to the concept of fate?

3. What is the function of fate in the *Apocryphon of John*? Of what is the author trying persuade his audience and how does he use the concept of fate?

### 1.3. Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

#### 1.3.1 Points of departure

Before I proceed and attempt to answer these questions, there is a need to account for some of the theoretical assumptions on which the argumentation in this essay is based.

The first of these assumptions is the conviction that history is something wholly other than the past. My understanding of this distinction is heavily influenced by postmodern theoreticians such as Keith Jenkins, who argues that “the past” is a designation for events that have already taken place and are inevitably out of our reach.\(^8\) We can only access the past through the scarce traces – archeological remnants and textual sources. History on the other hand, designates the interpretative work where the scholar creates a chronology and a narrative through the use of these sources and traces. Therefore, history is not the past, but rather a narrative framework through which the past is understood and created.

A second assumption is that history – since it is a personal construct – always must be ideological and to a certain extent biased by scholarly trends and traditions. This essay is of course no exception. Since it is impossible to achieve a wholly “neutral” historiography, a scholarly ideal should be to expose and give account for the assumptions and presuppositions which guide the work. A scholarly historiography that purports to give an objective account of a certain historical event is just as biased as for example a feminist or post-colonial reading of the very same event. Here, the difference lies not in the amount of ideology contained in these historiographic perspectives, but rather in their presentation. While a scholar from a more marginal perspective is often eager to present his/her ideological starting point, a liberal empiricist historian who

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perceives himself as neutral may not feel the need to inform about the assumptions and presuppositions underlying his/her work.\(^9\)

A third assumption – which follows from the discussion above – is the need for critical reflection in a scholarly work. This should be done on three levels. The critical gaze needs to be fixed, not just on other scholars and their work, but also on the object of the study and on one's own work. Even, or perhaps particularly, when there is a scholarly consensus on a certain topic, one should approach the paradigmatic trend with suspicion and try to identify the ideological currents operating behind this particular historiography, rather than to uncritically reproduce it.

Just as scholarly paradigms tend to be influenced by ideological traditions, antique authors were also motivated by power interests. Therefore, it is important to ask why and to whom the antique author is writing, and of what he (most ancient authors were men) is trying to persuade his audience. In whose interests is he writing?

These constant critical inquiries do not create a “neutral” historiography, but they can make the historiographer more aware of his/her ideological perspectives and scholarly influences, as well as his/her own expectations and presuppositions.

My fourth assumption concerns the method and the object of study. Here, I have emulated Bruce Lincoln’s stance toward the academic study of the history of religions. Like Lincoln, I understand the conjunction “of” that joins “History of Religions” as a marker communicating a relation of encompassment: that history is the method and religion the object of study.\(^10\) There is however a tension between these two nouns, history and religion:

Religion, I submit, is that discourse whose defining characteristics is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal. History, in sharpest possible contrast, is that discourse that speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice while staking its claims to authority on rigorous critical practice.\(^11\)

Therefore, Lincoln understands History of religions as “a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself.”\(^12\) Lincoln goes on:

\(^9\) See also Jenkins’ discussion on ideology and bias in Jenkins 1991, pp 40-47
\(^10\) Lincoln 2011, p 1.
\(^11\) Ibid.
\(^12\) Ibid.
To practice history of religions in a fashion consistent with the discipline’s claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, communities, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.\(^\text{13}\)

Lincoln’s emphasis on the material and contextual dimensions of religious discourse has implications for the questions scholars of history of religions ought to engage, as well as for how a critical scholar should approach a religious text. It is always necessary to ask who the author(s) is, and in what interests and to what audience he speaks. Is he representative for the group to which he claims to belong? Are there any boundary demarcations in the text? If there are, who is included and who is excluded – how is orthodoxy and heresy constructed? How does the text respond to the surrounding geographical and historical context?

Although some of the cosmological and soteriological elements in religious texts can be explained by ideological influences from earlier texts and traditions, not all its components can be reduced to merely traditions. As we can see in the *Apocryphon of John* (and as will be discussed extensively throughout this essay), sacred texts during antiquity were (just as today) constantly redefined, rethought and revalued.\(^\text{14}\) The text offers an intriguing reimagining of Genesis and Plato’s famous creation narrative *Timaios*. In the *Apocryphon of John*, the narrator portrays Moses as an ignorant prophet, whose words are in need of correction, and depicts the demiurge, Ialdabaoth, as an inferior creator whose works are flawed in comparison to the creations of the highest god. In order to understand this text, I argue, we must also read it as a response to external problems and the religious developments of the surrounding environments. Why did the author feel the need to so drastically re-write the creation narrative of Genesis? What problems and changes did he respond to? Was the author a Christian who sought to re-define the boundaries to Jews who did accept Jesus as Christ, and thus re-imagine the creation narrative of the Hebrew Bible in order to make sense of it in a new Christian context? Or perhaps the author was an urban Jew, well versed in the philosophical currents contemporary to his time, who wanted to reinterpret problematic and anthropomorphic passages in the Hebrew Bible in order to harmonize the portrayal of the Jewish god with the apophatic divinity of the Platonic traditions?

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) For an interesting discussion of this issue, see Magnusson’s article “Bortom vägs ände, eller klarsynthen som förblindade: En analys av så kallad akosmisk etik i *Sanningens Evangelium* från Nag Hammadi” from 2012.
Throughout this essay, I return to these analytical questions and discuss them in detail.

1.3.2 The Will to Knowledge and the Conditions of History

Lincoln and Jenkins, the theoreticians whose perspectives I discussed above, both owe a lot to the ideas of Michel Foucault. The importance of power interests, the subjectivity of historical accounts, the critique of essentialism and the total rejection of the liberal empiricist claim on an objective or neutral historiography are all concepts elaborated by Foucault and further developed by modern theoreticians continuing in his tradition. The reason why I have chosen to use Lincoln’s and Jenkins’ perspectives rather than Foucault’s is that their perspectives are more up to date, since they address questions and problems raised during the last two decades, and are, in my opinion, more applicable to studies of ancient religion.

Equally important, but also closely linked to these above mentioned concepts is what Foucault refers to as “the will to knowledge”, an expression which must at least partly be understood as a paraphrase on Nietzsche’s famous will to power. According to Foucault, the will to knowledge is not simply an urge to possess information, but rather the aspiration to define truth – the ability to decide what is important and how certain events and data should be interpreted. This perspective carries heavy implications for how one understands historical change and religious categories. Foucault rejects the notion of historical development as linear and continuous, in favor of a view where it is the struggle to define truth that dictates the conditions of history:

The history which bears and defines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning. History has no “meaning”, though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary it is intelligible and should be susceptible to analysis down to the smallest detail – but in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics. Neither the dialects, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts.  

As a result of this view, religions can no longer be viewed as neatly arranged categories, but rather as a cluster of diverse and conflicting voices, all of which are struggling to define their own truth. Therefore, a religious category is always a simplification, a construction whose meaning is always changing depending on what it is defined against. Throughout the essay, I apply this perspective in order to understand

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15 See Jenkins 1991, pp 2; 30-32. Although Lincoln does not discuss Foucault, his views on historiography and truth closely follow the views of Foucault. See for example Lincoln 1999, pp 207-216.
16 Foucault 1984, p 56.
the complex religious developments during antiquity and to refute stereotypical categorizations. From this point of view, it is no longer possible to claim, as Karen King does, that Gnosticism cannot have emerged in a Jewish environment, since it is not possible for Jews to depict the creator god as an inferior and negative entity.\footnote{See the discussion of King’s statement in section 2.3 “The Jewish and the Christian Hypothesis – A Critical Discussion of Two Theories of Origin.”}

Likewise, I want to refrain from oversimplifying depictions of religious phenomena. When I use categories such as Judaism and Platonism, it is not to suggest that there only was one authentic form of Judaism or Platonism in the Hellenistic period, or that there was a clear boundary between Judaism and Platonism. Rather many of the most important Jewish texts during the Hellenistic period exhibit thoughts that were also common for Greek philosophy. Therefore, I also want to avoid questions where the origin of a particular concept is sought in a certain tradition, since a too strict classification of religious traditions mirrors the scholarly historiography of the twentieth century rather than the historical reality of the Hellenistic period.

Another historiographic depiction that is of crucial importance for this essay is the scholarly view of fate during antiquity. Since the consensus view on this quite controversial topic has changed drastically during the last century, I feel the need to introduce the reader to the debate, as well as to offer my own position on the issue. In the subsequent discussion, I will also offer a brief overview of the debate surrounding the term Gnosticism, before I proceed to conclude the theoretical section with a brief discussion on method.

\subsection*{1.3.3 A Critical Discussion of Two Scholarly Trends: The Age of Anxiety Paradigm and Its Guilt Ridden Deconstruction}

The scholarly understanding of the first to fourth antiquity mindset has changed dramatically during the last few decades. As many modern critical scholars, such as Jonathan Z. Smith and Tomoko Masuzawa have acknowledged, much of the progress made in early twentieth century religious studies was confessionally motivated.\footnote{Masuzawa 2005, p 12-13.}

In what Jonathan Z. Smith refers to as “the Protestant historiographic myth,” scholars tended to understand early Christian developments as something originally
pure – totally unique and beyond comparison to anything else – that was distorted by Hellenistic elements at a later stage. Further, Smith argues that the legacy of this historiographic construction lives on in modern scholarly works. To give just one example of this scholarly tendency, many modern scholars tend to depict the opponents in the Epistle to the Colossians as either “syncretistic” (in contrast to the implicitly implied “purity” of apostolic Christianity) or as “religion” or “wholly other” (and thus ignoring the likely possibility that the opponents had a Christian self-understanding).

According to this scholarly discourse, astrological beliefs and paganism were not just something wholly other than Christianity, but also less rational. While modern proponents of the older paradigm portray Christianity as something self-evident – a kind of rational choice that does not need to be explained – they nevertheless provide a psychological explanation to why people were still attracted to astrology and paganism after the advent of Christianity. Often, scholars describe the attraction to astrology and paganism as a reaction to the conditions of the Greco-Roman society – as a desperate attempt to overcome the anxiety and alienation that those people allegedly experienced as well as to appease the demonic and frightening gods in the sky. As will be more extensively discussed below, this understanding of the Greeks as irrational and alienated goes back to a scholarly tradition which began around the turn of the century. Henceforth, I will refer to this scholarly trend as the “age of anxiety paradigm”.

During the first half of the twentieth century, several leading scholars understood the first to fourth century antiquity as an age of existential anxiety. According to proponents such as E.R Dodds, Hans Jonas and Franz Cumont the late Roman Empire was characterized by cosmic pessimism and alienation. Cumont, who was perhaps the first leading scholar of this paradigm, argues that people during antiquity generally perceived fate as an enslaving force:

Sidereal determinism, pushed to its extreme consequences, was a theory of despair, the weight of which crushed the man. He felt himself mastered, overpowered by blind forces which impelled him as irresistibly as they caused the celestial spheres to move. His mind

19 Smith 1990, p 1-35.
21 See for example Hartman 1995, p 36.
22 E.R Dodds was the first to use the term age of anxiety as a designator for the late antiquity mindset in his monograph Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety from 1965. Although he did not start the scholarly trend to understand late antiquity as a period of existential anxiety, he was one of its main proponents.
sought escape from the oppression of this cosmic mechanism, to free itself from the slavery in which Ἀνάγκη held it.23

Somewhat later in *Gnosticism, Existentialism and Nihilism* – the epilogue to the second edition of his book *The Gnostic Religion* – Jonas describes the antique Gnostic mindset in similar terms:

The starry sky – to the Greeks since Pythagoras the purest embodiment of reason in the sensible universe, and the guarantor of its harmony – now stared man in the face with the fixed glare of alien power and necessity. No longer his kindred, yet powerful as before, the stars have become tyrants – feared but at the same time despised, because they are lower than man.24

Jonas goes even further in his exposition:

Under this pitiless sky, which no longer inspires worshipful confidence, man becomes conscious of his utter forlornness. Encompassed by it, subject to its power, yet superior to it by the nobility of his soul, he knows himself not so much a part of it, butaccountably placed in and exposed to, the enveloping system.25

The result of this is fear, or, as Jonas phrases it, that: “His solitary otherness, discovering itself in this forlornness, erupts in the feeling of dread.”26

In a similar vein, Dodds compares philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius, Plotinus and Pallades to Albert Camus. In contrast to Jonas, who is mainly centered on the anti-cosmism and alienation of the Gnostics, Dodds, akin of the historiography of Cumont, expands the perspective and makes it applicable to the Greco-Roman mind in general:

They could recognize with Plato that this sublunar world ’is of necessity haunted by evil’, and could feel that man’s activity in it is something of a secondary order, less than serious, less than fully real – in fact ‘absurd’ in the sense which Camus gave to that term.27

The last twenty years, this early twentieth century tendency to understand antiquity as a period of alienation and cosmic pessimism has received an enormous amount of critique. Michael Allen Williams, Karen King and Nicola Denzey Lewis are but a few influential scholars who have questioned the scholarly construction of antiquity as an age of anxiety. Particularly Denzey Lewis’ deconstruction of the “age of anxiety-paradigm” is in many ways excellent. In her article “’Enslavement to fate ’cosmic pessimism’ and other explorations of the Late Roman psyche: A brief history of a historiographic trend’”, Denzey Lewis pinpoints several methodological flaws, among

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23 Cumont 1912, p 160.
24 Jonas 1963, p 328.
26 Ibid.
others the tendencies to use fourth century sources in support of first century cosmic pessimism, to pull quotations out of their literary context, and to ignore world affirming passages which depict fate as a positive force.28 Similar to Smith, Denzey Lewis argues that this paradigm, which depicts the citizens of the Roman Empire as irrational, alienated and in constant fear of astrological entities, at least partly must be understood as a Christian ideological discourse, which served to explain the (much inferior) condition of non-Christians in the ancient world who had not yet been saved through baptism.29 Not all of the proponents of the “age of anxiety paradigm” were steeped in Christian traditions, however. As has been discussed above (and as also Denzey Lewis observes) advocates such as E.R Dodds and Hans Jonas were rather influenced by the existentialists of the early twentieth century.

In many ways, I am sympathetic towards Denzey Lewis’ attempt to deconstruct “the age of anxiety paradigm.” All too many biblical commentaries, monographs and articles still use the cosmological pessimism of Dodds and Cumont as an interpretive framework, often with only a minimum of primary sources to support their historiography.

A modern proponent of this older paradigm is Walter Wilson. In The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle of the Colossians, Wilson depicts antiquity as a period characterized by “Weltangst”, whose “social and religious developments contributed to feelings of dislocation and loneliness among Hellenistic people.”30 Wilson goes on to describe that as a result of this “people felt themselves to be aliens and exiles, groping for personal wholeness and spiritual identity, while at the same time harboring resentment both against the human world and against human nature itself.”31 Although I consider Wilson to be an otherwise excellent critical scholar, I find his uncritical reproduction of the “age of anxiety paradigm” problematic, mostly because he bases his account almost entirely on secondary literature (that is, the works of, for example, E. R Dodds).32

I believe that Denzey Lewis’ critique of the early twentieth century paradigm must be understood as part of a major scholarly project to deconstruct the problematic historiography of early twentieth century religious studies at large. Through identifying

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32 Wilson does quote Seneca’s De Tranquilitate Animi 2.10 and Marcus Aurelius’ Ad Se Ipsum 2.17, but neither of the sources provide support for the theory that antiquity was an age of alienation and anxiety.
confessional and Christocentric tendencies in the older paradigm, the main proponents of this new paradigm, such as for example Jonathan Z. Smith, have done a terrific job that has eventually led to a call for a re-evaluation of history. This positive scholarly trend has also spread to the studies of the Nag Hammadi texts of which the Apocryphon of John is a part. A majority of – if not all – modern critical scholars now agree that the nineteenth and early twentieth century understanding of Gnosticism was problematically rooted in the hierarchical dichotomy of the nineteenth century between orthodoxy and heresy, where Gnosticism was always defined against the ostensible unity of orthodox Christianity.

After the Nag Hammadi discovery in 1945 and with primary sources widely accessible, we now know that early twentieth century scholars were wrong on many points. As Williams convincingly shows in his book Rethinking Gnosticism – An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category, it is no longer possible to claim, as for example Jonas did, that all Gnostics were either ascetics or libertarians, or that they were social determinists, since the primary sources do not support these notions. Further, Williams demonstrates that the movements and texts crammed together under the label Gnosticism in fact were much more diverse than what has previously been acknowledged.

Williams’ deconstruction of the older understanding of Gnosticism has thus been successful. The problem today, however, is not how to deconstruct, but rather how to re-think Gnosticism. Although scholars such as King and Williams have done a fantastic job problematizing the legacy of Gnosticism, I find their attempts to re-construct the category much more problematic.

Since older conceptions of Gnosticism, such as involving social determinism and libertarian ethics, have proven to be false, some of the proponents for the new paradigm, including Williams, King and Pagels, call for a total abandonment of the category. Other scholars, such as Jörgen Magnusson, Birger Pearson and Jaan Lahe, have taken a more restrictive approach to the problem. Although all of them share William’s critique of

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33 For a much more extensive discussion of this problem, see Williams 1996 and King 2003.
34 See Jonas 1963, pp 270-277. See also Williams 1996, pp 139-188
35 See Williams 1996, pp 189-212.
36 Williams suggest a replacement with the, according to him, more neutral category biblical demiurgical traditions. See Williams 1996, pp 7-8 and pp 51-53
concepts such as social determinism and libertarian ethics, they argue that Gnosticism can still fill an analytical function.37

Since the existence of Gnosticism as a religious category is not of immediate concern for the research questions raised in this essay, I will only briefly dwell on the problem, as I feel the need to inform the reader that I myself tend to lean towards the opinion that Gnosticism can function as an analytical tool although it should be used with caution. Even though I side with Williams in almost all of his critique of the older paradigm, I cannot see how his suggestion to replace Gnosticism with the term “biblical demiurgical traditions” would solve any problem.38 I find it harder, however, to accept King’s position.

While Williams rejects the notion that the adherents of the Gnostic movements must have lived according to the myths and advocated an anti-cosmic worldview in their everyday life, he does not deny the many of the Gnostic texts contain anti-cosmic elements. King, however, is more radical in her rejection of everything that stems from the older paradigm. In her call for abandonment of the category of Gnosticism, she does not just want to get rid of the term and the obviously outdated notions of libertarian ethics and social determinism, but she also seemingly wants to cleanse the scholarly historiography of Gnosticism of all the elements from the older paradigm. Although I find her call to reclaim our ancient texts from the legacy of the colonialism, androcentricism and the dichotomy between orthodoxy and heresy that has shaped early religious studies sympathetic in many ways, there is one problem with her approach. Everything old is not necessarily bad.

According to King, the alleged anti-cosmism of the Apocryphon of John is not to be found in the text, unless one looks for it. King even claims that the text itself offers a “resistance” against “stereotyping” readings and that one, in order to interpret the text as anti-cosmic, must use force to do this. Any anti-cosmic interpretation of the Apocryphon of John is therefore the colonial and patriarchal legacy speaking, while the pure message should be immediately mediated to the unpolluted mind.

