Social Fragmentation and Cosmic Rhetoric

Interpretations of Isaiah in the Nag Hammadi Codices

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Historical interpretations and contextualizations of many of the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi[1] tend to rely on several interrelated premises, most of which are effects of the orthodoxy/heresy debates of the second through fourth centuries and the eventual configuration of the biblical canon. The most powerful premise is that there were discrete social phenomena, ones now classified as "Christianity," "Judaism," and "Gnosticism," with theologically distinct contents, by the second century. The texts found at Nag Hammadi, which upon their discovery and translation were immediately classified as "Gnostic," were seen to testify to the distinctiveness of Gnosticism: its emphasis on salvation through knowledge, its investments in cosmic rather than social language and structures, its tortuous and esoteric mythologies, and disillusionment with the world.

Likewise, the fourth century dating of the codices and their discovery in Egypt has supported the notion that these texts are "late" and outside of the central geographical areas of early Christianity, thus not relevant to understanding the formation of Christianity, except as representative of its heretical "other."[2] As these texts were pushed closer to late antiquity, however, they were also assimilated *en masse* to the intellectual trends of that period, predominantly the abstract philosophizing of neo-Platonism and Jewish mysticism, which reinforced the notion that the texts found at Nag Hammadi had little relevance for reconstructing social history at all, except to testify to the presence of a thoroughly anti-social faction.

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1. I hesitate to refer to these texts as "Nag Hammadi texts" for several reasons, but primarily because that shorthand formulation allows the context of their discovery to over-determine interpretations of their contents. Indeed, the story of the discovery of these texts is a thoroughly orientalizing one, and has had a heavy influence on interpretations of these texts. For discussion on this, see Kotrosits "Romance and Danger at Nag Hammadi."

2. The notion that the texts of the Nag Hammadi codices are later than NT literature persists even while there are no full manuscripts of NT literature before the fourth century, and the fact that so many other important collections (most notably *Codex Sinaiticus*) were discovered in Egypt.

To counter these admittedly traditional scholarly tendencies and assumptions about many of the texts from the Nag Hammadi codices, this paper socially re-situates four of these texts as mournful reckonings with imperial violence, and more specifically, as the colonial wreckage of Israel's annexing and collapse. I will be discussing *Reality of the Rulers*, *Secret Revelation of John*, *On the Origin of the World*, and *Apocalypse of Adam*, some of the texts most doggedly classified as Gnostic and esoteric mythologizing. By illustrating the ways in which these four texts are interpretations of central motifs and gestures of Second Isaiah, I suggest that they belong to (and perhaps even reshape) the landscape of "early Christianity."[3] Indeed, many of the plot lines, theological moves, and themes said to be most distinctively "Gnostic" are borrowed from and are elaborations of Second Isaiah.

Redescribing *Reality of the Rulers, Secret Revelation of John, On the Origin of the World,* and *Apocalypse of Adam*[4]

Figured as esoteric or Platonized readings of Genesis, ones which make recourse to some common "Gnostic" assumptions and theologies,[5] these texts vary quite a bit in emphasis and plot. What they do share is a close reading and engagement with the two separate accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, thus describing humanity as caught between a lower world—created by a divine but foolish, cruel and furious ruler—and a world "above," in which the true, eternal god reigns. In a rather beautiful rendering of the very different tones and events of the two creation accounts, one figure is associated with truth, light, purity, knowledge, imperishability, and life; and the other with defilement or corruption, violence, darkness, and ignorance. Most of the plots of these texts revolve around humanity's subjection and captivity in the world of the cruel god (a condition associated with deadness, sleep, ignorance, and enslavement), and the defeat of the cruel god through humanity's genealogy in and knowledge received from the realm of the eternal god.

3. I place the phrase early Christianity in quotes not only because the Christianity Seminar has consistently questioned the anachronism of that term, but also because the term suggests a coherent phenomenon with recognizable, even unique, theological content. I suggest some alternatives to the default category of "early Christian" for texts from the NT and the Nag Hammadi codices in Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*.

4. The translations and versification for the *Reality of the Rulers*, *On the Origin of the World*, and the *Apocalypse of Adam* derive from Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*. However, the translation and versification for the *Secret Revelation of John* is from Karen King's monograph, *The Secret Revelation of John*.

