**Freedom from tyrannical rulers**

**Date:** 120 CE to 180 CE  
**Language:** Coptic  
**Category:** Christian and Gnostic  
**Literary genre:** Sapiential writing  

**Title of work:** Trimorphic Protennoia  
**Reference:** 41.2-20  
**Commentary:**

The *Trimorphic Protennoia* (which can be translated as “Three Forms of First Thought”) is the first tractate of Nag Hammadi Codex XIII. It is roughly contemporaneous with the *Apocryphon of John*, also from Nag Hammadi, likely composed in the mid-second century, or perhaps slightly earlier, and bears many similarities to the *Apocryphon of John* and the Gospel of John. For instance, the prologue of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* bears striking similarities to the famous opening to the Gospel of John, and both texts frequently utilise the “I am” formula for the self-identification of Protennoia (First Thought) and Christ (the Logos) respectively. There is clear influence from Jewish Hellenistic wisdom tradition, where wisdom is personified and presented as a figure of enlightenment for humanity (e.g. *1 Enoch* 42; *Sirach* 24, and Philo; on this, see John Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, p. 221-230), which is also recognised as an influence on the Johannine Logos-Christ (see Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*). The text is essentially a revelation monologue given by the First Thought of the (divine) Father, Protennoia, and presents an account of her three descents into the underworld as Sound, Voice, and Word (Logos) with the aim of saving her children, the “Sons of the Light” from the constraints of demons, and restoring them to their original divine home (41.4-20) (on the genre and form of the text, see, for example, Tilde Bak Halvgaard, *Linguistic Manifestations*, p. 45-49; Paul-Hubert Poirier, *La Pensée Première à la triple forme*, p. 14-15). Traditionally classified as a “Barbeloite/Sethian Gnostic” treatise, the text has evidently undergone Christian redaction at one stage, evident from glosses identifying Christ as the “Perfect Son” begotten of God (e.g. 38.22; 39.6-7).

The present extract is taken from a section of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* in which Protennoia addresses the “Sons of the Light” concerning freedom from evil tyrannical forces, and affirms her role in freeing them from such. For some interpreters, these kings and tyrants can be identified with the Roman authorities, who during the period when the text was composed and redacted into its present Christianised form, were increasingly expressing hostility to Christians. Karen King argues that the author of the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, similarly to the author of the thematically similar *Apocryphon of John*, connected the gods which Roman rulers believed to be supporting them with malevolent cosmic powers (see Secret Revelation, p. 164-165). The *Apocryphon of John*, in its reinterpretation of the creation myth from Genesis, attributes the creation of the flawed material world and the subsequent oppressive rulership over mankind to a demiurgical being named Yaltabaathi, not the God of Jews or Christians. Contrary to the will of the true divine Father, Yaltabaathi is created through the disobedient desire of Sophia, the female personification of wisdom, who dwells in the heavenly realm (the Pleroma, or “the All”) with the Father. Yaltabaathi is a shameful creation, disowned by his mother, yet still possessing of some divine power, which in his ignorance and malice he uses to create a series of archons (“rulers”) to do his bidding and aid him in creating an imitation of the heavenly realm – the material world. Having accomplished this, Yaltabaathi and his minions lead humanity astray, and oppress them (for a more detailed discussion of this text see the commentary on *Apocryphon of John* 10.7-28, 13.5-9).

As King argues, the present text makes quite clear that salvation is needed from kings and tyrants, and the material world is described as a prison where ruling forces abuse and restrain the “Sons of Light.” In the context of this extract, salvation is characterised as freedom from this violent, unjust treatment (Secret Revelation, p. 164-165). Kings and tyrants are directly linked in this passage with demonic forces, and given the context in which the author wrote, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the generalised rulers referred to are imagined as the Roman authorities, which are viewed as supported and influenced by evil demonic beings. Perhaps the lack of specificity indicates the authors’ desire to avoid potential repercussions of outwardly condemning the Roman government (see King, *Secret Revelation*, p. 165). Associating the Roman authorities with demonic forces (to various degrees
of explicitness) was common among early Christian authors. For example, in addition to the book of Revelation, the *Apocryphon of James 4.31-6.20*, also from Nag Hammadi, presents the persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities as the direct influence of Satan, and Justin Martyr in his *First Apology IV.1-V.4* blames demonic beings for influencing Roman rulers to treat Christians unfairly.

The author of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* assures its readers (who could identify themselves with the “Sons of the Light”) that despite oppression and persecution by worldly rulers in this life, they can attain liberation from this through the Saviour. Instead of advocating active resistance to Roman rule, the political message is internalised, and focused on as King terms it, “escapist ideology” which sees spiritual development as the path to combatting subjugation in the physical world (*Secret Revelation*, p. 165).

Keywords in the original language:

- ?????
- ????
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Thematic keywords in English:

- demon
- enemy
- king
- Roman oppression
- Roman rule
- tyrant

**Bibliographical references:**

Poirier, Paul-Hubert, *"The Three Forms of First Thought (NHC XIII.1), and the Secret Book of John (NHC II.1 and par.)"*, in Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner (ed. Kevin Corrigan, Tuomas Rasimus; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 23-41


Poirier, Paul-Hubert, *La Pensée Première à la triple forme (NH XIII, 1)* (Louvain: Peeters, 2006)


Scott, Martin, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1992)


**Other sources connected with this document:**

*The Apocryphon of James 4.31-6.20*

Endorsement of martyrdom

- Read more about *The Apocryphon of James 4.31-6.20*

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