38 King is also critical towards Williams’ solution. Instead of simply replacing a problematic term with a new one, she calls for a complete abandonment. See King 2003, p 168.
The *Secret Revelation of John* offers stunning examples of this resistance to stereotyping. For example, when Christ reveals the names of the individual demons associated with each part of the body, it had seemed that this proved that the Gnostics thought the body was demonically evil and hated it. But instead the list belongs to a widespread belief that demons were responsible for disease; knowing their names gave a person the power to exorcise their demonic influence and thus provide healing to the affected part of the self. Not hatred of the body, but bodily healing was the purpose of Christ’s revelation.\(^{39}\)

I find King's argumentation flawed, since not a single passage in the text mentions or even implies bodily healing. In the creation narrative in NH II 21:9-12, the narrator refers to the body as “the tomb in the form of the body” (ἐτε παί πε πισταλιον ἐνταναπλασικ ἰπικωμα) and as “the fetter of forgetfulness” (τμηπε ἵτβωε). In the soteriological accounts of the text, the author seems quite uninterested in the body.\(^{41}\) The readers are advised to remain in a state of detachment, much similar to the stoic ideal of apatheia, while “looking expectantly forward to the time, when they will be met by the receivers (of the body).”\(^{42}\)

Furthermore, I find it equally problematic that King portrays her colleagues who do not share her interpretation as slaves under the older paradigm, thus giving the impression that a modern scholar who does not oppose every element of the older paradigm advocates a patriarchal and colonial ideology.

In the recently published monograph *Gnosis und Judentum: Alttestamentliche und jüdische Motive in der gnostischen Literatur und der Ursprungsproblem der Gnosis*, Jaan Lahe offers a balanced discussion of this issue and shows convincingly that this is not the case. Similar to Williams and King, Lahe rejects Gnostic libertarian ethics and as well as the notion that all of the Gnostics were social determinists. Lahe also argues that while category of Gnosticism is problematic, since it is a typological construction used to designate a variety of different religious groups, the same could be said about other religious categories such as Hinduism, Buddhism and even Christianity.\(^{43}\) In spite of an

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\(^{39}\) Karen King has chosen a different translation of the title than the more commonly occurring translation the *Apocryphon of John*.

\(^{40}\) King 2006, p viii-ix.

\(^{41}\) See for example NH 25:17-26:7, where John, the protagonist of the text, is instructed that in order to achieve salvation, it is necessary to remain indifferent to the passions and all kinds of conditions such as anger, envy, fear and desire, “except the state of being in the flesh alone.” The state of bodily existence is thus the only condition which is depicted as inevitable in the text.” See chapter five for a more extensive discussion of this issue.

\(^{42}\) NH II 25:35-37.

internal variety, these categories can still be useful as analytical tools and macro-categories.\(^{44}\)

Unlike King, Lahe argues that the *Apocryphon of John* exhibits almost all of the characteristic features of Gnostic myth: the radical dualism between the apophatic highest god and the evil Ialdabaoth; the fall of Wisdom and her creation of the creator god; the seven archons as governing the world; salvation through knowledge. Furthermore, Lahe argues that the anti-cosmic stance of the text is beyond dispute.\(^{45}\)

While I agree with King that a modern scholar should refrain from reading the Gnostic texts with the older paradigmatic understanding as a framework, I find a reading that is constantly defined against the older paradigm equally problematic.

In early twentieth century scholarship (and still, in a few confessional biblical commentaries) the Gnostic movements were depicted as enticers, as marginal figures living in the shadows, preying on the weak and converting centrist Christians to heresy. Obviously, this is an outdated depiction, a product of the colonial period and the orthodoxy-heresy dichotomy of the nineteenth century.

But almost as problematic is in my opinion the guilt ridden deconstruction of this particular historiography, where the “victim-abuser” dichotomy is kept but simply reversed. The most evident example of this tendency is perhaps Elaine Pagels’ *The Gnostic Gospels* from 1979. Here, we do not encounter the depraved heretics from the earlier historiographic paradigm, but rather an equally ahistoric idea of groups who advocated gender equality,\(^ {46}\) depicted by Pagels as individualistic and idealistic precursors to the Protestants.\(^ {47}\) In *The Secret Revelation of John* from 2006 – published almost thirty years after Pagels’ book - King offers a more balanced discussion on the same issue. King’s main contributing is a problematizing and more critical discussion of gender.\(^ {48}\) The depiction of the group behind the *Apocryphon of John* as suffering under

\(^{44}\) See also Magnusson 2012, pp 232-233.
\(^{46}\) Pagels 1979, pp 71-88.
\(^{47}\) See Pagels 1979, pp 122-123.
\(^{48}\) See particularly King’s article “Sophia and Christ in the Apocryphon of John” in King 1988, pp 158-176.
and opposing hierarchical power structures in the Roman Empire is otherwise in many ways reminiscent of Pagels’ discussion. King writes:

By denying the validity of identities given by the world – such as master and slave, rich and poor, citizen and subject – it imagined a renegotiation of the political order. By refusing to acknowledge that those who rule the world are really in charge, it reframed and undermined oppressors’ claim to legitimate rule.\footnote{King 2006, p 172.}

When reading the Nag Hammadi texts with hindsight and with knowledge of the religious persecutions of heretics in the fourth century, it is easy to sympathize with the persecuted groups and apply the victim-abuser dichotomy as an interpretative framework. But the \textit{Apocryphon of John} is usually dated to the second century,\footnote{A date somewhere between 120 and 150 is consensus. See section 2.1 “The Date of Composition” for a more comprehensive discussion of the date of the text.} long before Christianity became centralized and when the “centrist” Christianities were just as marginal as the Gnostic groups. Williams even argues that the mythological elements in the Gnostic texts exhibits reduced cultural distance to the Greco-Roman world.\footnote{Williams 1996, pp 107-115. On page 113 Williams argues that: “Compared with what are usually considered more “orthodox” forms of Judaism and Christianity, which seems to be Scott’s point of reference, demiurgical myths in general do seem rather “deviant.” But compared to the wider spectrum of cosmologies in antiquity, at least many of the biblical demiurgical mythologies can be viewed as attempts to reduce deviance in worldview through adoptions and accommodations of Jewish and Christian tradition to Hellenistic and Roman cosmologies.”} Furthermore, the lack of interest in the material world and denigration of worldly positions was commonplace in contemporary philosophical discourse and similar expressions of detachment from the hierarchies of the world can be found in many other non-Gnostic texts.

Therefore, I argue that we need to step away from the victim-abuser dichotomy of the old paradigm and start to read the texts in their own right - as discourses where the author draws boundary demarcations and dictates hierarchies of his own. These discourses need to be seen, not just as a voice of the oppressed or as a protest against the worldly affairs, but as exertions of power and persuasion.

In my opinion, Denzey Lewis’ research is a step in this direction. Her analysis of fate and pronoia as identity markers used by the author(s) of the \textit{Apocryphon of John} within a “discourse of alterity” to designate exclusion and inclusion is both innovative and brilliant.\footnote{Denzey Lewis 2013, p 100. See also pp 85-86.} I will return to this interesting topic and discuss it more extensively later in this essay.
Similar to King, Denzey Lewis’ reconstruction is constantly defined against the older paradigm, but she does not go quite as far as King. In reaction to the tendency to understand the Gnostic cosmology as bleak and pessimistic, Denzey Lewis calls for a more nuanced understanding of the perspectives in the text, which is neither as anti-cosmic as in Lahe’s interpretation, nor as body- and world affirming as in King’s.  

More radical, however, is her rejection of the notion of the Gnostics as enslaved by fate. Denzey Lewis argues that while Gnostics, such as the group behind the Apocryphon of John acknowledged the existence of a negatively evaluated fate, they never understood themselves as subjected to it.

Some Christians rejected the notion of heimarmene as plainly erroneous; others incorporated vivid depictions of its administration to account for the spiritual malaise they perceived around them. At no point, however, does the rhetoric of ‘enslaving fate’ exist within the context of people feeling themselves to be enslaved. Rather, some attested that the human condition (of which they no longer considered themselves a part) was essentially and inherently one of enslavement. Those who embraced such a perspective also believed there existed certain modes of escape from this enslavement. Salvation, not enslavement, remained the central concern of these Christian authors. If heimarmene exists, our texts provide the antidote.

Denzey Lewis’ deconstruction of the “age of anxiety paradigm” and its outdated tendency to portray the whole Greco-Roman world as living in constant fear of the stars and the gods is a valuable contribution to the field of research. As Denzey Lewis convincingly has shown, only a handful of sources actually support such a notion. The fatal flaw of the age of anxiety paradigm is, in my opinion, not just the lack of sources, but also its tendency to generalize - to claim that a whole culture shared this particular mindset. Problematically, Denzey Lewis does not just reject this notion – she also reverses it. In her reconstruction, the condition of enslavement under fate was only applied to other groups, never to the own group. Thus, the “enslavement under fate” rhetorics were only a part of a polemical strategy and not an actual self-perceived condition.

53 Denzey Lewis 2013, p 37 states (about the Apocryphon of John and On the Origin of the World) that: “Neither text betrays an unmitigatedly pessimistic cosmology; both treat the subject of pronoia with a sophistication that reflects their engagement with Middle Platonist conceptions of a divided or ‘multiple’ providence.”
54 Denzey Lewis 2013, p 101.
55 Denzey Lewis 2013, p 28. “The authors of Nag Hammadi texts such as the Apocryphon of John, On the Origin of the World, the Tripartite Tractate, or Eugnostos – while all convinced of the veracity of astral influences as a dynamic principle of the cosmos – were equally convinced that their inexorable hold did not apply to them.”
I do not wholly share Denzey Lewis’ position. We cannot assume that the addressees to whom the author of the *Apocryphon of John* writes actually shared all of his beliefs. Even if Denzey Lewis is right in her assertion that the author did not understand himself and his addressees to be enslaved under fate, there is nothing that guarantees that the addressees shared this conviction. The case can just as well have been the opposite - that the author responded to a situation where the addressees understood fate as an enslaving force and wrote in order to comfort them and persuade them that they did not need to worry. Furthermore, the soteriological passages where the author discusses these issues are quite ambiguous and can be interpreted both ways. Since these passages are crucial for the research questions of this essay, I will return to this problem and discuss it more extensively.

The main problem, in my opinion, is that we seem to have gone from one generalization, namely the notion that enslavement under fate was a part of the Greco-Roman mindset, to another, namely the notion that the self-perceived condition of enslavement under fate did not exist at all.

To summarize this discussion, I think that we need to find a middle ground between the two generalizing and quite extreme notions of the Gnostics as either alienated and body hating or as world affirming egalitarians. While one should definitely treat the older scholarly paradigm with the outermost suspicion, I believe that one must be equally careful to embrace the new scholarly trend, in which critical scholars sometimes, in an almost apologetic fashion, compete with each other in order to provide the reader with the most world-affirming and non-exclusive depiction of the Gnostics (or “Gnostics”) as underdog heroes.

Up to this point, I have presented my point of departure and discussed how it relates to the different scholarly paradigms. Before I proceed to present the text itself and discuss its historical context, I will first offer a brief discussion of method and an overview of the main scholarly positions.

56 For a similar reconstruction, see Magnusson 2012, where it is argued that the author of the *Gospel of Truth* wrote in order to persuade adherents with a literal understanding of the Gnostic myths that they did not need to fear the demiurge. Magnusson 2012, p 42 writes: “Jag föreslår att vi har att göra med en situation där församlingsmedlemmar med en mer bokstavlig tolkning av gnostiska myter utgör ett betydande inslag. Strategin för vår predikant blir då att bekräfta deras erfarenhet och uppfattning för att sedan gradvis modifiera den.”
1.3.4 On Method

In the study of this text, I make use of traditional historico-critical methods.\(^{57}\) The theoretical implications of this perspective, as well as my view on the conditions of history, have been discussed in detail above. I have also discussed some of the most urgent problems posed by this approach and in the end of section 1.3.1 “Points of Departure,” I have accounted for some of the analysis questions that can be derived from this perspective.

Since the object of this study is an antique text, originally composed in Greek, but in its present state only available in Coptic, it is also necessary to discuss the hermeneutical and philological dimensions of the process. As Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Einar Thomassen point out, it is almost impossible to separate the method of hermeneutics and philology from historico-criticism when working with text material.\(^ {58}\)

Throughout the *Apocryphon of John*, the author employs an allegorical reading, reminiscent of the technique used in the works of Philo. In his creative exegesis of the book of Genesis, the author deliberately stretches the meaning of the Greek vocabulary in the Septuagint, in order to make it fit better with his allegorical interpretations. Since these wordplays are difficult to understand and even harder to translate, it is necessary to have a good grasp of both Greek and Coptic in order make sense of some of the most ambiguous passages.\(^ {59}\)

There are four different manuscripts of the text at hand, of which three were found in Nag Hammadi 1945 and a fourth that was purchased on the antiquities market in Cairo 1896 and later brought to Berlin. When I refer to any of these different manuscripts, I use the commonly accepted abbreviations: NH II, NH III and NH IV for the

\(^{57}\) For a discussion of historico-criticism as a method, see Rüpke 2011.

\(^{58}\) See Thomassen 2011, p 353 and Gilhus 2011, p

\(^{59}\) The material creation of man is just one example of several passages where this tendency becomes evident. Here, the author tells us that the material body of man is created from the four elements: fire, earth, water and wind. The Greek word pneuma, however, can be translated both as wind and spirit. In this passage it is clear that this ambiguity is deliberate, since the author goes on and clarifies the nature of this pneuma in NH II 20:35-21:9 “that is, from matter and darkness and desire and the imitating spirit.” As a result of this wordplay, the author manages to combine the tradition that matter stems from the four elements with notion that the imitating spirit is closely linked to and has power over all things material. In section 4.1 “Occurrences in the *Apocryphon of John*,” I return to this passage and discuss it in detail.
manuscripts from the Nag Hammadi library and BG for the Berlin Codex.⁶⁰ Of these four manuscripts, NH II and NH IV are almost identical. NH III and BG are both shorter than NH II and NH IV, and they tend to differ from one another in terms of details and vocabulary. Waldstein and Wisse have suggested that NH III and BG therefore are likely to be two independent translations of a shorter version of the text, while the two longer manuscripts NH II and NH IV are likely to be copies of the same translation.⁶¹

During my working process, I have used Waldstein and Wisses’s synoptic edition, which features the Coptic text from all of the four different versions next to each other. My main focus is the longer version of the text, and since NH II is better preserved than NH IV and as the two versions tend to agree on most details, I make most extensive use of NH II. Due to space limitations, I only refer to NH II, when I discuss a passage in the text, where the different versions tend to agree. Whenever the different versions of the text display significant differences, I point this out and refer to the shorter versions as well.

The translations of the Apocryphon of John presented in this essay are all my own. Regarding quotes from Philo and the Hebrew Bible, I use the translations from the collected works of Philo published by Loeb and the NRSV. I have, however, also had the possibility to read the quoted passages in the original Greek.⁶² Regarding the Jewish apocryphal works used in this essay, I have unfortunately only had access to translations and not the original text.

Both during the reading of the intertexts and the main text, I deliberately attempt to avoid isolating passages from the body of text. Rather than to focus on selected and isolated passages in the Apocryphon of John, I am interested in how the parts relate to the whole and how particular markers are used in the narrative structure to refer back to previous passages.⁶³ Since one of the research questions of this essay concerns the presentation of Pronoia and the imitating spirit, as well as how they relate to the concept of fate, the narrative structure and relation between certain passages and the narrative as a whole, is crucial in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the author

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⁶⁰ Abbreviation for “Berolinensis Gnosticus 8505.”
⁶² Apart from Gen 1:14, I only quote passages that were initially composed in Greek. Since the author of the Apocryphon of John likely had access to the Septuagint rather than a Hebrew version of the Hebrew Bible, I have also read this passage against the text of the Septuagint.
⁶³ See Gilhus 2011, pp 276-278 for a discussion of the hermeneutic circle and the relation between the parts and the narrative whole.
presents the characters. See section 4.4 “The Imitating Spirit and Fate” for a discussion of indications in the narrative that imply a close relation between the imitating spirit and fate.

1.4 Previous Research

The Apocryphon of John – also referred to as “The Gnostic bible” due to its popularity during antiquity – has been the subject of a wide array of scholarly investigations ranging from gender and sexuality issues to the question of its economic and social settings. There have also been studies devoted to its alleged Platonic, Stoic, Orphic, Hermetic, Homeric, Jewish, Egyptian and Johannine influences. The role and function of fate and Providence has, however, remained a relatively unexplored topic in modern research. Of all the published monographs and articles on the Apocryphon of John, only two publications from the last thirty years address the issue of fate and providence. These publications are Michael Allen Williams’ article Higher Providence, Lower Providences and Fate in Gnosticism and Middle Platonism published 1992; Nicola Denzey Lewis’ monograph Under Pitiless Skies: Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity from 2013.

My intention here is neither to discuss, nor to evaluate these scholarly efforts, but rather to provide the reader with a brief orientation. I will return to all of these ideas and positions, and discuss them more in detail throughout the essay.

Williams’ article is mainly concerned with the cosmological structure in the Apocryphon of John and its relation to contemporary Middle Platonic systems. It is written as a reply to an article by Pheme Perkins, in which she argues that the role of

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65 For gender and sexuality, see Fischer-Mueller 1990 and for the economical and social settings, see Green 1985.
67 Onuki 2010.
68 Quispel 1978.
69 Quispel 1992.
70 Goehring 1981.
72 King 2006, pp 10-17.
73 See for example King 2006, pp 235-238.
74 The role of fate in Gnosticism is actually more widely discussed in older research. For a discussion about the older paradigm, see section 1.3 “A Critical Discussion of Two Scholarly Trends: The Age of Anxiety Paradigm and Its Guilt Ridden Deconstruction.”
fate in *On the Origin of the World* follows the tripartite structure of the middle Platonists and that it contains a higher and a lower Providence as well as an agent of Fate. Further, Perkins argues that the author of *On the origin of the world* must have picked up the ideas while studying under the middle Platonists in Athens sometime around 150 C.E.\(^\text{75}\)

Williams admits to the similarities between the middle Platonist systems and the role of fate in *The Apocryphon of John* and *On the Origin of the world*, but does not recognize a tripartite structure of fate in *On the Origin of the world*. Williams does however see this structure in *The Apocryphon of John*. Since this study is limited to the role of providence in *The Apocryphon of John*, I will not further discuss Perkins’ article or her understanding of fate in *On the origin of the world* and will thus limit the discussion to Williams’ hypothesis of the tripartite structure of *The Apocryphon of John*.

Since I argue that the *Apocryphon of John* should be read in the light of Jewish apocalyptic literature, I differ quite significantly from Williams who, primarily understands the text as an interjection into the Middle Platonic debate about fate. For a discussion of this issue, see chapter five.