5. Actually, each of these texts has been further specified as "Sethian Gnostic," a subtype of Gnosticism, which was originally proposed by Hans-Martin Schenke. Cf. Schenke "Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften" and "The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism." For a summary of the origins and limits of Sethian Gnosticism as a category, see King, *What is Gnosticism?* 149–89.

With these basic similarities in mind, I will delineate the stories of these texts, with the goal of surfacing their textural and impressionistic differences as well as highlighting plot points with colonial and diasporic resonances.

Reality of the Rulers ("Hypostasis of the Archons")

As its title suggests, *Reality of the Rulers* claims to describe the rulers of the cosmos in unadorned actuality, as corrupt, cruel, and arrogant tyrants. It does so through a loyal elaboration of Genesis 2–4, but one tinged with satire.

These rulers are led by Sammael, also called "god of the blind," who became blind after speaking in arrogance the blasphemous words, "It is I who am God; there is none apart from me." The rulers decide to create a man based on an image of "incorruptibility" that they see reflected in the watery abyss (but cannot lay hold of). They make him out of soil, but they cannot make the man rise, and he remains lifeless on the ground. The text renders this comically, depicting the rulers blowing and blowing but to no avail, until the spirit of the Father descends on and lives in Adam. Adam's side is opened and his spirit is removed, creating Eve. However, upon seeing this *pneuma*/spirit-endowed woman, the rulers become anxious and try to rape her. In a thematic repeat of the rulers' inability to capture incorruptibility, the spirit-endowed woman eludes them by becoming a tree (it seems that her spirit leaves her), leaving them with only a "shadowy reflection resembling herself," which they "defile foully." When Adam and Eve eat of the tree of knowledge, doing so against the command of the chief ruler Sammael and encouraged by the snake, who is temporarily inhabited by the woman's spirit, they realize that they both now lack spirit, and are expelled from the garden. Eve gives birth to Cain, Abel, and Seth, as well as to Norea, an assistant for many generations of humanity who is "the virgin whom the forces did not defile." On the brink of the rulers' destruction of humanity by flood, Norea brazenly confronts the rulers, claims she is not from them, and cries up to the "god of the entirety." An angel descends, and tells her about her origins. What the angel Eleleth tells her is reported in a dialogue between Eleleth and an "I" who appears abruptly in the text. It is the origin story of Sammael, now suddenly also referred to as Yaldabaoth. That story circles back to the beginning of the text, but fills out the plot line in ways that overlap with the stories of Yaldabaoth in both the *Secret Revelation of John* and *On the Origin of the World* (as I shall describe below). The text concludes with the questioner ("I") asking, "Am I also from [the rulers'] matter?" The angel responds that "you together with your offspring are from the primeval father from above," and promises that the true man will come, and will anoint them, freeing them from bondage and blind thought. The references to being anointed and to the true human who saves humanity gesture toward understandings of Jesus, but do not explicitly mention him.

Names and characters change and combine throughout this text, as well as throughout the other texts discussed here. For example, the female spiritual

element that came out of Adam and inhabited the woman, and then inhabited the snake, seems later to have been Norea. The text seems inclined toward preserving this ambiguity, playing up the difference between seeming and reality, and between true nature and outward appearance.

Secret Revelation of John

This lengthy text begins with a scene in which the disciple John encounters a Pharisee on his way to the temple. The Pharisee asks John where his teacher is, and John tells him that his teacher has "returned to the place from which he came." The Pharisee accuses John of having been deceived by Jesus and turned away from the traditions of their fathers. In sadness, John goes to a desert mountain, where he ponders questions of origins and his own fate.