Nicola Denzey Lewis’ recently published monograph *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Under Pitiless Skies* features the most comprehensive discussion on Providence and fate to date. More than just another contribution to the debate of the role of fate, Denzey Lewis’ undertakings should be understood as a part a larger ongoing project to deconstruct and redefine Gnosticism. Throughout the book, Denzey Lewis argues that the condition of enslavement under fate was used as a rhetorical device for inclusion and exclusion, rather than a self-perceived condition. Further, she calls for a complete abandonment of the early twentieth century tendency to understand antiquity as an age of anxiety in which fate was perceived as an enslaving force. To support her hypothesis, Denzey Lewis uses *the Apocryphon of John* as one of the major source texts.

Since Denzey Lewis’ study is important for the field of research, as well as it is recent and up to date, I return to her work throughout the essay. The most extensive discussions of her hypothesis can be found in chapter four and five.

There are quite a few important scholarly works that discuss the text and its historical context in general. Scholars such as Jaan Lahe and Birger Pearson have written on the *Apocryphon of John* from a Jewish perspective and placed the text in a Jewish-
Hellenistic context, while for example Karen L. King and Gerard Luttikhuizen have argued that the text emerged in a Christian context. Although I return to discuss the positions of these scholars throughout the essay, most of the discussion about historical context and religious background of the text is concentrated to chapter two.

Regarding the surrounding religious context, I have had great use of Peter Frick’s study of the concept of fate and providence in Philo of Alexandria. This discussion can primarily be found in chapter 3.

1.5 Disposition
In part two, I discuss the dating, historical context and religious background of the Apocryphon of John. Unlike most modern scholars who have studied the role of fate in Gnosticism – scholars such as Pheme Perkins, Nicola Denzey Lewis and Michael Allen Williams – I argue throughout the essay that the radical dualism between Pronoia and fate should be understood primarily against the background of Hellenistic Judaism, rather than Middle Platonic speculations. In part two of the essay, I attempt to show how the Apocryphon of John relates to Jewish Hellenistic thought and motivate why I have placed the text in this particular context.

Part three is an exposition of the role and function of Pronoia. First, I discuss how the concept of Pronoia is understood in a philosophical and Hellenistic-Jewish context, and then I proceed to discuss how the concept of Pronoia in the Apocryphon of John relates to other roughly contemporary texts. Here, I argue that Pronoia in the Apocryphon of John – much like in the works of Philo - is depicted as an extension of the highest god, which allows him to intervene in the earthly events and at the same time preserve his transcendence.

In part four, I discuss the imitating spirit and fate. I argue that the concept of the imitating spirit shares many features with Jewish-Hellenistic texts and that the radical dualism in the Apocryphon of John is closely related to the Jewish apocalyptic imagination. Further, I argue that the author presents the imitating spirit as either identical or closely related to fate. As a result of this reading of the text, the dualism between God’s providential activities carried out by Pronoia and the influence of lower fate over mankind, carried out by the imitating spirit, becomes more evident and radical.
In part five, I discuss the function of this radical dualism. Here, I argue that the dualism between fate and Pronoia primarily fills two main functions. First, I argue that the author uses these concepts to reconcile the notion of external influences with the ability to choose between good and evil. Second, I argue that the author, who struggles to combine a certain amount of determinism with the concept of free choice, uses the dualism between Pronoia and fate to exhort the adherents to conduct in a particular manner.

2. The Historical Context of the Apocryphon of John

2.1 The Date of Composition

For a long time, the Gnostic texts were believed to have been inevitably lost, confining scholars of early Christianity to the secondary reports of the church fathers. This changed, however, when the *Apocryphon of John* suddenly and unexpectedly “appeared” on the black market of Cairo in the late nineteenth century. In 1945, three additional versions were found among the texts of the Nag Hammadi library. Due to academic struggles and competition, this discovery was unfortunately not publicly available to scholars until the sixties.

The publication of these texts was nothing less than a revolution in this field of research, enabling scholars to get a firsthand account of the Gnostic schools of thought for the first time in modern history. Although these texts have provided us with an enhanced understanding of, for example Gnostic ethics, doctrines and boundary demarcations, they offer very little information as regard to questions of contexts, origins and dates.

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76 See King 2006, pp 7-8.
77 See James M. Robinson’s account of these fascinating circumstances surrounding the Nag Hammadi discovery in Robinson 1997, pp 3-33.
A majority of leading scholars, such as Karen King, John D. Turner, Roelof van den Broek and Birger Pearson, argue for a date around 150. The main argument for such a dating of the text is the church father Irenaeus of Lyon’s refutation of a Gnostic text in *Adv. Haer.* 129, whose cosmology to a high degree resembles the mythological framework of the *Apocryphon of John.* Scholars such as King argues that since Irenaeus wrote his refutation around 180, the *Apocryphon of John* must have been composed prior to that and had time to spread to Rome where Irenaeus was situated at the time.

This assumption has, however, been questioned by scholars such as Waldstein and Wisse, who argue in the introduction to their synoptic edition of the text that Irenaeus most likely did *not* know the *Apocryphon of John* but rather refuted another text which the author of the *Apocryphon of John* used as an influence.

Since the textual evidence from the second century testifies to the existence of a wide variety philosophical as well as Christian and Jewish schools of thought, of which many resembles the *Apocryphon of John,* I will side with the majority of scholars who date the text to 120 to 150 CE.

### 2.2 The Location of the Text

To establish a location in which the text was initially composed is almost as hard as to provide a dating of the text. Probably the text was composed in an urban and religiously diverse environment, due to the clear influences from Greek mythology, as well as the references to "foreign" religions. Furthermore, the prominence of Jewish themes in the *Apocryphon of John* also suggests a city with a significant Jewish population as well as a place where Judaism intermingled with philosophy. Therefore, several scholars, such as Karen King and Wolf-Dieter Hauschild have traced the text to the city of Alexandria.

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78 Van den Broek 1996, p 53; Turner 2001, p 220; Pearson 2007, p 29. King 2006 p 17 does not suggest an exact date, but argues that the text must have been written sometime before 180. A minority of scholars, such as Stephen Davies 2006, p XXV, argue for an even earlier dating of the text and suggest around 80.

79 King 2006, p 17.

80 Waldstein & Wisse 1995, p 1. Further, Wisse writes in his article “After the Synopsis: Prospects and Problems in Establishing a Critical Text of the Apocryphon of John and in Defining its Historical Location” that there are not sufficient reason to assume that any of the Nag Hammadi texts were composed prior to the third century (Wisse 1997, p 149).

81 See for example Goehringer 1981.

82 The perhaps best example of this is the passage where John is confronted by a Pharisee whose name is Arimanios (NH II 1:8-9), which is a clear reference to Ahriman, the evil principle of Zoroastrianism. See also King 2006, pp 16-17.

83 King 2006, pp 13-17. King argues that there are several features in the Apocryphon of John that suggests an Egyptian setting: the use of the Decans, the connection between the body parts and the divinities, the theriomorphic
It should be mentioned that there are also other theories about the location of the Apocryphon of John. Helmut Koester, for example, locates the text to Syria.\textsuperscript{84} I find King’s argumentation the most plausible, however, since the text exhibits several typically Egyptian features and must be located in an urban environment. I share King’s conviction that if the text were not written in Alexandria, “it would need to have been written in a place just like it.”\textsuperscript{85} A working hypothesis for this essay will therefore be that the text was written in Alexandria.

\textbf{2.3 The Jewish and the Christian Hypothesis – A Critical Discussion of Two Theories of Origin}

The origin of Gnosticism has been a widely contested issue. In the early twentieth century, many scholars undertook the task to explain Gnosticism through genealogy – and thus trace the origins of Gnosticism to one specific tradition.\textsuperscript{86} A popular scholarly understanding was to perceive Gnosticism as an originally oriental phenomenon, often thought to derive from Iranian dualism. Today, most scholars have rejected this genealogical approach to Gnostic origins, since the Nag Hammadi texts – much like other contemporary documents – exhibit a variety of influences and therefore cannot be reduced to and derived to one single tradition.\textsuperscript{87} There is still, however, an ongoing debate whether Gnosticism first emerged in a Christian or in a Jewish environment.

So why is this important for this essay? Although this issue may not seem to be of immediate concern, I argue that the relation between the salvific figure of Pronoia and Jesus is of crucial importance for the research questions of this essay, since it is decisive for how the role of Pronoia should be understood.

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\textsuperscript{84} See Koester 1982, pp 212-213. See also Pearson 1990, p 51, who locates the origin of Gnosticism to Palestina and Syria. Pearson 1990, p 200 also writes that “the place of origin of the myth (that is, the myth of the Apocryphon of John) remains an open question.”
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\textsuperscript{85} King 2006, p 17. King also writes: “Many cities of the Mediterranean world, including Antioch and Rome, can also be described as pluralistic urban environments. The cumulative evidence, however, points directly to Alexandria.”
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\textsuperscript{86} King 2003 provides a good overview and critique of the older scholarly paradigm. See King 2003, pp 20-109.
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\textsuperscript{87} Because of this variety of influences – from Stoic, Platonic, Aristotelian and Pythagorean philosophy, Jewish and Greek mythology, Egyptian culture, Iranian dualism etc. – some scholars tend to classify Gnosticism as a syncretistic phenomenon. Karen King, among others, has argued that this is an inappropriate designation, since it implies that some phenomena are mixed, in contrast to other which are “pure.” I side with King on this issue. See King 2006, pp 33-34.
\end{flushright}
If, for example, the *Apocryphon of John* emerged in a Christian environment, as a distinct Christian exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, where the author struggled to distance himself from the Jewish traditions while at the same time make sense of the sacred scriptures, we must then understand the role of Pronoia and Christ as complementary or interchangeable in order to explain why Pronoia occupies a more significant soteriological role than Christ. In some of the passages, where Pronoia has a clear soteriological role, Karen King chooses to blend the two characters:

In the hymn, Pronoia descends three times into the darkness in order to illumine her seed and bring them the protection of baptismal sealing. Yet when this hymn is inserted into the *Secret revelation of John*, it is put in Christ’s mouth. Thus it is no longer Pronoia who speaks, but Christ who declares ‘I am the perfect Pronoia of the all.’ Thus Christ becomes identified with Pronoia-Barbelo, the first power who came forth from the invisible spirit.

While this is an interesting interpretation that highlights the role of Christ, it does so at the expense of Pronoia, who is reduced to just another aspect of Christ. While this reading is important – since this was probably how Christ and Pronoia were understood at a later Christian stage - it should not be the only one.

If, on the contrary, the text – or the mythological framework used in the text – emerged in a Jewish environment, Pronoia was originally the main protagonist of the text and the sole soteriological figure. According to proponents of the Jewish hypothesis, the text was “Christianized” first at a later stage, when a prologue and an epilogue, which featured the apostle John and the resurrected Jesus was added, and a long dialogue about the conditions of salvation was interpolated. According to this theory, Pronoia was already part of a complete soteriological system when the text was Christianized and Jesus was added. Therefore, it is not the role of Pronoia that needs an explanation, as in the Christian hypothesis, but rather the role of Christ.

Since this issue is crucial for the role of Pronoia in the *Apocryphon of John*, I will return to it and discuss it more in detail at the end of this chapter. Before I do this, I will present the main arguments for and against a hypothesis of Jewish origins. I will also provide a critical analysis and discussion of these arguments.

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88 This is the view advocated by Gerard P. Luttikhuizen. See Luttikhuizen 2006 passim. His position is also discussed more extensively below.
89 King 2006, p 245-246.
90 See the article “Sophia and Christ in the *Apocryphon of John*” from 1988 where King addresses the problem of how feminine salvific figures tended to be replaced by male counterparts in later redactions.
Although a Jewish theory of origin was put forth by Friedländer as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, it was first after the Nag Hammadi discovery that it became popular. Its proponents – scholars such as Gedaliahu Stroumsa and Gilles Quispel – argued that the many significant Jewish elements, as well as the lack – and sometimes total absence – of Christian motifs in the Gnostic texts supported the notion that Gnosticism was an originally Jewish phenomenon. The perhaps most prominent advocate of this theory today is Birger Pearson. According to Pearson, the mythological framework in the Apocryphon of John cannot simply be understood as a rejection of Jewish traditions, but must also be seen as a characteristically Jewish exegesis. Pearson writes (about the Apocryphon of John):

This commentary is not created ad hoc by the Gnostic author. It is, in fact, a Gnostic synthesis of several Jewish (originally non-Gnostic) traditions of Genesis exegesis. These exegetical traditions include: (1) the Hellenistic-Jewish (probably Alexandrian) tradition that God relegated the creation of man’s mortal nature to the angels, (2) the Hellenistic-Jewish (again probably Alexandrian) distinction, based on the LXX text of Gen. 2:7, between man’s lower and higher soul, that is, ψυχή and πνεῦμα, and (3) the Palestinian tradition that Adam was created as a “formless mass” (Heb. gôlem) into which God breathed his life-giving breath.

Not everyone shares Pearson’s conviction, however. Also Gerard P. Luttikhuizen uses the Apocryphon of John in his argumentation, but reaches a conclusion that is the complete opposite of Pearson’s position. According to Luttikhuizen:

This Gnostic document has no special interest in the religious institutions of Judaism. Its central issue is the nature of the biblical creator God – the God, that is, who is worshipped by Jews and (non-Gnostic) Christians alike.

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94 Quispel 1978, p 48: “There is really nothing which prevents us assuming that this introduction was written by a Christian in order to Christianize an already existing document which was completely alien to Christian views”. Stroumsa 1984, p 170: “These Jewish elements could hardly be later influences upon a movement further and further estranged from anything Jewish; they must point to Jewish roots of Gnosticism, roots which appear to have run very deep.”
95 Jaan Lahe’s monograph Gnosis und Judentum: Alttestamentliche und jüdische Motiven in der gnostischen Literatur und das Ursprungsproblem der Gnosis is a recent and important contribution to this field of research. In a review of this book, Pearson writes: “In my opinion, this is the most important book on ancient Gnosticism published in many years, although an English edition would extend its readership.” Pearson 2012. Lahe’s position is in many ways close to Pearson’s. In regard to the question of Gnostic origins Lahe 2012, p 387 writes: “Die Benutzung des ATs und der jüdischen Quellen und Überlieferungen kann als Beweis dafür gelten, dass die Autoren gnostischer Texte Juden waren oder zumindest in enger Verbindung mit dem Judentum standen.”
97 Pearson 1990, pp 33-34.
98 Luttikhuizen 2006, p 23. Luttikhuizen is far from alone in his rejection of the Jewish hypothesis. We find a similar position already in Hans Jonas response to Gilles Quispel in the anthology The Bible in Modern Scholarship from 1965. For other advocators of the Christian hypothesis, see King 2003 and 2006; Pagels
According to Luttikhuizen, texts such as the Apocryphon of John are better understood when read in the light of NT texts such as Hebrews and Galatians, as well as later patristic works such as the letter of Barnabas and the works of Justin Martyr. The negative portrayal of the creator god and the degradation of Jewish traditions should therefore not be understood as an interjewish attempt to make sense of problematic passages in the Hebrew Bible, but rather as a “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity. Similarly to the patristic texts, the author of the Apocryphon of John struggles to distance itself from Jewish traditions, at the same time as he tries to make sense of the old sacred scriptures.

Luttikhuizen’s hypothesis is interesting, but it fails to explain the fundamental differences between the Apocryphon of John and texts such as Hebrews and the Letter to Barnabas. While the latter texts – particularly Hebrews - tend to understand the advent of Christ as a (or perhaps “the”) decisive turning point in history, the Apocryphon of John lacks this perspective. In the Apocryphon of John there is an ongoing battle already from the start of the text, between the highest god and Pronoia on the one hand, and Ialdabaoth and his minion on the other hand. Even with the Christian framework, Christ is nothing but one of several salvific figures (of which Pronoia is the most prominent). Furthermore, the author of the Apocryphon of John does not seem to read the Hebrew Bible in the light of NT texts and traditions, but rather from the perspective of the creation narrative Plato’s Timaios. Although both the Apocryphon of John and the patristic literature takes on a similar task – to make sense of the Hebrew Bible in the light of new religious developments, their approach, their religious background and the religious texts that they valued seems to have been quite different.

In his monograph Gnosis und Judentum: Alttestamentliche und jüdishe Motive in der gnostischen Literatur und das Ursprungsproblem der Gnosis, Lahe has compiled a list of famous argument for and against the Jewish hypothesis. Since Lahe’s compilation...
provides a good overview of the two scholarly positions and their traditional arguments, I will summarize it here in a shortened form.\(^\text{100}\)

**Arguments in support of the Christian hypothesis:**

1. None of the Gnostic elements available can in their present state be dated before the time of the New Testament.
2. All of the opponents of the New Testament epistles (1 and 2 Joh; the Pastorals) which scholars have identified as Gnostics, seem to have been Christians.
3. The opponents of Ignatius of Antioch were Christians.
4. Famous Gnostics such as Satornil and Kerinth understood themselves as Christians.
5. Many of the Nag Hammadi texts contain explicit Christian themes.

**Arguments in support of the Jewish Hypothesis:**

1. Many of the Nag Hammadi texts either lack Christian themes or contain only a minimum of Christian elements. These texts often contain explicit Jewish themes.\(^\text{101}\)
2. Hermetic texts, such as *Corpus Hermeticum*, which show great affinities with the Gnostic systems, lack Christian themes and must have been influence by other traditions.
3. Mandeanism, which emerged as a baptismal sect, contains few (according to Lahe insignificant and secondary) Christian elements.\(^\text{102}\) Unlike most other Gnostic texts, these traditions does not show any influences from Greek philosophy. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume a Jewish background, rather than a Christian or Hellenistic.
4. Irenaeus’ description of the Gnostic system of Simon Magus – the alleged founder of Gnosticism - contains many Jewish but surprisingly few Christian elements. Regardless of whether the mythic Simon Magus from Acts actually advocated this Gnostic system, Lahe suggests that the Simonian system originally was Jewish and that it first later became Christianized.

\(^{100}\) For Lahe’s compilation of arguments, see Lahe 2012, pp 64-68. All of these arguments are discussed extensively throughout the whole book.

\(^{101}\) See for example the *Apocalypse of Adam*, the *Three Steeles of Seth* and the *Hypostasis of the Archons*.

\(^{102}\) See Lahes’s comments in Lahe 2012, pp 67-68.
I find several of these traditional arguments for and against Jewish origins of Gnosticism problematic. Argument 2 and 3 in support of the Christian hypothesis are both surprisingly weak. Although the polemic passages in 1 John and the Pastorals traditionally have been identified as Gnostics, this notion has also been questioned by many modern NT exegetes.\textsuperscript{103}

The opponents of Ignatius of Antioch were mainly two types: Judaizing Christ believers\textsuperscript{104} and believers with a docetic understanding of Christ.\textsuperscript{105} It is the latter of these types that traditionally have been associated with Gnosticism. Several modern scholars – particularly King and Williams – reject this tendency to use Gnosticism as a collective term referring to everything that was condemned by the proto-orthodox leaders.\textsuperscript{106} While a few Gnostics did have a docetic understanding of Christ, other did not, which is evident in for example the \textit{Gospel of Truth} where Christ suffers on the cross.\textsuperscript{107} And just as all Gnostics were not docetists, all docetists were not Gnostics. The terms are not interchangeable and Gnosticism is therefore not an appropriate designation for the opponents of Ignatius of Antioch.

Neither is argument 4 in support of the Christian hypothesis convincing. The proponents of the Jewish hypothesis do not deny that many of the famous Gnostics were Christians; they merely argue that many of the mythical elements of Gnosticism originated in Jewish circles and that they were later adapted by Christ believers. The existence of prominent Christian Gnostics does not contradict a theory of Jewish origins.

I also find argument 2 in support of the Jewish hypothesis flawed. Although \textit{Corpus Hermeticum} shows many affinities with the Gnostic system of for example the \textit{Apocryphon of John} and \textit{On the Origin of the World}, it also differs in a variety of ways, of which the more positive evaluation of the material world is just one example. On the same points that the hermetic texts differ from Gnosticism, they tend to resemble the Middle- and Neo-Platonic traditions. The question, therefore, is whether it is reasonable to assume that \textit{Corpus Hermeticum} must have been influenced by non-Christian Gnosticism just because it lack Christian elements, or if \textit{Philosophical Platonic

\textsuperscript{103} For one of many examples, see Lloyd Pietersen’s article “Despicable Deviants: Labelling Theory and the Polemic of the Pastorals.” Pietersen 1997, p 345 writes: “In summary, much historical-critical work has resulted in gross generalizations concerning the Jewish or Gnostic identity of the opponents.”

\textsuperscript{104} See for example the letter to the Philippians, 6:1-2.

\textsuperscript{105} See the letter to the Smyrneans, chapters 1-6.

\textsuperscript{106} See King 2003, pp 208-217 for an interesting discussion of Docetism and Gnosticism.

\textsuperscript{107} See NH I 20:10-14.
environment could have produced the same text. In my opinion, the non-Christian system of *Corpus Hermeticum* does not in any way exclude the possibility that Gnosticism emerged in a Christian environment.

Neither do I find the fourth argument convincing. Even if the Simonian Gnostic system – which we only know from Irenaeus polemical descriptions – contains prominent Jewish elements and fewer Christian motifs, it is hard to conclude whether these Christian elements are secondary or not, without the primary sources at hand.

So, which arguments remain? As stated above, there are, on the one hand, several Nag Hammadi texts with explicit Jewish themes that lack Christian elements. But, on the other hand, there are also several Nag Hammadi texts which are explicitly Christian. It is, however, difficult to draw any conclusions from this, other than that the Nag Hammadi library features a variety of religious movements, rooted in different traditions.

It is also true that none of the Nag Hammadi texts can be dated before the time of the New Testament. It is questionable, however, if this really can serve as an argument against Jewish Gnosticism. Although first and second century Judaism was influenced by ideas advocated by Christ believing Jews, I find the notion that Judaism suddenly stagnated and stopped progressing after the advent of Christianity somewhat problematic.

Unfortunately, Luttikhuizen does not discuss how Mandeanism fits in his dual hypothesis, since the existence of Mandeanism provides one of the better arguments for Gnostic movements with Jewish roots. Neither does he respond to Pearson’s, in my opinion, strongest argument, namely that the exegesis in the *Apocryphon of John* shows strong affinities with several Jewish schools of interpretation. Nor does he comment on the philological arguments that Lahe and Pearson puts forth, where it is argued that there are passages in the Gnostic texts that contains puns on Hebrew and Aramaic words and which in some cases seems to be based on rabbinic accounts, rather than on

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108 Also Williams 1996 leaves this out in his discussion. King 2003, pp 205-206 uses mandeanism in her argumentation and lets the movement serve as a proof that a Gnostic worldview is not incompatible with a positive ethic: “The view that Gnosticism is incapable of a positive ethic is contravened by the evidence, such as the ethnographic studies of Mandeanism, which have made it abundantly clear that a dualistic Gnostic cosmology is compatible with an ethic that can sustain a community over time.” I find this argumentation, however, strangely incompatible with her main hypothesis, that it is necessary to abandon the term Gnosticism altogether, since she in this case uses the category of Gnosticism – and not Christianity – to make interesting comparisons between Mandeanism and the Christian Gnostic movements. King also discusses Mandeanism on pp 138-140, but argues for a quite late date.
the Hebrew Bible itself. This last argument does not exclude the possibility that these passages were composed by Christians – King argues for example that the Christians in Alexandria studied under Jewish teachers but it presupposes that the author(s) was well versed in both Hebrew and in the Jewish rabbinic traditions. Since Pearson’s philological argumentation is in complete opposition to Luttikhuizen’s dual hypothesis, it is unfortunate that he does not respond to it in his monograph.

An argument, often used by scholars who argue that Gnosticism originated in a Christian environment, is that such a radical rejection of the creator God cannot possibly have emerged in Jewish circles. Proponents of the Jewish hypothesis, such as Lahe and Pearson also find this argument particularly difficult to respond to. Lahe refers to it as the main argument (Hauptargument) against the theory of a Jewish origin and Pearson suggests that the Gnostic movements must have emerged as a result of the existential despair and alienation experienced by Jews during the first century B.C.E or first century C.E.

Karen King, who rejects the Jewish hypothesis, writes:

How could Jews have produced a religion in which the creator god of Genesis was portrayed as a weak, arrogant, malicious and inferior deity? Such a position appears so anti-Jewish as to

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109 Pearson 1990 pp 43-46 suggests that the “wisdom of the serpent” motif in The Testimony of Truth, the Apocryphon of John and the Hypostasis of the Archons shows influences from not only the Hebrew Bible, but also rabbinic material. In Genesis 3:1, LXX uses the word φρονιμώτατος and HB uses the word חرؤש . According to Pearson, none of the adjectives are as strong as wise (Coptic: ΟΥΚΑΒΕ), which is also used in the Targum Ps.-Jonathan. Even more convincing, Pearson argues, is the association between Eve, in the Gnostic texts referred to as “the instructor of life” and the serpent. According to Pearson, these passages involving Eve, the serpent and their functions as instructors, show influence from Aramaic sources, since only Aramaic would allow the wordplay. The Aramaic word for serpent is חיויא while Eve is חוה . Eve and the serpent are both related to the Aramaic verb מינ which means “show”, “tell.” This connection is made in both Gnostic and Rabbinic sources. This is only one of several instances where Pearson shows philological connections between Hebrew/Aramaic and the words used in the Nag Hammadi texts. See also Pearson 1990, pp 47-49 and 67-68. See also Lahe 2011, pp 357-373. Lahe argues that the philological connections serve as proof that the author(s) must have been well versed in Palestinian Jewish tradition and that he either was Jewish himself or stood in close connection to Jewish teachers. Lahe 2011, pp 391: “Solche Wortspiele können ein Beleg dafür sein, dass die Autoren der Nag Hammadi-Schriften die jüdischen Traditionen, darunter auch die palästinisch-jüdischen Traditionen, kannten und mit der Träger dieser Traditionen Kontakte gehabt haben.”


110 Luttikhuizen does respond to Pearson’s article “Jewish Haggadic Traditions in The Testimony of Truth From Nag Hammadi (CG IX,3) and questions whether “midrash” is an appropriate designation for the Gnostic text, but he ignores the philological argumentation. This is unfortunate, since Pearson builds his hypothesis on mainly philological parallels. See Luttikhuizen’s discussion of Pearson’s article in Luttikhuizen 2006, pp 78-82.

111 Lahe 2012, p 394.

be impossible to attribute to devout Jewish imagination; hence scholars resort to Jonas notion of crisis and alienation.\textsuperscript{114}

There are several reasons why I find King’s argumentation problematic. Quite surprisingly – and in stark contrast to her nuanced understanding of early Christian diversity\textsuperscript{115} – King exhibits this simplistic and stereotyping view of ancient Judaism, built on the essentialist presupposition that a people of a certain culture and religion behave in a particular and predictable manner. I share Foucault’s suspicion towards this kind of reasoning and would argue that just as historical developments does not follow a certain logical and linear pattern, neither do people. According to Foucault, historical change is regulated above all by power interests and particularly by “the will to knowledge.”\textsuperscript{116} The “will to knowledge” is the desire to define truth, the struggle to gain influence over others and to define their reality, just as well as one’s own. Foucault writes:

> The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them; controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function as to overcome their rulers through their own rules.\textsuperscript{117}

With this dynamic perspective applied to the problem – where historical change is understood as unpredictable and regulated by power struggles rather than rules of regularity – there is no longer a need to raise King’s rhetorical question, simply because there is not necessarily a contradiction between a Jewish identity and a negative portrayal of the creator god of Genesis. There are several indications of a tension between Alexandrian Judaism and the Graeco-Roman traditions. Therefore, I argue that the rethinking of the creation narrative in the Hebrew Bible should be understood both as an attempt to redefine the creation narrative in order to adapt it to a new urban context, as well as to approach the universalistic theology of the philosophical schools contemporary to the text and thereby reduce cultural and theological tension.

Therefore, I find Pearson’s suggestion, that the Gnostic exegesis must be the result of a historical crisis and the experience of existential anxiety, almost as problematic as King’s. As Michael Allen Williams observes, many of the Gnostic texts – and particularly the \textit{Apocryphon of John} – reinterprets famous and problematic passages of the Hebrew

\textsuperscript{114} King 2003, p 181.
\textsuperscript{115} King’s nuanced discussion of early Christian diversity, as well as her call for an expansion of the religious category of Christianity is one of her many great scholarly contributions.
\textsuperscript{116} See section 1.3.2 “The Will to Knowledge and the Conditions of History.”
\textsuperscript{117} Foucault 1984, p 86.
Bible. In previous scholarship, scholars tended to label these exegetical efforts as “protest exegesis” and understand these passages as systematic attempts to reverse all the values of the Hebrew Bible.\footnote{Williams 1996, pp 53-57.} Williams rejects this notion and points out that there is diversity among the Gnostic sources and that they tend to differ in their evaluation of these problematic passages. The serpent in the garden is for example positively evaluated in \textit{On the Origin of the World}, while it is distinctively negative in the \textit{Apocryphon of John}. Williams argues – and I agree with him in this – that there were no systematic attempts to reverse values or to practice a protest exegetical reading of the texts. Rather, the author of these texts attempted to solve theological problems – and thus to redefine and rethink the truth of the holy texts.

The Gnostics were, however, far from alone in their efforts to redefine theological truths. Precursor can be found already in the Eleatic philosophers from the fifth century B.C.E. who found the anthropomorphic depictions of the gods in the Homeric works repulsive. (This makes me wonder – would King label the exegetical works of Xenophanes as anti-Hellenic?). Particularly in later philosophy, there are numerous examples of this tendency to oppose and redefine older theological truths.

Furthermore, there are many indications of a tension between Alexandrian Judaism and Greek philosophy. Long before the advent of Christianity, Judaism was criticized, sometimes even mocked by representatives of different philosophical schools. Boys-Stones refers to this tendency as a “systematic form of anti-Semitism.”\footnote{Boys-Stones 2001, p 60.} Although there must be several reasons for this polemical stance against Judaism, Boys-Stones identifies a tension between traditional Jewish beliefs and the “syncretized theology of Graeco-Egyptian hegemony” as a main cause.\footnote{See Boys-Stones 2001, pp 60-61. Boys-Stones writes: “The reasons for this reactions are, of course, enormously complex, but one issue stands out in particular, and that is the termination of the Jewish community as a whole to preserve its traditional beliefs and practices in self-conscious opposition to the syncretized theology of Graeco-Egyptian hegemony. By their refusal to compromise with the customs and beliefs of the Greeks, the Jews were (at least the Greeks felt that they were) implicitly questioning their validity; and this, from the pagan point of view, was tantamount not just to ‘godlessness’ but actually because theology was so central to the Greek conception of polity, to subversion, a refusal to accept the political norms of Alexandrian life.”} In other words, the Jews claimed exclusive access to the theological truth and denied the validity of the Graeco-Roman religious traditions. As a consequence of this rejection and breaking of the Graeco-Roman norms, the Greeks felt a need to depreciate the Jewish traditions. In support of this hypothesis,
Boys-Stones quotes Apion’s refutation of the Jews,\textsuperscript{121} where Apion argues that Judaism is a corruption of Egyptian culture. According to Apion, the Jews shared a common cultural and religious origin with the Egyptians. When they were expelled from Egypt, they developed an own, degenerated understanding of this religious origin, of which the Jewish rites and laws were a result.

These, and similar anti-semitic assertions, were refuted by Jewish apologetics such as Aristobulus and Philo, who argued that Judaism was the most ancient religious tradition and that it had exerted a considerable influence on other, later traditions.\textsuperscript{122} By doing so, they wanted, on the one hand, to depict Judaism as the most ancient and exalted religious tradition, thus countering other claims of religious primacy and superiority. On the other hand, they sought not to refute other philosophical traditions, but to reconcile them with Judaism. The truth conveyed through allegorical reading of the Hebrew Bible, could also be mediated through the philosophical traditions and some of the Greek myths.\textsuperscript{123} As a result of this reasoning, Philo did not only solve theological problems and contradictions in the Hebrew bible; he also managed to reduce religious and cultural tension between Alexandrian Judaism and its Hellenistic environment. Although Philo claimed the primacy of the Hebrew Bible, he did not deny the value of other traditions, which – according to his understanding – had derived from it.

As I will discuss more extensively below, there are many similarities between the exegesis of Philo and the redefinition of sacred text in the \textit{Apocryphon of John}. When Philo rejected the literal understanding of certain particularly problematical passages in the Hebrew Bible, he also distanced himself from many fellow Jews. At the same time, he approached the philosophical traditions when he read and interpreted these passages in the light of Hellenistic philosophy. Similar to Philo, the author of the \textit{Apocryphon of John} tries to reconcile the creation narrative of Plato’s \textit{Timaeus} with the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{124} Unlike Philo, however, the author of the \textit{Apocryphon of John} seems to have used \textit{Timaeus} as a proof text, rather than the creation narrative of the Hebrew Bible. When he was able

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\textsuperscript{121} Unfortunately, almost of all of the Greek anti-Jewish rhetoric from the Hellenistic period is only preserved in the second hand accounts of Josephus. For Josephus’ account of the polemic of Apion, see Against Apion.
\textsuperscript{122} For just one of many examples of this tendency, see \textit{The Eternity of the World} 13-19 where Philo tries to reconcile \textit{Timaeus} with Genesis, while at the same time arguing for the primacy of Judaism. For Aristobulus, see Maren R. Niehoff’s discussion in Niehoff 2011, pp 58-74.
\textsuperscript{123} See also Philo’s reoccurring references to “the poets,” “the mythologists” and “the philosophers” in for example \textit{On the Giants} 58-61 and \textit{On the Confusion of the Tongues} 2-7.
\textsuperscript{124} That the author of the \textit{Apocryphon of John} is influenced by \textit{Timaeus} is beyond any doubt and acknowledged by scholars ranging from Pearson 1990 and Turner 2001 to King 2006 and Piële 2006.
\end{flushleft}
to reconcile the two texts, he did so. When he encountered problematic passages where the two texts seemed to contradict each other, he altered the text of Genesis in order to harmonize it with the creation narrative of Plato, often introducing his exegesis with the phrase: “But it was not as Moses said.” While some of Philo’s exegetical efforts must have seemed unorthodox to the Jewish population of Alexandria, the author of the Apocryphon of John strayed even further from the traditional interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, with his demonization of the creator god being the most radical of these theological departures. Although this fundamental blending and redefinition of the two creation narratives must have resulted in the most disfavored position among traditional Jews, the adoption of the apophatic deity of the platonic tradition – and clear rejection of divine anthropomorphism – must have gained the favor of the advocators of the philosophical traditions.

The last – and for this essay most important argument for a Hellenistic-Jewish origin - is the relation between Pronoia and Christ in the Apocryphon of John. As discussed above, there are several passages in the Apocryphon of John where the roles of Pronoia and Christ seem to overlap. As Pearson points out, this blending of the role of Pronoia and Christ is not entirely consistent. In both of the shorter versions, in NH III and BG, it is the Epinoia of light, an aspect (or “reflection”) of Pronoia, that reveals itself for Adam and Eve and instructs them. In the longer accounts, in NH II and NH IV, Christ, the narrator of the text appears and replaces the Epinoia of light. As a result of this interpolation, Christ becomes the main salvific figure of the passage, while Pronoia instead seems to be identified with the tree of knowledge.

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126 Liddell & Scott 1924 translate Epinoia as 1: thought, notion; 2: power of thought, inventiveness; 3: invention, device; 4: purpose, design. Waldstein & Wisse 1996, pp 132-133, have chosen to translate Epinoia as “reflection.” I have kept the Greek designation in order to preserve the ambiguity of the name.
Therefore, Adam gave her a name: The Mother of all the living. Through the authority of the height and the revelation, *Epinoia instructed him the knowledge from the tree in the form of an eagle*. She opened his eyes through eating of the knowledge, so that he would remember his perfection, for the two of them were in a fall of ignorance.

*NH II 23:23-33*

Therefore, she was called Life, which is the mother of the living. Through Pronoia’s authority of heaven and through her, they tasted the perfect knowledge. *I revealed myself in the form of an eagle, on the tree of knowledge*, which is the Epinoia from the Pronoia of the pure light, so that I could instruct them and raise them from the depth of sleep, for the two of them were in a fall and they understood their nakedness.
Another example of the same tendency to assign Christian names to prominent and originally non-Christian characters in the *Apocryphon of John* is the inconsistencies between BG 30:14-17 and NH II 6:23-25. As, among others, Pearson points out, the character Autogenes is explicitly identified with Christ in the BG version, but not in NH II.127

According to Pearson, these inconsistencies in assigning the role of a savior to either Christ or Pronoia show that the passages in some way have been altered. Pearson argues that the purpose of these alterations has been to enhance the role of Christ at the expense of Pronoia. John D. Turner takes a similar stance:

The longer version’s addition of the Pronoia dialogue had the effect of recapitulating Pronoia/Barbelo’s three basic salvific visitations from the higher to the lower world narrated in the main body of the *Apocryphon of John* as salvific deeds of Christ himself. It was he, not Pronoia, who initiated 1) the downward projection of the image of the First Man, 2) the sending of the spiritual Eve as Adam’s enlightener and mother of the savior Seth, and 3) his own final advent into the world to enlighten the contemporary Sethians by revealing to John the Sethian sacred history told in the main body of work. 128

Both Pearson and Turner draw the conclusion that the text was an originally non-Christian myth, in which Pronoia was the main salvific figure. It was first at a later stage, when the texts became Christianized and a Christian framework was added, that also the main body of the text was altered when editors incorporated Christian glosses.

As Pearson points out, there are texts such as *Eugnostos the Blessed* and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* that provide a good analogy to the redactorial work of the *Apocryphon of John* and serves as proof of Christian redaction of originally non-Christian texts.129 *Eugnostos the Blessed* and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* are two different versions of the same text. While the former lacks any Christian references whatsoever, the latter contains Christian characters and Christ as a narrator, just as the *Apocryphon of John*.