While several extant manuscripts of *Secret Revelation of John* have important differences among them, of the four texts I am discussing here, *Secret Revelation of John* draws the deepest contrasts between the world above and the world below. Indeed, in keeping with its own stated purpose, *Reality of the Rulers* does not spend much time at all on the world above, while the vision John receives begins with a seemingly endless list of superlatives and a number of conceptual impossibilities to describe the Father and his divine realm. The Father's realm is among other things a "monarchy with nothing above it," and it is highly structured (if also hard to track). This higher realm is associated strongly with oneness and unity, even while populated with a dizzying number of divine figures. The Father himself is, however, *not* a god, he is *more than* a god, even further outdoing the treacherous ruler and creator of the world below (here primarily called Yaldabaoth, as well as Saklas and Sammael). Yaldabaoth was brought into existence by the divine figure Sophia when she tried to create a likeness of herself without divine permission. This act and its deviance from the unity and hierarchy of the divine realm is what initiates the creation of the lower world ruled by Yaldabaoth and his underlings. The lower world in *Secret Revelation of John* is repeatedly and emphatically described as steeped in darkness, chaos, and ignorance. While *Reality of the Rulers* describes the world below as full of injustice and impurity, *Secret Revelation of John* ups the ante by describing the lower world as an entirely counterfeit reality full of suffering: human beings, while created by Yaldabaoth, are luminous figures superior to the rulers, and are thus vengefully imprisoned in a shadowy landscape. The fate of humanity is to be trapped in darkness until or unless they know of their true origin and the emissary of this knowledge. The one transmitting that saving knowledge by way of this very revelation to John is the Savior/Christ, identified also with Pronoia, with the Father, or with the Mother-Father.

Secret Revelation of John not only paints a broad, even comprehensive picture of the cosmos, but it also makes specific references to political categories, unlike the generalized "rulers" of *Reality of the Rulers*. References to monarchy, kingship, and Roman political aspirations all suggest that it is a pointed political

narrative. Its tone is alternately sharp and vulnerable: it simply feels more sorrowful than *Reality of the Rulers*.

On the Origin of the World

On the Origin of the World begins as an intervention into the ex nihilo debate—the question of whether anything existed before chaos. Certainly something did exist, the text opines, because chaos is only a shadow, the negative projection of light. While it, too, tells the story of Yaldabaoth's birth out of Pistis Sophia, it does so in a more haunted, impressionistic way than the other two texts. *On the Origin of the World* is a strongly sensory and visceral text, not only because it is evocative, but because it invests much time and language elaborating images of and relationships between substances (darkness, matter, water, bodily fluids), bodily and environmental processes (birth, abortion, the sounds of voices speaking, plants sprouting), gender and sexual difference, and emotion.[6] Its emphasis on primordial substance and processes of creation (echoed in its interest in bodily substances and birth), gender parity and androgyny, reflects *On the Origin of the World's* particular attachment to Genesis 1, which it follows more closely than does *Secret Revelation of John*. These emphases come together in ways that feel not only somewhat gothic and phantasmagorical, but experientially rich. *On the Origin of the World* also feels concertedly midrashic in its style of argumentation, explicitly referencing other authoritative sources and drawing on etymologies for inspiration and meaning.

   On the Origin of the World gives an account of Yaldabaoth as father, progenitor, and king, and of one of his sons, Sabaoth, who hears the voice of Pistis and rejects his father. Pistis pours light on Sabaoth and he receives authority over the forces of chaos. The forces of chaos are jealous of Sabaoth, and Pistis offers him protection and gives him a "place of rest" and a kingdom "so that he might dwell above the twelve gods of chaos." *On the Origin of the World* is replete with references to kingship and kingdoms/thrones, as well as to people who have no king.

   An interesting difference in *On the Origin of the World's* narrative of Yaldabaoth (here also called the "prime parent") is that Yaldabaoth expresses a poignant grief and shame over his own arrogance. He, too, seems to long for his divine origins, and feels wonder when he sees the sublime light of the higher world shining down. Adding to the drama of the text, there is periodic cosmic warfare between the forces of chaos and the more "perfect" and luminous figures in the text. Indeed, the text ends with the world's implosion and the forces of chaos being consumed in war, their power dissolved. Light destroys darkness

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6. Which is not to say that *Secret Revelation of John* and *Reality of the Rulers* don't express such interests, just that Origin does so more intensely. For more on gender, sexual difference, and representations of women in these texts, cf. King, ed., *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*; Dunning, *Specters of Paul*, 75–95; King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 89–156.

and everything returns to its root. But as a surprisingly humdrum button on the grand cosmic vision, the text ends with, "Indeed, by his acts and his acquaintance each person will make his nature known."

Jesus makes a brief, though not insignificant, appearance in the middle of the text, in the description of Sabaoth's throne:

> Thereafter he created an assembly of angels, thousands and myriads, numberless, which resembled the congregation in the eighth heaven; and a firstborn called Israel, which is "the man that sees God"; and another being, called Jesus Christ, who resembles the savior above in the eighth heaven and who sits at his right upon a revered throne. (*Origin* 105.21–28)

Though the text includes a savior and the logos, who comes to proclaim the unknown, these are not explicitly identified with Jesus. Both *On the Origin of the World* and *Apocalypse of Adam* show interest in baptism.