With all the arguments taken together, I find it reasonable to conclude that the texts emerged in a Jewish Hellenic context and that it was later Christianized. Luttikhuizen’s dual hypothesis – that Hellenic-Christian converts composed the text - is interesting, but it fails to explain the inconsistencies between the different versions, as well as the

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127 See Pearson 2007, pp 63-64. See also Turner 2001, pp 213-214: “Christianization has caused the third member of the supreme divine triad to be designated as Christ rather than Autogenes, who is demoted to a higher level, even though he still tends to be regarded as the father of the divine Adamas.”


129 See Pearson 2007, p 63.
philological arguments and the strong affinities between the exegesis of the text and several rabbinic schools of interpretation.

My intention is not to argue for a single origin of Gnosticism. Rather, I share Williams’ and King's conviction that we must refrain from generalizations and discuss the texts individually when it is possible. Therefore, I want to emphasize that I have limited to my discussion to the *Apocryphon of John* and that I do not reject the possibility the similar ideas could have emerged in different contexts, perhaps even independent of each other.

Neither is it my intention to argue that the *Apocryphon of John* cannot be understood as a Christian text or that the earliest, non-Christian version is in any way more “genuine” than the later, Christianized text. That the text was used by Christ believers at a later stage is beyond any doubt. The problem is that it is impossible to harmonize the two characters of Pronoia and Christ in the present state of the text. If one chooses to emphasize the role of Christ, the role of Pronoia is drastically reduced, since the editor has given Christ a more prominent role at the expense of Pronoia. But if one chooses to emphasize the role of Pronoia, Christ suddenly becomes superfluous, since Pronoia already is an active an all compassing savior figure. There is simply not enough space for the two saviors, since they stem from two different traditions.

Therefore, what I do want to emphasize is the need to expand the perspective and include both the earlier understanding of the myth, where Pronoia is the main salvific figure, and the later, edited version, where Christ is incorporated and Pronoia occupies a more marginal role.

I will now proceed to discuss the role of Pronoia in the text and how it relates to the concept of Pronoia in other religious texts, contemporary to the *Apocryphon of John*.

### 3. Pronoia in The *Apocryphon of John*

Up to this point, I have located the *Apocryphon of John* in Alexandria – or, to use Karen King’s phrasing, “a place just like it.” On the question of date, I have followed a majority of scholars and placed the text in the middle of the second century.130

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130 The question of date is particularly difficult. To be more precise, I tend to follow Turner 2001 p 220, who dates the early pre-Christian myth to the beginning of the second century and the later, edited version to the middle or late second century.
I have also followed Pearson, Lahe and Turner and suggested that the earliest version of the text emerged in a Jewish context and that the text was later Christianized. Unlike for example Pearson, I have argued that the negative depiction of the creator god does not need to be explained as the result of a Jewish crisis, but rather as an attempt to redefine the creation narrative and adapt problematic and obsolete passages to an urban setting, as well as to approach the universalism of the philosophical schools and thereby reduce cultural tension.\footnote{131 See the discussion above, in the proceeding chapter.}

I will now proceed to discuss how the concept of Pronoia fits in this Alexandrian Jewish-Hellenistic context.

### 3.1 Pronoia in Greek and Jewish Thought

According to Peter Frick, the tendency to use Pronoia in a philosophical sense can be traced to Plato’s use of the word in *Timaeus*\footnote{132 See *Timaeus* 30c and 44c.} and *Laws* book 10. Particularly in *Laws* 896E-903, Plato elaborates on the idea of a providential “soul” (ψυχὴ) that governs the cosmos. The concept of Pronoia – a benevolent world soul governing the earthly events – became increasingly important in later philosophy, where the term often was used in discussions related to issues such as fate and the free will of man.\footnote{133 For a great discussion – and problematization – of the Platonic-Stoic debate about fate, providence and the free will of man, see Richard Sharples 2007, pp 169-188.} As the discussions grew more technical and advanced, Platonic philosophers such as Pseudo-Plutarch even developed systems of hierarchies, where differentiations were made between three different levels of providence.\footnote{134 See Pseudo-Plutarch’s *On Fate* 574 C-D.} It is in this context that scholars such as Denzey Lewis and Williams have placed the role of fate in the *Apocrypon of John*. For a discussion on the hypothesis of a tripartite structure of fate in the text, see chapter five.

Pronoia also occurs in some of the later, more Hellenized texts of the Septuagint. Here, Pronoia often functions as an extension of the Jewish god, as an agent who carries out God’s will on earth. In the old Greek version of Daniel 6:19 (but not in the Theodotian translation of the text), it is God’s providence, Pronoia, who shuts the mouths of the lions. Pronoia also occurs frequently in the books of Maccabees.\footnote{135 For all occurrences, in the Maccabees, see 2 Macc. 4:6; 3 Macc. 4:21, 5:30; 4 Macc. 9:24, 13:19, 17:22.} In 3 Macc. 4:21 we are told that it was the “invincible providence of him who was aiding the
Jews from heaven.” Similarly, the author writes in 4 Macc. 17:22 that “and through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated.” The author of the Wisdom of Solomon also expresses a similar view of Pronoia: “But it is your providence, O Father, that steers its course, because you have given it a path in the sea, and a safe way through the waves.”

However, there is an ambiguity in the depiction of Pronoia in these texts. On the one hand, Pronoia is used to designate the abstract concept of God’s providential activity in the world. In this manner, Pronoia is only an aspect of God. On the other hand, there is also a tendency to portray Pronoia as an independent entity, separated from God. This is also evident in the works of Philo.

In a quite complex theological system, influenced primarily by Stoic thought, Philo identifies several powers under god. Above these powers is god’s Logos, which is described as “the Word who is antecedent to all that has come into existence.” The relation between the Jewish god and his Logos is further specified in Who is the Heir of Divine Things? 206. According to Philo, the Logos is:

Neither unbegotten as God or begotten as you, but midway between these extremes, serving as a pledge for both; to the Creator as assurance that the creature should never completely shake off the reins and rebel, choosing disorder rather than order; to the creature warranting his hopefulness that the gracious God will never disregard his own work. (Translation: F. H. Colson & J. W. Earp.

As can be seen in the quote above, the Logos is a “midway” (μέσος) between an independent entity such as man and an aspect of God. Even more puzzling than the question regarding the relation between god and the Logos, is the relation between the Logos and the powers, and their relation to Pronoia. As Frick points out, it is difficult (if even possible) to harmonize Philo’s different classifications of the powers below god into one coherent system, since he tends to give different accounts in different passages. In The Embassy to Gaius 6, Philo classifies the powers as:

The creative, the kingly, the providential, and of the others that all are both beneficial and punitive, assuming that the punitive are to be classed among the beneficial. (Translation: F. H. Colson & J. W. Earp.)

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136 Wisdom 14:3.
137 The Migration of Abraham 6.
138 The Logos doctrine in Philo is debated and generally considered difficult to interpret. See Frick 1999, pp 75-78.
139 See Frick 1999, pp 80-81.
As we can see in this quote, Philo identifies Pronoia as one of the powers under god and leaves out the Logos, which is implicitly understood as above them. In another account, however, Philo mentions five powers under god and his Logos, but in this list Providence is not included. Also the accounts of god’s creational activities display an ambiguity regarding the role of Pronoia. As Frick writes, Philo usually understands the Logos as god’s instrument of creation, but occasionally also assigns the same function to Pronoia, expressed through the instrumental dative. This links the activities of Pronoia with the activities of the Logos. Therefore, Frick suggests that: “Providence as an instrument of creation can be perceived as an aspect of the Logos’ function as instrument of creation.”

Since the task of this essay is not to present a coherent view of Philo’s system of powers, I will not even attempt to harmonize these different accounts. It is, however, possible to draw the conclusion that Philo wished to delegate the providential activity of god to some lower entity. Whether Philo actually understood Pronoia as an independent power in its own right, or whether Philo simply gave the epithet Pronoia to the powers when they were performing providential activities, is not of immediate relevance here. What is important is the function of Pronoia as an extension of god.

Frick argues that one of the main reasons for this ambiguity regarding the relation between god and his powers, Logos and Pronoia, in Hellenistic-Jewish though – and particularly in Philo – is the desire to reconcile the idea of the god’s uttermost transcendence with the notion of god’s immanence, his presence on earth and ability to intervene. I share this interpretation. Throughout his works, Philo rejects all anthropomorphic portrayals of the Jewish god and stresses the need for a negative language. Philo describes god as: “without name” (ἀκατανόματος); “ineffable” (ἀόρητος) “invisible” (ἀόρατος) “beyond description” (ἀπερίγραφος) and “incorporeal” (ἀσωματικός). It is thus not the highest aspect of god that intervenes in

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140 On Flight and Finding 95.
142 Frick 1999, p 116.
143 Frick 1999, pp 57-58.
144 On Dreams 1:67.
146 On the Confusion of the Tongues 138.
148 Moses 1:158. For a more comprehensive compilation of Philo’s apophatic language, see Frick 1999, pp 40-41.
the earthly affairs. His providential activities are rather regulated by the Logos and the powers.\footnote{149}

The apophatic theology of the *Apocryphon of John* resembles to a high degree the negative theology of Philo. The highest god in the *Apocryphon of John* is described as: invisible (\(\alpha\zeta\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\alpha\omicron\tau\omicron\alpha\omicron\omicron\upsilon\)\textsuperscript{150}); impossible to limit (\(\upsilon\alpha\zeta\alpha\omicron\tau\iota\omega\nu\)\textsuperscript{151}); immeasurable (\(\upsilon\alpha\zeta\alpha\omicron\tau\omicron\omicron\omicron\iota\omicron\tau\iota\omicron\)\textsuperscript{152}); unspeakable (\(\upsilon\alpha\zeta\alpha\omicron\tau\omicron\omega\alpha\xi\eta\epsilon\omicron\omicron\)\textsuperscript{153}) impossible to assign a name to (\(\upsilon\alpha\zeta\alpha\omicron\tau\iota\omicron\tau\omicron\iota\nu\)\textsuperscript{154}); incorporeal (\(\omicron\omicron\xi\omicron\omega\omicron\omicron\mu\omicron\alpha\omicron\tau\iota\kappa\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\iota\omicron\zeta\) \(\alpha\omicron\pi\omicron\)\textsuperscript{155}). Similar to the accounts of Philo, the highest god of the *Apocryphon of John* brings forth powers, referred to as either aions/eternal beings (\(\nu\alpha\iota\omicron\omega\omicron\omicron\)\textsuperscript{156}) or powers (\(\nu\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\)\textsuperscript{156}).

### 3.2 Pronoia as an Extension of the Highest God in the *Apocryphon of John*

Interestingly, there is also a similar ambiguity regarding the relation between the highest god and his first creation in the *Apocryphon of John*. In Philo’s works, it is the Logos who is the foremost of all of God’s creations. In the *Apocryphon of John* it is Pronoia who assumes this role.

And [his thought became a] thing, was revealed and stood in his presence, [in the shining of] his light. This is the [first power that] was before everything, [that was revealed from] his thought – that is, [the Pronoia], whose light [shines in the image of his] light, the [perfect] power, which is the image of the invisible, perfect virginal spirit. \footnote{157}

The author of the text describes Pronoia as the first thought and image of the highest god, as an aspect of him, yet different. That the author depicts Pronoia as independent from and inferior in relation to the highest god becomes clear from passages like NH II 5:11-20. Here, Pronoia (who is both referred to as Barbelo and Pronoia) asks for permission from the highest god to bring forth a new creation, “foreknowledge” (\(\pi\rho\omicron\omicron\gamma\omicron\nu\omicron\omega\omicron\omicron\omicron\iota\omicron\omicron\omicron\))\textsuperscript{157}. It is first after the approval of the highest god that the

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\footnote{149} Alternatively, they are regulated by a particular power that goes under the name of Pronoia. See the discussion above.

\footnote{150} NH II 2:29, 3:12. The parallel versions contain either the same or very similar epithets.

\footnote{151} NH II 3:7.

\footnote{152} NH II 3:10.

\footnote{153} NH II 3:14.

\footnote{154} NH II 3:15-16

\footnote{155} NH II 3:22-23.

\footnote{156} \(\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\) is the Coptic equivalent of the Greek word \(\delta\omicron\nu\alpha\omicron\mu\iota\omicron\omicron\), which Philo uses. See Crum 1939, 815b.

\footnote{157} NH II 4:26-35.
new creation, Foreknowledge, comes into existence. In the account that follows, a multitude of divine powers are created, but their creations all follow the same procedure: When one of the already existent powers desires to bring forth another creations, it asks for the permission from and assistance of the highest God.

In the *Apocryphon of John* the material world is the result of a mistake and comes into being when one of the lower creations, Wisdom (σοφία) desires to bring forth “a thought” from herself. Interestingly, the manner in which Wisdom wishes to create resembles to a high degree the first creation of the highest god – which resulted in Pronoia.

According to King, the negative evaluation of Wisdom’s attempt to create is closely linked to the patriarchal conceptions of the Hellenistic world, which associates the female with materiality.\(^{158}\) Although I – at least partly - share King’s reading, I believe that the author means to emphasize the contrast between the perfection of the highest divinity and the inferiority of his lower creations, rather than to highlight the gender of the characters. As stated above, the author of the *Apocryphon of John* depicts the highest god as beyond all human conceptions and concept. Although he is referred to as “father of the all” (ἐίκοσι Μητήρ) in NH II 2:28-29, it is clear that this epithet is only supposed to be understood in a figurative sense – not as an actually designation of gender. The same goes for Wisdom (σοφία), whose grammatical gender is feminine, since the word comes from an originally Greek feminine noun, but who is probably meant to be understood as beyond gender.\(^{159}\)

The highest god does not give his consent to the wish of Wisdom. In spite of the disapproval of the highest god, Wisdom brings forth her desired creation. The ability to act independently and defy the will of the highest god places Wisdom ontologically further from the perfection (for an interesting comparison, see the quote from Philo’s *Who is the Heir of Divine Things* above, on page 41, where Philo stresses the inability of

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158 See King 1988, p 171-172. See also Fischer-Mueller 1990, pp 79-95 for a discussion of the gendering of Ialdabaoth, the creator of the material world.

159 On this issue, Turner 1988 p 179 writes as a response to King’s article: “One of the principal difficulties in assessing the gendered imagery in the Gnostic documents is the extraordinary ambiguity involved in tracing the reference of gendered pronouns in Coptic to their antecedents. A related difficulty is the ambiguity caused by the imagery of androgyny as applied to many of the dramatis personae in the gnostic myths. Given also the frequently dubious quality of Coptic translations of Greek exemplars, these dual sources of ambiguity make the analysis of gendered imagery a very risky business indeed.”
the Logos to act independently and rebel against God as a proof of the ontological superiority of the Logos).

Since Wisdom’s creation is an act of defiance against the highest god, the result is doomed to be imperfect. Rather than another divine being, her creation is a misfit who resembles a lion-faced serpent\(^{160}\) and who immediately starts to bring forth creations of his own in a twisted parody of the creations of the highest spiritual realm. This is also the start of the famous battle between good and evil, between the perfect and timeless realm of the highest god and the temporal and much inferior creations of Ialdabaoth. This battle both centers on and determines the fate of humanity, whose spiritual body is created in the image of “the first man”, one of the divine beings, and whose material body is created by Ialdabaoth and his minions.

After the creation of Ialdabaoth, the highest god seems to take a step back as Pronoia becomes the more prominent protagonist. Similar to the accounts of Philo, it is sometimes difficult to decide to which extent the authors (and the editors) understood Pronoia as an independent entity or just as an aspect of the highest god. Interestingly, the different versions of the text also tend to differ in some of the most crucial passages.

Although Ialdabaoth came forth as an abomination – in every aspect inferior to the eternal beings of the spiritual realm – he received some of the divine power from his mother.\(^{161}\) This power enables him to create – to bring forth a realm of his own, created as a twisted imitation of the higher realms, and to create minions. As a countermove and attempt to retrieve this divine power, Pronoia – alternatively, the highest god, “the Father” depending on which version of the text one looks at - announces the existence of the higher eternal beings to Ialdabaoth and his minions and reveals the image of “the first man” which appears in the reflection of the waters. While BG 47:19-48:5 and NH III 21:21-24 present a much shorter account of the events, where it is “the holy, perfect father” (in NH III simply “the holy, perfect”) who guides the events and intervenes, NH II 14:18-24 and IV 22:25-23:2 assign this role to Pronoia:

> And he\(^{162}\) instructed them, that is, the holy Mother-Father and perfect Pronoia, the image of the invisible - which is the Father of everything, in whom everything came to existence – the first Man, for in the form of a man, he revealed his image.

\(^{160}\) For literature on the leontomorphic appearance of the creator god, see Howard M. Jackson 1985.


\(^{162}\) The personal pronoun may seem confusing as Pronoia is a feminine noun, but it is clear that it correlates with the first epithet of Pronoia, Mother-Father, which has a masculine definite article. Since
These designations – Mother-Father, image of the invisible and first Man – are all epithets referring to Pronoia, which also occurs in the account of the events surrounding the creation of Pronoia. It is Pronoia who acts, while the highest god remains passive. As a result, the transcendence of the highest god is preserved. When Pronoia appears to the archons, she is revealed as a particular aspect – in the shape of "the son of man" – and it is clear that this image can only be seen by the archons as a reflection in the waters. Unlike Gen 1:26-27, where man is created in the image of god, humanity in the Apocryphon of John is modeled after the reflection of a particular aspect of Pronoia, who herself is an image of the highest god. There are, in other words, several steps between the most transcendent divinity and man. In the shorter versions of the text – BG and NH III – the distance between the highest god and man is not fully as incalculable.

When the archons see the image, they decide to create a man modeled after it - the result is the psychic body of man. At first, their creation seems to be a disappointment, since it remains lifeless and does not move. Apparently, all of this is part of the divine plan, as Pronoia - or "the Father," according to BG and NH III - sends Autogenes and some of the lesser powers to advise the archons and tell Ialdabaoth to blow his spirit into the face of the man. As a result, the divine power leaves Ialdabaoth and enters the man.

Again, the shorter and longer versions of the text disagree on the role of Pronoia and the transcendence of the highest god. According to BG 51:4-7 and NH III 23:22-23, Wisdom asks for help from “the Father” (In NH III “the Father of everything”), who sends...
Autogenes and the powers, but in NH II 19:15-18, she asks Pronoia, who in this occurrence is only referred to by her epithet “the Mother-Father.”

After the creation, the psychic man is “cast down to the lowest matter”\(^{167}\) and “imprisoned”\(^{168}\) in a material body. The task is now to reclaim the divine spark in man and bring it back to the highest spiritual realm, where it belongs. In the shorter versions of the text – BG 52:17-19 and NH III 24:25-25:1 – it is the father who intervenes and sends the spiritual being “the Reflection (\(\text{επινοια} \)) of light” to retrieve the spark. In the longer versions – NH II 20:9-11 and IV 31:3-4 - it is Pronoia, the Mother-Father, who sends the Reflection of light, which is here further specified as an aspect of Pronoia.\(^{169}\)

Ialdabaoth creates a woman, using a part (\(\text{μεπος} \)) of the man’s power. Just as the man is created in the likeness of Providence, the woman, Eve, is created in the likeness of the Reflection of light. After the creation, the Reflection of light descends, in order to instruct the humans. When Ialdabaoth learns that they have received knowledge,\(^{170}\) he expels them from paradise. As an additional countermove, Ialdabaoth rapes Eve and through their offspring, he introduces the sexual desire – which in the *Apocryphon of John* is a destructive force that keeps mankind in bondage.

In the longer versions – NH II and IV – the author tells us that it is Life (\(\text{ζωη} \)), an aspect of Wisdom, who takes the woman, Eve (\(\text{ευη} \)), in possession. But before the rape is taking place, “Pronoia of everything” (\(\Pi\text{ρονοια μ\text{ττηρφ} }\)) acts and takes Life out of Eve to make sure that it is not the divine Life that gets defiled.

When the passage ends the battle is still inconclusive. Ialdabaoth and his minions keep mankind in a state of oblivion, as the eternal beings struggle to return the divine spark in man from its earthly prison to the spiritual sphere where it belongs. Since the dialogue is centered on issues such as the conditions of salvation, free will and determinism, as well as it exhibits a dualism between “the spirit of life” – closely linked to Pronoia and the providential activities of God - and the “imitating spirit” – which is closely linked to fate and acts as an extension of Ialdabaoth – I will discuss it more in detail later in this essay.

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\(^{167}\) NH II 20:8-9.

\(^{168}\) The author states that the man was clothed in “the bonds of oblivion” (\(\text{τθιρε ντ\text{βως} }\)).

\(^{169}\) NH II 20:18. “This one is one from him (the Mother-Father).” \(\text{τα\ ου εβολ ν\text{θην} τε} \).

\(^{170}\) Not through eating from the three with knowledge of good and evil as in Genesis, but through the instruction of the Reflection of light.
As we have seen above, the longer and the shorter versions of the texts tend to differ in whether they use the highest god or Pronoia as the main agent in the struggle against the powers of darkness. Consistently, it is the father who acts in BG and NH III. It is he who shows himself in the waters and it is he who sends Autogenes. Similarly, it is he who sends the Reflection of light. The Reflection of light, however, is identified with Pronoia in both the shorter and the longer versions.\textsuperscript{171} It seems that the transcendent highest god in the shorter versions of the \textit{Apocryphon of John} only acts himself as long as he can perform his actions from the highest spiritual sphere. When he shows himself in the waters, it is clear that he does so from a safe distance. The same goes for the sending of Autogenes and the Reflection of light. In the shorter versions, it is the highest god who takes the initiative to act against Ialdabaoth, but he does not execute these counteractions himself – he rather commands the power below him to perform the tasks. It is the Reflection of light who intervenes in the earthly affairs – instructs Adam in the garden\textsuperscript{172} warns Noah of the flood,\textsuperscript{173} descends upon mankind in order to save them from the imitating spirit and informs them about their divine origin\textsuperscript{174} - while the highest god is able to preserve his transcendence.

In the longer versions of the text, the emphasis on the transcendence of the highest god is even more evident, since he does not even take part in the struggle against Ialdabaoth and his minions. In these renderings of the myth, the enigmatic highest deity does not act at all - he merely consents to the acts of his powers.

In many ways the function of Pronoia in the \textit{Apocryphon of John} resembles its role in the works of Philo and Hellenistic-Jewish texts, where Pronoia works as an extension of God and agent of God’s providential activities. Just as in the \textit{Apocryphon of John}, the concept of Pronoia allows God to intervene in the earthly affairs, at the same time as his highest aspects remains in total transcendence. This conclusion is neither surprising, nor original. What complicates things, however, is the role of the imitating spirit, an entity who works against the providence of God and is constantly defined as the evil counterpart of Pronoia. Furthermore, I argue that the imitating spirit in the \textit{Apocryphon}

\textsuperscript{171} This identification is made explicitly in several passages. See for example: NH III 37:19; BG 72:16; NH II 23:28-29; NH IV 36:25-26.
\textsuperscript{172} NH II 23:25-31.
\textsuperscript{173} NH II 29:1-3.
\textsuperscript{174} NH II 31:1-22.
of John is portrayed as closely linked to the concept of fate and plays a decisive part in the soteriological discussions of the text.

I will start with a brief presentation of the character, as well as an overview of the passages where it occurs, and then proceed to present the scholarly discussion about the role of the imitating spirit as well as in which historical and religious context it may be understood. I will then go on to present my own position and suggest that the relation between the imitating spirit and Ialdabaoth to a high degree resembles the relation between Pronoia and the highest God. Similarly, the imitating spirit acts as an extension of the creator God and becomes more engaged in the earthly activities after the transition from the mythic primordial times of Genesis to the general situation of the readers. Furthermore, I argue that there is a close relation between the imitating spirit and fate.

4. Fate and the Imitating Spirit in the Apocryphon of John

4.1 Occurrences in the Apocryphon of John

When the archons have completed the spiritual body of man, modeled after the image of Pronoia or the Father, Autogenes descends to persuade Ialdabaoth to breathe into the face of the man. As a result of this action, the divine spark departs from him and enters the man. The archons decide to counteract and create a material body in order to imprison the spark. It is in this passage that the imitating spirit first appears.

And they took him to the shadow of death, so that they could form him a second time, from the earth and water and fire and wind/spirit, which is from matter, which is the ignorance of darkness and desire and their imitating (ΩΜΑΙΗΣΙ) spirit.  

The archons create man from and bind him to the four elements. Pneuma, the Greek word used to designate the fourth element listed above, wind, can also be translated “spirit.” It is evident that the author plays with this ambiguity, as he depicts the imitating spirit as one of the four elements from which the archons constructs the material body.

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175 See the discussion above.
176 NH II 21:4-9
of man. As we can see in the text, the author portrays the imitating spirit as closely linked to ignorance, darkness and desire.

The relation between the imitating spirit and sexual desire is further elaborated in NH 24:29-31. After the rape of Eve, when sexual desire has been introduced to the world, Ialdabaoths plants the desire in Adam.\textsuperscript{177} As a result of this, we are told that:

And through intercourse, he established the birth of the copies of the bodies and he inspired them through his imitating spirit.\textsuperscript{178}

As we shall see, this close link between the imitating spirit and sexuality also reoccurs in other passages, later in the text.

The longest elaboration on the role of the imitating spirit takes place in the dialogue on the conditions of salvation in NH II 25:16-27:33. In no other passage of the text is the dualism between the imitating spirit and Epinoia/Pronoia, in this passage also referred to as the spirit of life, so explicitly pronounced as here. The main condition for salvation mentioned in this passage is the attainment of a state of indifference in regard to passions such as anger, envy, jealousy and desire. On the one hand, there is the spirit of life who descends on the followers, in order to help them to attain this exalted condition. On the other hand, there is the imitating spirit, which is closely linked to these passions. If the adherents are not able to resist the temptations, the imitating spirit gains enough power over them to draw them into further temptations and works of evil. As I argue more extensively below, the aim of this passage is to offer an explanation for the theodicy dilemma and to reconcile the notion of conditional fate with human free will.

The imitating spirit also figures in the passage that immediately follows the dialogue. Towards the end of the dialogue, John, the protagonist, asks Christ about the origin of the imitating spirit. What follows now is another account of the material creation of man – which basically is a short retelling of the same events that occurred in NH II but which interweaves ειμαρμένη, fate, with the body of man. In this account, fate seems to fill the same function as the imitating spirit did in NH 21:4-9. This is but one of several reasons why I argue that the imitating spirit is presented in the \textit{Apocryphon of John} either as an aspect of fate or at least as closely related to the concept. Since this is a minority position, I will return to this issue and discuss it in detail below.

\textsuperscript{177} In NH III 31:23-24, BG 63:5-6 and NH IV 38:16-17, it is in Adam that he plants the desire, but in NH II 24:28-29 it is in Eve.

\textsuperscript{178} NH II 24:29-31.
The narrative proceeds with an exegesis of Genesis 6, with is heavily influenced by 1 Enoch 8:1. When Ialdabaath fails with his plan to bring a flood over the world and destroy the immovable race, he sends his angels to seduce the daughters of men. When these attempts also fail, they create an imitating spirit and change their appearances in order to resemble men. This time their seduction is successful and as a result, they fill the women with the imitating spirit and draw them into all sorts of temptations.

In the shorter versions of the text – BG and NH III – the Greek word ἀντίμιμον, “closely imitating,” is used to designate the spirit. The only exception is BG 55:9, where the spirit is referred to as ἀντικείμενον, which is a participle of ἀντίκειμαι, “to be set over against,” “to be opposite to,” “be adverse.” Although ἀντικείμενον πνεῦμα, “adversary spirit,” is a stronger and more polemical designation, it is clear that the two designations are used interchangeably. The longer versions of the text – NH II and NH IV – use the Coptic equivalents as designations, instead of the Greek loanwords. The meaning, however, is roughly the same (see the footnote).

Since it is evident that the designations are used interchangeably to refer to the same character, I will, for the sake of simplicity, henceforth refer to the spirit as “imitating.” I will now proceed to present the scholarly discussion regarding the role of the imitating spirit and in which religious context it should be understood.

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179 Many scholars have noted similarities between the two texts. To given just one example, Stroumsa 1984, p 38: “This can be easily recognized as derived directly from the description of the angels’ fall in 1 Enoch 8:1, for although it was significant in the early version of the myth (where the origins of evil and moral depravation were linked to the origins of civilization), this element appeared as a mere literary vestige in the Gnostic story, without any specific function.” See also Pearson 1984, pp 453-454, for a detailed discussion on the literary dependence on 1 Enoch.

180 Liddle & Scott 1924.

181 οὐβιὰέιτ occurs frequently in both NH II and IV and is the qualitative form of the verb οὐβίο (see Crum 1939 552a). According to Crum 1939, the qualitative form corresponds to the Greek διάφορος, different, unlike (Liddle & Scott 1924). A completely literary translation of the designation in the longer versions would be something like “the spirit which is changed” or “the spirit which is different” (in regard to the other one). My translation of the spirit as “the imitating spirit” is an attempt to stay close to the designation used in the shorter versions and at the same time try to make sense of designation used in the longer versions. Since “the spirit which is changed/different” refers to the antagonistic spirit which is created in the image of Pronioa but yet different, I have chosen the translation “imitating spirit”, which is also very close to the meaning of ἀντίμιμον. A majority of scholars, including King, Denzey Lewis and Waldstein & Wisse have chosen to translate as “the counterfeit spirit”, which is close to my translation, but slightly stronger than imitating, which is closer to the meaning of ἀντίμιμον. The other designation that occurs is οὐθάγ, most likely a qualitative form of οὐθάφ, which means “despised” (Crum 1939, 375a). For a discussion and critique of other possible translations, see Böhlig 1968, pp 163-164.
4.2 The Jewish-Hellenistic Background to the Concept of the Imitating Spirit

Several scholars, among others Birger Pearson and Gedaliahu A. G. Stroumsa, tend to emphasize the account in NH II 29:16-30:11, where the author reinterprets Gen 6.\(^{182}\) As Pearson points out, this passage serves as an answer to the question asked by John in NH II 27:31-32 regarding the origin of the imitating spirit. Pearson and Stroumsa observe that many details in the account closely follow traditions from 1 Enoch and argue that the imitating spirit is an innovation that has been added in the Gnostic exegesis of the famous narrative about the fallen angels who descend and seduce the earthly women.\(^{183}\) Further, Stroumsa states that “the antimonim pneuma, a purely Gnostic concept, is not found in philosophical texts.”\(^{184}\)

I find Pearson’s and Stroumsa’s explanation interesting but dissatisfying, since they mainly discuss a single account and ignore the prominent role that the imitating spirit has in previous passages of the text.\(^{185}\) Pearson does actually discuss the dualism between the spirit of life and the imitating spirit in the dialogue in NH II 25:16-27:33 and its role in the struggle for salvation. Unfortunately, he does not discuss how the two passages relate to each other and he does not elaborate on the significance of the imitating spirit in the creation narrative. Stroumsa concludes – just as Elaine Pagels and Nicola Denzey Lewis also do\(^{186}\) – that the concept of the imitating spirit is closely linked to sexual desire.\(^{187}\)

Furthermore, I argue that Stroumsa’s assertion - that the concept of the imitating spirit does not appear in any philosophical texts – can be questioned. Although the term “imitating spirit” does not appear, there are at least two passages in the works of Plato which features a similar dualism between a providential soul and one “capable of effecting results of the opposite kind.”\(^{188}\) Interestingly, these two cosmic souls appear in conjunction with a discussion of fate and the providence of god. In Plato’s discussion of

\(^{182}\) See the proceeding page, footnote 185.
\(^{183}\) Pearson 1984, pp 459-460.
\(^{184}\) Stroumsa 1984, p 37.
\(^{185}\) Pearson 1984, p 460 does actually discuss the dualism between the spirit of life and the imitating spirit in the dialogue about the conditions of salvation but unfortunately he does not discuss the role of the imitating spirit in the creation narrative.
\(^{186}\) Pagels 1976, pp 264-265 and Denzey Lewis 2013, pp 96-97.
\(^{188}\) See the quotes below.
cosmic providence in Laws X 896E-897, he also mentions a malevolent entity that intervenes in the earthly activities.

One soul is it, or several? I will answer for you – “several.” Anyhow, let us assume not less than two – the beneficent soul and that which is capable of effecting results of the opposite kind.(Translation: R.G. Bury)

Unfortunately, this doctrine of the dualism between the good universal soul and its evil equivalent is just hinted at in Plato and not elaborated. In Epinomis 988D-E, Plato makes a similar distinction between the good cosmic soul which guides humanity towards to the good, and its opposite, which makes bad things happen:

And therefore, since we now claim that, as the soul is the causes of the whole, and all good things are causes of like things, while on the other hand evil things are causes of other things like them, it is no marvel that soul should be cause of all motion and stirring – that the motion and stirring towards the good are the function of the best soul, and those to the opposite are the opposite – it must be that good things have conquered and conquer things that are not their like. (Translation W.R.M. Lamb)

Although we can know with certainty that the author of the Apocryphon of John had access to Plato’s Timaeus, it is harder to establish a connection between our text and the above quoted passages. The idea of the two cosmic spirit (or “souls) that exerts good and bad influence on the earthly affairs can evidently be found also in Plato. Since many of the most important Jewish intertexts exhibit ideas and traditions which are also characteristic for Hellenistic philosophy, I find no reason to reproduce the dichotomous system of classification where an origin of a certain concept is sought either in Judaism or Hellenism. Jewish philosophers such as Philo can figure as proofs that this taxonomy does not correspond to a historical reality. Quite contrary to Stroumsa’s position, I argue that the concept of the imitating spirit in the Apocryphon of John is not unique for Gnosticism, but rather should be seen as a development of a concept with its precedents in Jewish and Hellenistic texts.\textsuperscript{189}

A similar dualism between good and evil spirits can also be found in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. According to H. C. Kee, the books were composed some time during the second century B.C E, but it is difficult to give a more precise date of the text.\textsuperscript{190} In the Testament of Reuben, the narrator provides a list over the seven spirits

\textsuperscript{189} As scholars of comparative religious studies tend to stress, the concept of the spirits in opposition to each other can be found even earlier in Iranian religion. See for example Yuri Stoyanov 2000, pp 61-64.

that are “given to man at creation so that through them every human deed (is done)”\textsuperscript{191} and seven spirits of deceit. The spirits given at creation are all closely linked to human perception and the senses,\textsuperscript{192} while the seven spirits of deceit are associated with different passions and evils, such as promiscuity, arrogance and insatiability.\textsuperscript{193} An additional eight spirit is sleep, created in the image in death, which forms an alliance with the other evil spirits. As H. C. Kee points out, the author does not make any direct statement of an inherent evil in the human body and argues that the evil spirits exploit human weaknesses for evil ends.\textsuperscript{194} Similar to the \textit{Apocryphon of John}, the \textit{Testaments of the Twelve Apostles} exhibits a radical dualism, where the antagonist Beliar commands the evil spirits and exerts his evil influences over mankind.\textsuperscript{195} Throughout the text, these evil spirits work individually – e.g. the spirit of envy inspires envy in humans – but there are also a few passages where the texts exhibit a dualism between one evil spirit and one good spirit. The evil force is personified in the \textit{Testament of Simeon} 2:7 as “the prince of error.” Similarly, in \textit{Testament of Judah} 20, the author makes a contrast between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. The \textit{Testament of Asher} 1:3 presents two ways – “two mindsets, two lines of action, two models and two goals.”\textsuperscript{196} It seems, however, that the spirits throughout the texts should be understood as individual entities working together as collective, rather as different aspects of one personified being.

As pointed out by several scholars, particularly the spirit of sexuality plays a prominent role, making sexuality desire the most dangerous of the demonic passions.\textsuperscript{197} Similarly to the \textit{Apocryphon of John}, the \textit{Testaments} seem to advocate abstinence, not from procreation, but from the particular mindset that leads to sexual desire. To procreate is not a sin, but to think impure thoughts is. Even if the act of sexual promiscuity is not committed, the very thought of it is just as defiling.\textsuperscript{198} If one manages to overcome sexual desire, then one is also safe from Beliar, the personification of evil in the texts.\textsuperscript{199}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{191}] \textit{Testament of Reuben} 2:3-4. Translation: H. C. Kee.
\item[\textsuperscript{192}] See the \textit{Testament of Reuben} chapter 2.
\item[\textsuperscript{193}] See the \textit{Testament of Reuben} chapter 3.
\item[\textsuperscript{194}] Kee 1983, p 783 in Charlesworth (ed.) 1983.
\item[\textsuperscript{195}] See for example \textit{Testament of Asher} 1:7-9.
\item[\textsuperscript{196}] Translation: H. C. Kee
\item[\textsuperscript{197}] H. C. Kee 1983, p 779 in Charlesworth (ed.) 1983.
\item[\textsuperscript{198}] See \textit{Testament of Reuben} 6:1-5.
\item[\textsuperscript{199}] \textit{Testament of Reuben} 4:11.
\end{itemize}
There are also other similarities between the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the *Apocryphon of John*. Most striking of these parallels is perhaps the retelling of Gen 6. It is clear that both books draw on the material in the books on Enoch, and interestingly they both differ from *Enoch* on the same particular detail. Both the angels in the *Apocryphon of John* and in the *Testaments* take on the appearance of the women’s husbands when they descend to seduce them. This does not occur in the books of Enoch. Since the two texts agree on this particular detail, it is possible that the author of the *Apocryphon of John* had access to the *Testaments*. Pearson is one the scholars who suggest that the author of the *Apocryphon of John* may have had derived this idea from either the *Testament of Reuben* or from one of its sources. While it is difficult to establish a textual relation, it is quite non-controversial to assume that the both texts draw upon a common tradition and that the author would have been familiar with this particular version of the myth of the Watchers. The many similarities between the *Testaments* and the *Apocryphon of John* also suggest that the two texts emerged in similar environment, where the cosmology and soteriology of apocalyptic Judaism had merged with an anthropology influenced by Stoic and Platonic philosophy.