Apocalypse of Adam

In *Apocalypse of Adam*, less emphasis is placed on distinguishing between the "god of truth" and the creator god (although this distinction is still made), and more emphasis is placed on what perishes, what does not, and why. Defilement/corruption, purity of origins, and the persistence of light amidst darkness and death are of heaviest concern, and baptism figures as a central site of meaning for these themes.

Framed as a revelation from Adam to his son Seth, *Apocalypse of Adam* begins with Adam describing his and Eve's loss of their "glory" and "eternal knowledge," as their creator god (here only called Sakla) "divides them in wrath," resulting in their enslavement to him in fear. The text dedicates considerable time to condensing and interpreting Genesis 6–10. Though the creator god casts a flood on the earth to destroy humanity, Noah's descendants, notably Ham and Japheth but not Shem (from whom Abraham descends), carry the "imperishable seed" of the eternal realm. The vengeful creator god then tries to destroy the seed of imperishability through "fire and sulphur and asphalt." An illuminator appears, a man who is said to "perform signs and wonders in order to scorn the powers and their ruler." The god of the powers recognizes the superiority of the illuminator, but in the wake of the god's anger, the heavenly glory withdraws so that the "powers will not see it with their eyes, nor will they see the illuminator either." The powers then punish the illuminator's flesh. The powers wonder whence the illuminator comes and thirteen kingdoms offer (wrong) explanations, each of which ends with, "He received power and glory there. And thus he came to the water." But the "generation without a king" understands (correctly) that the illuminator comes out of a "foreign air, from a great age [aeon]," and he makes a generation of chosen ones luminous with him.

Adam finishes the revelation to his son with a vision of repentance by those who have been obedient to the powers, and thus have been mired in death, and

the vindication of those who fight the power and have "stood in his presence in a knowledge of God-like light that has come forth from fire and blood."

Interpreting Isaiah

Most broadly, these texts share and reflect Second Isaiah's most prevalent themes: knowledge and understanding of the true God versus idols, blindness as a metaphor for knowledge and faithfulness, the association of God with light and justice, and the oneness and singular height of God. For instance, in Second Isaiah God opens the eyes of the blind or leads the blind, God leads those in darkness into the light,[7] Israel is described as blind,[8] and those who make idols are blind.[9] Blindness is equated with not knowing the truth, with being "bound" or imprisoned, and with worship of idols. This is consonant with the association of Yaldabaoth and blindness. He is called "Sammael"—"god of the blind" in Aramaic—and a function of his deceptive minions is to keep them bound, cast into darkness,[10] and to make "the whole creation blind so that they might not know the God who is above them all."[11]

While the contrast between the creator God and the eternal or true God has often been understood as a unique Gnostic feature or indication of a heretical "ditheism" or "theistic dualism," tracing the very faithful interpretations of Isaiah in these texts suggests other conclusions. In what is perhaps the most recognizable feature of Second Isaiah, one finds heightened assertions of God's position. These heightened assertions arise defensively: through rhetoric against idols, and usually through creation motifs. God's magnificent creation of the world is set against the feeble, almost ridiculous efforts of the maker (*tektwn*) or craftsman of idols:

> Who has measured the water with his hand
> And heaven with a span
> And all the earth by handful?
> Who has weighed the mountains with a scale
> And the forests with a balance?
> To whom have you likened the Lord,
> or with what likeness have you likened him?
> Has an artisan made an image,[12]
> Or has a goldsmith, after casting gold,
> Gilded it—prepared a likeness of it? (Isa 40:12, 18–19)[13]

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7. Isa 42:7, 16.
8. Isa 42:18–19; 43:8–9.
9. Isa 44:18.
10. *SRevJohn* 24.8.
11. *SRevJohn* 24.14. For more examples, cf. *Origin* 103.15–20; *RealRulers* 86.27–87.3; 94.25; *ApocAdam* 77.10–15.
12. In the LXX: *Mē eikona epoiēsen tektōn*.
13. Isaiah passages are taken from the New English Translation of the LXX (NETS), International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies.