A similar depiction of the devil as an invisible spirit that exerts evil influence on men is also found in the *Apocalypse of Sedrach*, a text that is usually dated somewhere between 150 and 500 C. E. When Sedrach asks god about the sufferings of man and why he allows the devil to deceive men, he refers to the devil as an invisible spirit who enters the hearts of men.

Although the book of Sedrach is a probably later work that did not influence the *Apocryphon of John*, the text provides an important insight in other, roughly contemporary works and further strengthens the case that this dualistic concept was far from unique for our text.

Many scholars have also noticed similarities between the spiritual dualism in the *Apocryphon of John* and in the Dead Sea scrolls. The *Community Rule* 1QS 3:13-4:26 exhibits a spiritual dualism much similar to the *Apocryphon of John*. According to 1QS 4:15, all humans have received a portion of both spirits, which compete in order to

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201 Agourides 1983, p 606.
202 *Apocalypse of Sedrach* 5:3-6: “If you loved man, why did you not kill the devil, the artificer of all iniquity. Who can fight against an invisible spirit? He enters the hearts of men like a smoke and teaches them all kinds of sin.” (Translation S Agourides).
203 See for example Hauschild 1972, pp 238-247.
influence them. Unlike the *Apocryphon of John*, however, both of the two spirits in the *Community rule* are created by God. While this does not suggest a direct textual relation between the Essenes and the group behind the *Apocryphon of John*, I argue that these parallels, taken together with the argumentation above, provide a strong argument for the assumption that the *Apocryphon of John* emerged in Jewish circles and that the spiritual dualism in the text is best understood when read in the light of Jewish apocalyptic literature.\textsuperscript{204}

### 4.3 The Imitating Spirit and Ialdabaoth

Unlike the scholars discussed above, Zlatko Plève does not attempt to trace the concept of the imitating spirit to one particular tradition. Rather, Plève looks at the presentation of the spirit – how it is depicted in the narrative and which role it seems to play in the text. According to Plève, Ialdabaoth and the spirit should be understood as interchangeable:

Ialdabaoth, in sum, possesses all the natural faculties of an animal’s soul – impression, irrational impulse, and locomotion – and stands for the ‘pneuma’ in its lowest degree of tension, one which the *Apocryphon of John* calls the counterfeit (ἀντίμιμον) or ‘adversary spirit (ἀντικείμενον πνεῦμα)’.\textsuperscript{205}

This understanding of the relation between the imitating spirit and Ialdabaoth differs significantly from the perspective of many other scholars. According to scholars such as Pearson, King and Stroumsa the imitating spirit is something distinctively other than and hierarchically and ontologically inferior to Ialdabaoth. Through viewing the imitating spirit primarily as a personification of a certain concept – in this case sexuality – or as the creation of Ialdabaoth’s minions, these scholars increase the steps between the creator god and the imitating spirit. As a result, the imitating spirit becomes a less transcendent and lower entity than in Plève’s reading.

Rather than to argue that Ialdabaoth and the imitating spirit are interchangeable, as Plève does, or to stress the distance between the spirit and Ialdabaoth, as a majority of other scholars do, I would position myself somewhere between. I believe that in order to understand the role and function of the imitating spirit in the *Apocryphon of John* one

\textsuperscript{204} See Hauschild 1972, pp 246-247 for a similar view: “Sowohl 1QS 3,13-4,26 als auch Quaest. Exod. 1,23 zeigen uns, wie intensive hier über das Problem der den Menschen bestimmenden tranzendenten Mächte nachgedacht wurde. Letztere Stelle aber ist, gerade weil es sich um ein so markantes Lehrstück handelt, eine weitere Stütze für die Annahme, dass das AJ in sekterierischen jüdische Kreisen Alexandriens wurzelt.”

\textsuperscript{205} Plève 2006, 125-126.
needs to analyze how the spirit is related to Ialdabaoth in the text. I argue that this relation should be understood as analogous as to the relation between the highest god and Pronoia, and that the imitating spirit thus should be understood as an extension of Ialdabaoth.

As soon as Ialdabaoth has been thrown out from the spiritual sphere, he starts to create a place of his own, in the image of the higher sphere and in a twisted parody of the works of the highest god. He almost brings forth entities – powers – that serve under him. As a number of scholars have observed, these powers are closely linked to the seven planets, the twelve signs of the zodiac and to the 360/365 days of the year. The relation between Ialdabaoth and his minions resembles that between the highest god and his creations. While they are entities of their own and at least partly independent, they are also portrayed as aspects of Ialdabaoth. In passages such as BG 42:10-13 and NH II 11:35-12:5, the author tells us that Ialdabaoth can move between the seven kings of the world – that is, the seven planets – and act through them. These seven powers each create the different parts that constitute the human. Similarly to the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, each of these seven powers also corresponds to one particular “soul” of the psychic body. Similarly to Philo, and unlike the Testaments of the Patriarchs, the author Apocryphon of John does not assign the creation of the psychic body to the highest god, but to his servants, which are of a mixed nature, some of them good and some of them evil. Unlike the highest nature of man – the divine spark that resides within him – the psychic body is far from perfect, but on the other hand, it is not as negatively evaluated as the subsequent stage of man’s creation. It is first when the archons realize the superiority of man and create the material body, that desire and ignorance enters humanity. As discussed below, the material creation is closely related

206 A. J. Welburn’s article “The identity of the Archons in ‘The Apocryphon Johannis’ was published in 1978, but is still frequently quoted and generally accepted by scholars. In my opinion, it is still the most systematic and coherent examination of the relation between the archons and astrology.

207 BG 42:10-13 “And Ialdabaoth, Saklas, had many forms, so that he could reveal himself in every face, according to his will.”

208 ψυχή

209 See On the creation of the World 73-74: “Such are the heavenly bodies; for these are said to be not only living creatures endowed with mind, or rather each of them a mind in itself, excellent though and through and unsusceptible of any evil. Others are of mixed nature, as man, who is liable to contraries, wisdom and folly, self-mastery and licentiousness, courage and cowardice, justice and injustice, and (in a word) to things good and evil, fair and foul, to virtue and vice.” (F.H Colson & G. H. Whitaker).
to the concept of the imitating spirit, as the spirit is depicted as the substance in which
the archons and angels bind man.

In spite of his activity in the dawn of mankind – in the mythic primordial time of the
first chapters of Genesis - Ialdabaoth seems to withdraw, much like the highest god.
Throughout the text, Ialdabaoth acts primarily through his minions and the imitating
spirit. Apart from raping Eve in the Garden of Eden and taking the initiative to bring the
flood over mankind, Ialdabaoth mainly controls mankind through the imitating spirit.

While the transcendence of the highest god is evident in the text and generally
acknowledged by scholars, the transcendence of the theriomorphic creator god is rarely
brought to discussion. Although Ialdabaoth does not share the apophatic qualities of the
highest god, as he speaks, acts and issue commands, he does seem to withdraw from the
earthly activities after a certain point in the narrative. From NH II 25 and forward
Ialdabaoth only exerts his influence over mankind through the imitating spirit. In the
retelling of the events in NH 27:33-30:11, it is the flood that marks the transition from
sacred, primordial time to the more general situation of the readers. Simultaneously,
Ialdabaoth, who seems to have retired, passes on the role as the oppressor of mankind
to the imitating spirit.

As I will argue in the subsequent section, I believe that the concept of fate plays a
decisive role in the relation between the imitating spirit and Ialdabaoth. In the
proceeding discussion I will also return to the issue of the relation between Ialdabaoth,
the archons and the imitating spirit, as well as to discuss how they all connect to the
concept of fate.

4.4 The Imitating Spirit and Fate
Apart from Nicola Denzey Lewis’s recent discussions in her monograph Cosmology and
Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity from 2013, the relation between the
imitating spirit and fate has unfortunately been overlooked by scholars. According to
Denzey Lewis, the imitating spirit is identical with fate in the Apocryphon of John. Denzey
Lewis writes:

Elaine Pagels intimates that the author of the ApJn understood the antimimon pneuma as
identical to the sexual impulse. It is equally true that it is identical with heimarmene – an
identification emphasized by the dual account of its origins. Both heimarmene and the
antimimon pneuma derived from an achontic plan to enslave mankind, to rob it of its
spiritual knowledge. Both originated from the first act of sexual intercourse in the cosmos-
an action that initiated a watershed of sin, distraction and spiritual blindness. The
consequences of heimarmene and the antimimon pneuma are also identical: humans live and die in a state of ignorance, never to recognize the ‘God of truth.’

Denzey Lewis has reached her conclusion mainly through a comparison between the creation of fate in NH 28:12-32 and the descent of the Enochian angels in NH 29:16-30:11, which leads to the creation of the imitating spirit. Although I agree with her main argumentation and find her reading of the text both important and original, I believe that her case would be stronger if it had also included the role of the imitating spirit in the creation of the material man in NH 21:4-9. Furthermore, Denzey Lewis leaves out several important arguments that would give further support for her hypothesis. Since I agree with Denzey Lewis’ conclusion but find her argumentation weak, I will develop and modify her hypothesis. I argue that there are three additional reasons why the imitating spirit should be understood either as identical or closely connected to fate.

The first reason is the opposition between the imitating spirit and Pronoia, and the themes of fate, predeterminism and free will in NH 25:16-27:33 The dualism between Pronoia and the imitating spirit has been acknowledged by a variety of scholars, including King, Plêse and Pearson, and is neither a controversial, nor original observation. Nowhere else in the text is this dualism as evident as in the long dialogue about salvation in NH II 25:16-27:33, where the imitating spirit is constantly defined against Pronoia. In NH 29:23-24, the angels descend to seduce the earthly women. After an initial failure, they create the imitating spirit to aid them in the task, modeled after Pronoia, “the spirit that descended.”

Although scholars often observe the dualism and opposition between the imitating spirit and Pronoia, they rarely comment on its relation to the notion of fate. As we have seen above in chapter 3.1 – in the discussion on the role of Pronoia in Jewish and Hellenistic thought – the concept of Pronoia in Jewish texts is closely linked to the providential activities of God. Pronoia is commonly used as an extension of God’s will when he intervenes in the earthly activities and thus alters and shapes the earthly events. As seen in chapter 3.2, the role of Pronoia in the Apocryphon of John is much similar to that of other Jewish texts, such as the works of Philo, and functions to preserve God’s transcendence at the same time as it allows him to exert influence on the earthly domains. In Jewish texts, God’s interferences in the earthly activities – which takes place through the concept of Pronoia – are preordained and beyond both man’s

210 Denzey Lewis 2013, p 97.
comprehension and control. The providential works of God are more or less identical to the notion of fate.

The imitating spirit, which is created in the image of Pronoia, seems to function in similar manner. In NH 30:2-11 and in the dialogue in NH 25:16-27:33, it works as an external force with the ability to influence humanity and to draw it towards a particular mode of thought and action. Following the Platonic principle that a copy is always inferior to the original, the imitating spirit is weaker than Pronoia (NH II 26:26-27) and can only exert his power over the lower parts of man, the parts that are connected to the body. As I discuss more extensively below, this allows humanity to stay immune to the influence of the imitating spirit. Although lower fate exerts a certain influence over humanity, its consequences are not as irrevocable as the providential activities of God.

A similar division appears in the roughly contemporary text the Testament of Solomon,²¹¹ where 36 theriomorphic decans – celestial beings with astrological connotations - have power over the bodies of mankind.²¹² Although the text assigns a certain degree of influence over man to the demonic powers, it is God who determines the ultimate fate of man. This is clear from 19:6-21, where the eavesdropping demon Ornias is able to predict the death of a man, since he has overheard the decision from the divine counsel.

²¹¹ The date of the Testament of Solomon has been subject to debate, with suggestions ranging from the first to the late third century. In Charlesworth 1983, p 942, D. C. Duling writes: “Whether one follows McCown’s early third century dating or Preisendanz’s earlier one, there is general agreement that much of the testament reflects first-century Judaism in Palestine.” I find it highly unlikely that the author of the Apocryphon of John would have had access to the text. I believe, however, that the text can provide an important insight in contemporary Jewish-Christian speculations about demons and fate.

²¹² In the Testament of Solomon, the demons primarily have the power to bring diseases. In this aspect, the text differs significantly from the Apocryphon of John were lower fate, in the form of the imitating spirit, primarily works through the passions.
spirit, which is closely linked to the concept of fate.213 Furthermore, Denzey Lewis argues that the common emphasis on sexual desire, as well as the common theme of spiritual enslavement links the passages together.

While I basically agree with Denzey Lewis’ conclusions, I find her argumentation weak. Therefore, I would like to modify her hypothesis and suggest that the creation of fate rather should be read against the account of the material creation of man in order to make sense. While this requires a different reading of the text and a different understanding of the narrative technique of the author, it yields a similar understanding of the relation between the imitating spirit and fate.

As Denzey Lewis points out, the reference to the “measures and times and moments”, in which fate binds mankind in NH II 28:31, has mainly been interpreted by scholars as a way to designate astrology in general. Denzey Lewis suggests that Galatians or Plato’s Laws may have served as an influence.

Scholars have understood “measures and times and moments [καιρός]” as a general reference to astrology. While this is certainly plausible, I detect also the influence of Gal 4:9-10 “But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years” or even Plato’s Laws 4. 709B: “God controls all that is, and τυχε and καιρος co-operate with God in the control of human affairs.”214

While Denzey Lewis’ suggestions are not implausible, I find them a bit farfetched. Furthermore, Denzey Lewis fails to provide a satisfying explanation of how the creation of fate connects to the main narrative and how it would place the creation of fate chronologically in relation to the events in the Garden of Eden.

As scholars such as Kragerud and Pearson215 tend to emphasize, almost every passage in the Apocryphon of John (except for the dialogue on the conditions of salvation in NH II 25:16-27:33) contains a reference one of the first nine chapters of Genesis. While it is far from impossible that the author was familiar with Plato’s Laws, since we know that he had access to Timaeus, I find it more likely that NH II 28:11-32 follows the pattern of previous passages and refers to the events in the first chapter of Genesis, which, of course, is read through the lens of Platonism. Gen 1:14-18 provides an account for how the Jewish god creates the moon, the sun and the stars. The astrological

213 Denzey Lewis 2013, pp 93-95.
214 Denzey Lewis 2013, p 95, footnote 31.
connotations linked to these concepts are evident from the description of their function in Gen 1:14.216

God said: ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs (σημεία) and for seasons (καιροὺς) and for days (ἡμέρας) and for years (ἐναυτοὺς).’(The translation is from the NRSV)

NH II 27:33-28:5, the passage that immediately precedes the creation of fate, is a reduplication of an event that takes place in NH II 20:9-28. In NH II 20:9-28, the archons have recently created the psychic body of man and Pronoia has just sent Autogenes to trick Ialdabaoth into breathing his spiritual spark into the face of man, who becomes divine as the spark enters his body. As a response to this, the archons cast man down to the lowest regions of matter. This is when Pronoia, here referred to as the Mother-Father (Πμνητρατωρ), sends a helper to aid man. Exactly the same events take place in NH II 27:33-28:5, where Pronoia, also under the name of Mother-Father, sends help to man.

The consequence of this intervention in both of the accounts – NH II 20:28-35 and NH II 28:5-11 - is that Ialdabaoth realizes the superiority of man and decides to act against him.

I argue that this reduplication in the narrative marks a return to the events that took place in the beginning of Gen – in the mythic primordial time. Through the reference to Gen 1:14, where God creates the sun, the moon and the stars, which are “for signs and for seasons and for days and for years,“ the author places the binding of fate in the same narrative framework as the creation of the material world and the creation of man. I argue that the author of the Apocryphon of John, through this reduplication of the narrative, presents the two accounts as separate versions of the same event.

In the first of the accounts, Ialdabaoth’s counteract is the material creation of man, the binding of humanity in matter. In the second account, NH II 28:11-32, the counteract of Ialdabaoth and his minions is the creation of fate, where men, gods and angels are bound in the chains of fate.

In both accounts, the archons work as agents, issuing and performing the act of binding. The instrument through which humanity is bound in the first account – NH II 20:32-21:14 - is the imitating spirit (and the four elements). In the second account, in

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216 As several scholars of the Hebrew Bible have observed, this account differs from Babylonian accounts in its unwillingness to assign the celestial bodies divine powers and portray them as independent beings. See for example Vawter 1977, pp 47-48.
NH II 28:11-32, fate fills a similar function. It seems, therefore, that the author wants to establish a connection between the imitating spirit and fate.

The third reason for a close relation between fate and the imitating spirit is the choice of vocabulary in NH II 20:32-21:14 and 28:11-32. As I have argued above, there are several indications that the author wants to return to the events that occurred at the dawn of time. In the events that follows, in NH II 20:32-21:14, the creation of the material man and in NH 28:11-32 the creation of fate, there are several parallels in the use of the word chain, bond, fetter, (μῆπε) as a metaphor.

In 21:10-12, the author describes the creation of the material body as “the tomb in bodily form, which the robbers clothed the man in – the bond (τμῆπε) of oblivion (τμῆπε).” The bond of oblivion is a metaphor that also occurs frequently in NH II 28:11-32, the account of the creation of fate.

In NH 28:15, fate (ἡμαρμενή) is referred to as “the last of the bonds, which are subject to change” (τσαί ἡμῆπε ζτοββιαείτ). In 28:23-24, “the bond of oblivion,” (τμῆπε ητμῆπε ητμῆπε) is mentioned as one of the catastrophes brought forth by fate. In 28:29, we are told that because of “the bonds of oblivion”, the sins of humanity are hidden.

Apart from these two passages there are only two additional instances where the word chain, bond, fetter (μῆπε) occurs. Interestingly, these occurrences also relate to the activity of fate/the imitating spirit. The first of these occurrences is a discussion of the activities of the imitating spirit and the conditions of salvation. We are told that by the time of death, the soul of those who have been unsuccessful in guarding themselves against the spirit and gone astray will be handed over to the powers and once again bound with chains (NH II 27:7). The second occurrence is in an interpolative part of the text called “the Pronoia hymn”, where Pronoia descends in order to save mankind. Here, the bodily existence is referred to as being in “the bonds of prison” (NH II 31:10).

To use chain, bond or fetter to designate the activities of fate was not unusual during antiquity. Chrysippus, the famous stoic philosopher, even argued that the Greek word ἡμαρμενή, fate, stemmed from εἰρμενή, “what is linked together.”

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Pseudo-Plutarch, an author roughly contemporary to the *Apocryphon of John*, had a similar understanding of the etymology of the word.\textsuperscript{218}

Taken together with the previous arguments, I argue that these parallels in terms of vocabulary makes a strong case for the hypothesis that the imitating spirit is presented in the text as either closely linked to, or identical with fate.

5. \textbf{The Role of Fate and the Function of the Dualism in the *Apocryphon of John*}

I have now offered a survey of the passages where Pronoia, the imitating spirit and fate occurs in the text. Following scholars such as Birger Pearson, John D. Turner and Gedalihu Stroumsa, I argue that the *Apocryphon of John* emerged in a Jewish-Hellenistic environment and that the text should be understood as an attempt to redefine the creation narrative and approach the universalistic theology advocated by philosophical schools contemporary to the text. On this matter, I differ from other modern scholars, such as Nicola Denzey Lewis and Michael Allen Williams, who has written on the subject of fate in the *Apocryphon of John*. Furthermore, I argue that we should turn to the Jewish-Hellenistic works contemporary to the *Apocryphon of John* in order to contextualize and understand the dualism between Pronoia and the imitating spirit.

Just as in, for example, the works of Philo, Pronoia in the *Apocryphon of John* serves as an extension of God, which allows him to intervene in the earthly events and carry out providential activities and at the same time preserve his transcendence.

I argue that there are several indications that the author presents the imitating spirit as closely related – if not identical – to the concept of fate. Regarding the relation between Ialdabaoth and the imitating spirit, I argue that the spirit is presented as analogous to the relation between the highest god and Pronoia. In a similar vein, the imitating spirit is depicted as an extension of the creator god, who becomes particularly important after the transition from the primordial time of Genesis to the more general situation of the readers. While the prominent role of Pronoia as an extension of the creator god is widely acknowledged, few – if any scholars – have observed the much similar role of the imitating spirit/fate.

Up to this point, I have primarily focused on the first of the research questions of this essay: How the concepts of fate, Pronoia and the imitating spirit are related in the

\textsuperscript{218} On Fate 570B.
Apocryphon of John and in which context they should be understood. I will now proceed to discuss the second question: The social function of fate in the Apocryphon of John.

As discussed in the introductory section of this essay, few modern scholars have written on the subject of fate in the Apocryphon of John. Apart from Michael Allen Williams’ article “Higher Providence, Lower Providences and Fate in Gnosticism and middle Platonism,” Nicola Denzey Lewis’ book “Cosmology and fate in Gnosticism” is the only study exclusively devoted to the subject. Denzey Lewis’ main contribution is her analysis of the scholarly construction of the “age of anxiety”-paradigm and her deconstruction of the notion of enslavement under fate. Rather, Denzey Lewis argues, fate was used as a rhetorical devise to create boundary demarcations between the own group and the others. Denzey Lewis writes: “At no point, however, does the rhetoric of ‘enslaving fate’ exist within the context of people feeling themselves to be enslaved.”

While I find Denzey Lewis’ hypothesis that the discourse of enslavement under fate at some occasions was used to differentiate between the own group and the others plausible, I do not share her assertion that this was its main function. Instead, I will suggest and argue in the subsequent chapter that fate in the Apocryphon of John has primarily two functions:

1. As I have argued above, Pronoia and the imitating spirit serves as extensions of the highest god and Ialdabaoth, mediating their influences in the general reality of the readers. The doctrine of two opposing powers is an attempt to solve the theodicy dilemma, preserve God’s goodness and transcendence, and to offer an explanation for the evils in the world. This assertion is far from controversial and widely acknowledged by scholars in the field. There is, however more to it. I argue that the Apocryphon of John aims to reconcile the doctrine of an external influence – in this case both positive and negative – with the notion of an individual free will.

2. As a consequence of this, the dualism between Pronoia and the imitating spirit is used to exhort the readers to observe the practices prescribed in the text, which
are necessary to achieve salvation. This argument is further strengthened by the paraenetic character of the dialogue in NH II 25:16-27:33.

Particularly on the latter point, I differ from Denzey Lewis’ understanding of the text, since she argues that the condition of enslavement was not perceived as a real threat and is only used to describe the state of the outsiders.

I will now proceed to discuss the two main arguments in detail.

5.1 The Theodicy Dilemma and Conditional Fate in the Apocryphon of John

Following the hypothesis of Michael Allen Williams, that the doctrine of fate and providence in the Apocryphon of John is influenced by and modeled after the tripartite structure of philosophers such as Pseudo-Plutarch, Denzey Lewis argues that the alleged anti-cosmism of the text is excessively exaggerated:

Neither text\textsuperscript{223} betrays an unmitigatedly pessimistic cosmology; both treat the subject of pronoia with Middle Platonist conceptions of a divided or ‘multiple’ providences.\textsuperscript{224}

In my opinion, what the system of Pseudo-Plutarch and The Apocryphon of John primarily holds in common is their attempt to solve the theodicy dilemma by assigning the main responsibility for the more dubious actions and events in the earthly domain to something else than the highest god. While both systems – particularly The Apocryphon of John – make use of Stoic themes\textsuperscript{225} they distance themselves from the Stoic notion of God’s Providence as an undivided, all-pervading force. While Providence in The Apocryphon of John in many ways is reminiscent of the Stoic concept and particularly Philo’s idea of the divine Logos as an agent of God, it is complemented by a thoroughly negative counterpart who primarily controls the lower parts of the creation and actively works against the will of the highest God. The middle platonic system is less dualistic and explains the insufficiencies of the world through the great distance between the highest Providence who governs the highest spiritual sphere and the lower fate which is responsible for the earthly events. Fate is therefore neither negative nor repressive in the middle Platonic system, but rather something that should be understood as good, even though it is not perfect due to its distance from the highest God.

\textsuperscript{223} That is, the Apocryphon of John and On the Origin of the World.
\textsuperscript{224} Denzey Lewis 2013, p 37.
\textsuperscript{225} See Onuki 2010, pp 254-255.
It seems that Denzey Lewis derives her more positive evaluation of the cosmos in the *Apocryphon of John* from reading the text against these middle Platonic speculations. I would argue, however, that while there are some similarities in terms of vocabulary (Pronoia, heimarmene) and themes (the influence of fate over man), these are quite superficial and express ideas common to the Graeco-Roman world rather than a textual relation.

In the system of Pseudo-Plutarch,\(^226\) the highest providence (Pronoia) is restricted to the highest spiritual sphere.\(^227\) An intermediary providence governs the intermediary level, where the younger gods reside, and the lower providence is confined to the world as we know it. This division appears as fixed, rather than dynamic.

In *The Apocryphon of John*, on the other hand, Providence plays an active part in the salvation of mankind. Though originally residing in the highest realms, Pronoia repeatedly descends in order to assist mankind, with the aim of providing the salvific knowledge necessary for the final liberation. Almost as hard to fit with the system of the middle platonic philosophers is fate, which resides both in the intermediary realm (in Pseudo-Plutarch’s system this would rather be the home of lower Providence) and the earthly domains, where it controls and oppresses humanity.

I argue that the *Apocryphon of John* rather has more in common with Jewish-Hellenistic texts that address issues such as the theodicy dilemma and fate. During the Hellenistic period, several Jewish works adopt a dualistic stance in order to explain the evils in the world. In the *Book of Jubilees*, it is the satanic Mastema and his minions who are responsible for the sufferings of man. By assigning to Mastema several of the impious acts traditionally attributed to God, the author manages to solve some of the acute problems in the Hebrew Bible. In *Jubilees* 17:16 it is Mastema, not God, who orders Abraham to sacrifice his son. Similarly in 48:1-4 it is Mastema who attempts to kill Moses, not God. It is also Mastema who hardens the heart of the pharaoh in 48:17.

It seems that although this dualism frees God from the responsibility of the evils in the world, this occurs at the expense of the free will of man. If there are evil powers in

\(^{226}\) Referred to simply as “Plutarch” in the bibliography.

\(^{227}\) On Fate 573b-c: “The highest and primary providence is the intellection or will, beneficent to all things, of the primary God; and in conformity with it all things divine are primordially arranged throughout, each as is best and most excellent. Secondary providence belongs to secondary gods, who move in heaven, and in conformity with it all mortal things come into being in orderly fashion, together with all that is requisite to the survival and preservation of the several genera. The providence and forethought which belongs to the daemons stationed in the terrestrial regions as watchers and overseers of the actions of man would reasonably be called tertiary.”
the world with the ability to influence the actions of men, how can man possibly be held accountable for his wrongdoings? Several of the dualistic texts, rooted in a Jewish Apocalyptic understanding of the present age, stress this very question. The *Apocalypse of Sedrach* struggles with the balance between free will and predestination. Here, Sedrach laments the condition of man, who is weak and easily misled by the evil spirit, and pledges that God will have mercy on him and not judge him so hard. God answers that he already has sent his angels to watch over man, but that he also left man with free will (*Sedrach 7:13-8:10*). In sum the text presents the evil spirit of the devil and the angels as external forces who are able to influence the actions of man, at the same time as a certain amount of man’s free will is kept.

Also the *Community Rule* from the Dead Sea Scrolls and *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* presents a similar view, where external powers are able to influence man, although the ability to choose between good and evil is preserved.

While these texts differ in whether they regard the evil powers as instruments of God or entities working against God,\(^\text{228}\) they all seem to share a common emphasis on the importance of a compatibilism,\(^\text{229}\) – the belief that the responsibility of human action is compatible with the conviction that everything in the world to some degree is predetermined by fate.\(^\text{230}\)

As in the works of Philo and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Apocryphon of John* understands the irrational part of the soul as divided into seven parts, which consists of the five senses, speech and generation.\(^\text{231}\)

In Philo, evil acts among men are primarily explained as the lack of control over passions and the inability to make the right choices. The *Apocryphon of John* presents a similar understanding of the passions and the need of the worthy individual to be in control of them. The ones on whom the spirit of life, Pronoia, descends are characterized by a state of indifference in regard to the passions and the uttermost control over

\(^{228}\) As in the Community Rule and The Apocalypse of Sedrach, the evil powers in Jubilees are not in direct opposition to God, but rather filling the function of seducers, in order to separate the wicked from the good. See for example Jubilees 7:8-9, where Mastema asks God to spare some of his demons, so that they can corrupt mankind – a favor which God willingly grants. In the Apocryphon of John and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the evil powers are completely independent from God and works against him.

\(^{229}\) Not so much in the *Apocalypse of Sedrach* and *Jubilees* as in the other texts.

\(^{230}\) For a more detailed definition of compatibilism, as well as a discussion of attempts to solve this philosophical problems in the Stoic and Platonic schools contemporary to the *Apocryphon of John*, see Richard Sharples 2007, pp 169-188.

\(^{231}\) NH II 19:1.
themselves (NH II 25:23-33). They mediate only on the imperishability (Tmnattek0) and are totally indifferent to anger, envy, jealousy, desire or greed. It is only one condition that they cannot escape from during life on earth: the bodily existence.

They cannot be grasped (emaste) by anything, except for the condition of the flesh, which they carry when they look forward to the time when they will find what they seek from the ones who receive (them).232

As in the works of Philo, the body is closely linked to the passions in the Apocryphon of John. While the bodily existence is inherently negative in the Apocryphon of John, referred to as a tomb (NH II 21:10) and prison (NH II 31:3-4), it can be conquered, if the adherents resists the foul passions and stays indifferent to them. An adherent, who has reached this state of indifference to the lower passions, also stays immune from the influence from the imitating spirit. Not giving heed to the lower passions also brings the adherent closer to the spirit of life, making it easier to resist future temptations. Through this, the author has combined the notion of external influences from good and evil powers with the notion of a certain amount of individual freedom of choice.

A much similar view is also expressed in the Testament of Benjamin 4:1-4:

The deliberations of the good man are not in the control of the deceitful spirit, Beliar, for the angel of peace guides his life. For he does not look with passionate longing at corruptible things, nor does he accumulate wealth out of love for pleasure. He does not find delight in pleasure, nor does he grieve his neighbor, nor does he stuff himself with delicacies, nor is he led astray by visual excitement: The Lord is his lot. (Translation H. C. Kee).

The Apocryphon of John goes a few steps further than the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, however, as the text also provides the reader with an extensive description of the final destinations of the adherents, depending on which course of actions they choose. The ones who are in control of their body – and thereby become immune to the influence of the imitating spirit – their spiritual spark will after their death return to the spiritual sphere where it belongs (NH II 26:26-32). The ones who fail to resist the passions – and thereby become vulnerable to the influence of the imitating spirit – their spiritual sparks will be handed over to the powers and once again cast into chains of rebirth (NH II 27:4-8).

232 NH II 25:33-26:1
5.2 The Function of Fate in the Moral Exhortations of the 
Apocryphon of John

Unlike Denzey Lewis, I argue that the author of the Apocryphon of John presents the powers of the imitating spirit/fate as a threat that is both real and imminent, since it is able to influence the conducts of the followers. Furthermore, I argue that the author uses the concept of enslavement under fate and the imitating spirit in order to persuade the adherents to observe certain practices and to emulate a certain mindset.

According to Denzey Lewis, the author of the Apocryphon of John provides the readers variety of different ways to reach salvation. Denzey Lewis states that:

These include not simply gnosis or recognition of one’s spiritual roots, but also abstinence from sexual activities; the cultivation of an attitude of emotional detachment; knowledge of the names and workings of demons (the so-called melothesia from the lost Book of Zoroaster at II 15, 29-19, 10); sacramental intervention; and last but not least, something akin to ‘grace’ given freely by the savior. All these ‘ways of salvation’ are assembled together into a remarkable bricolage where it would be unjust to privilege one means of cosmic release from another. They all work together, or at least, one way does not seem to be more important than another. Likely the fluidity of these ways assured ApJn’s widespread popularity in Christian antiquity; it literary offered something for everyone.

I find Denzey Lewis’ claims that the text “offered something for everyone” and that the adherents were free to choose their own path to salvation unconvincing. Problematically, Denzey Lewis’ depiction of the group behind the Apocryphon of John presupposes that there existed a similar dichotomy between praxis and theory as in our contemporary society.

Rather than offering a multitude of paths which the adherents could pick and choose from, I argue that the author presents both a correct understanding and cultivation of emotional detachment as conditions necessary for salvation, as the author did not differentiate between theory and practices. Rather, it seems that right practice is viewed as a consequence of right understanding.

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233 Denzey Lewis 2013, p 128.
234 Ibid.
236 Although sexuality is portrayed as negative, the author never explicitly advocates sexual abstinence. It seems that the author has much in common with the view advocated in the Testaments, where sexual intercourse is not wrong in itself, but a life that is guided by sexual excesses is. While baptism is regarded as a further way to protect oneself from evil influences, it seems that the importance of baptism is a later development. See Turner 2001, p 96 on this point.
The *Apocryphon of John* is also very explicit with what happens to the adherents who has reached the knowledge necessary for salvation, but yet decided to turn away (NH II 27:21-30). According to the author, this group will receive the worst punishment, forever tortured by “the angels of poverty.”

While this passage can be seen as an account of additional emphasis on the boundaries between the ones who belong to the group and the ones who do not, I argue that it also serves as warning to the adherents in the group. While the author may have wished to distance the adherents from former members - apostates, I believe that this passage also serve the admonitory function of warning the adherents of the inexpressible sufferings they would meet if they failed to remain in the group and observe the prescribed practices.

To sum it all up, I believe that Denzey Lewis has made many important contributions to the research on fate in the *Apocryphon of John*. Particularly her deconstruction of the “age of anxiety”-paradigm is brilliant. As discussed in the first chapter, I find the notion that people during antiquity generally perceived fate as an enslaving force problematic and outdated. But unlike Denzey Lewis, I argue that even though we must avoid the broad generalizations of the older paradigm, it is reasonable to assume that there were groups with this understanding of fate. Furthermore, I argue that fate/the imitating spirit is used in the *Apocryphon of John* as an attempt to explain the theodicy dilemma and reconcile the notion of external powers influencing the actions of man with the notion of man as responsible for his actions. I also argue that the discourse of fate/the imitating spirit plays a decisive role in the moral exhortations of the text. Although the readers of the texts may not have understood themselves as enslaved by fate, it is presented as an actual threat in the *Apocryphon of John* - an evil entity with the power to enslave the ones who strayed too far from the practices advocated in the text.

6. **Summary and Conclusions**

The research questions addressed in this essay are:

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237 The angels of poverty also occurs in the Books of Enoch.
1. How does the concept of fate in the *Apocryphon of John* relate to similar speculations, contemporary to the text? How does the text respond to the surrounding geographical and historical context?

2. How does the author present the imitating spirit and Pronoia? How do these characters relate to the concept of fate?

3. What is the function of fate in the *Apocryphon of John*? Of what is the author trying persuade his audience and how does he use the concept of fate?

**I have reached the following conclusions:**

1. The *Apocryphon of John* probably emerged in an originally Jewish-Hellenistic context (see chapter two for an extensive discussion of this issue). Far from being innovative, this perspective is shared by a variety of scholars ranging from Gedaliahu Stroumsa and Gilles Quispel to Birger Pearson and Jaan Lahe. Following this, I have argued that Jewish-Hellenistic texts, rooted in the apocalyptic traditions, can enhance our understanding and shed light on many of the peculiarities of the text. My main contribution is that I apply this perspective to the topic of fate in the *Apocryphon of John*, an issue which has previously solely been examined in the light of the Greek Philosophical schools, often neglecting texts from a Jewish-Hellenistic context.

2. I have argued that the author – much like Philo of Alexandria - presents Pronoia as an extension of God, a concept which preserves his transcendence and at the same time allows him to intervene in the earthly activities. While this is widely acknowledged by a variety of scholars, I have also shown that the imitating spirit serves a similar function and works as an extension of Ialdabaoth, which becomes more important after the transition from the primordial time of Genesis to the general situation of the readers. As far as I am aware, this analogy has not been suggested before. The use of Pronoia and the imitating spirit allows the author to explain the external influence of Ialdabaoth and the highest god and at the same time preserve their transcendence. Furthermore, the author presents the imitating spirit as closely related to fate, εἰμαρμένη. While this close connection previously has been suggested by Denzey Lewis, I have developed this idea with further arguments. I argue that this close relation is indicated by: 1. The opposition
between the imitating spirit and Pronoia; 2. The narrative structure of the
text and the reduplication of events in NH II 27:33-28:5 and NH II 20:9-28; 3.
Parallels in terms of vocabulary in NH II 20:32-21:14 and 28:11-32 (for all of
the arguments in detail, see chapter 4). As a result of this reading of the text,
the dualism between God’s providential activities carried out by Pronoia and
the influence of lower fate over mankind, carried out by the imitating spirit,
becomes more evident and radical.

3. Jewish texts during the Hellenistic period adopted a more radical dualism in
order to solve the theodicy dilemma and assign the responsibility for the
evils in the world to some other entity than God. As one can see in Jewish-
Hellenistic texts such as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, whose
author depicts humanity as under constant influence of evil spirits, the issue
of free will and freedom from these evil influences also become a subject
of increasing importance. If humans are influenced by evil beings, how can they
be responsible for their courses of action? The author uses the concepts of
Pronoia and the imitating spirit/fate to reconcile the notion of external
influences with the ability to choose between good and evil. It is thus both an
attempt to solve the theodicy dilemma by assigning the responsibility for the
evils in the world to Ialdabaoth and the imitating spirit, while at the same
stressing the individual freedom to chose a course of actions that makes the
adherent immune to the influence of the spirit. Unlike Denzey Lewis, who
argues that the discourse of enslavement under fate only was applied to “the
other” and that it was only used as to draw boundary demarcations between
the own group and the ones outside it, I argue that the threat of enslavement
under fate primarily was directed to the own group and used to exhort them
to emulate a certain behavior.
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