Throughout Isaiah the "creation" work of the craftsman is presented as
laughable in comparison to God's more expansive work of creation. In Isa
42:5–8, there is an emphasis on the giving of *pneuma* or spirit to those who walk
on the earth:[14]

> Thus says the Lord God
> Who created heaven and established it,
> Who bolstered the earth and the things that are in it,
> and who gave break to the people upon it,
> and spirit to those who tread on it,
> I, the Lord, God, have called you in righteousness,
> And I will take hold of your hand and strengthen you;
> I have given you as a covenant to a race,
> As a light to nations,
> to open the eyes of the blind,
> to bring out from bonds those who are bound,
> and from the prison house those who sit in darkness.
> I am the Lord God; this is my name;
> My glory I will not give to another,
> nor my excellences to the graven images. (Isa 42:5–8)

This is of course stunningly similar to *Reality of the Rulers*, *On the Origin of the
World*, and *Secret Revelation of John*, in which the chief ruler or rulers can create
humanity, but only divine figures from the Eternal Father's realm can bring
Adam to life by endowing him with *pneuma*.[15]

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14. See also Isa 42:1.

15. See *Origin* 115.1–16: "Afterwards, he appeared before him. He became a soul-en-
dowed man. And he was called Adam, that is, 'father,' according to the name of the one that
existed before him. And when they finished Adam, he abandoned him as an inanimate ves-
sel, since he had taken form like an abortion, in that no *pneuma* was within him. Regarding
this thing, when the chief ruler remembered the saying of Pistis, he was afraid lest the true
man enter his modeled form (*plasmata*) and become its lord. For this reason he left his mod-
eled form forty days without soul, and he withdrew and abandoned it. Now on the fortieth
day, Sophia Zoe sent her breath into Adam, who had no soul. He began to move upon
the ground." See also *SecRevJohn* 17.64–18.11 (Codex II): "And all the angels and demons
labored until they had created the psychic body. And their product was completely inactive
and motionless for a long time. But when the Mother wanted to retrieve the power which
she had given to the Chief Ruler, she entreated the Mother-Father of the All, the one who
possesses great mercy. Following the holy design, he sent the five Lights down to the place
of the angels of the Chief Ruler. They advised him with the goal of extracting the power of
the Mother. And they said to Yaldabaoth, 'Breathe into his face by your spirit and his body
will arise.' And into the face he blew his spirit, which is the power of his Mother. He did not
understand because he dwells in ignorance. And the power of the Mother left Yaldabaoth
and went into the psychic body that they had made according to the likeness of the one who
exists from the beginning. The body moved and gained power, and it was luminous. See
RealRulers 87.25–88.10: "They said, 'Come let us create a man that will be soil from the earth.'
They modeled their creature as one wholly of the earth … They said, 'Come let us lay hold
of it by means of the form that we have modeled, so that it may see its male counterpart, and
we may seize it with the form that we have modeled'—not understanding the force of God,
because of their powerlessness. And he breathed into his face: and the man came to have

Similarly, in Isa 46:3–7, God is associated with birthing and bearing—emphasizing God's ability to give life while idols remain inanimate:

> Hear me, O house of Jakob
> And everyone who is left of Israel,
> You who are being carried from the womb
> And trained from the time you were a child.
> Until your old age, I am,
> And until you grow old, I am;
> I bear with you;
> I have made, and I will set free;
> I will take up and save you.
> To whom have you likened me?
> See, act with cunning,
> You who are going astray!
> Those who contribute gold from a bag
> And silver in a balance
> Will set it on a scale,
> And after hiring a goldsmith, they made handiwork,
> And bowing down they do obeisance to them
> They carry it on their shoulders and go,
> And if they set it up, it stays in its place;
> It will not move. (Isa 46:3–7)

The theme of birthing and bearing, in addition to the emphasis on *pneuma* as endowing matter, or substance with liveliness or vibrancy, seems to inspire so much of the dramatic and literally visceral birthing imagery in *On the Origin of the World*, which is rendered as what would otherwise be a somewhat abstruse image in the text. For example, the jealousy for the light engendered by the shadow/darkness is called "an abortion without spirit/*pneuma*" (*Origin* 99.9–10).

The emphasis on the ineffectual work of the maker of idols, work which is a poor imitation of God's making and forming work, is highlighted in the LXX with the use of the words *poieō, plassō,* and *plasmata* (see Isa 43:7; 44:9–11). These are the terms used in Genesis 1 and 2 to refer to God's creative work, but both God and the craftsman perform this work here. To underscore that the

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a soul (and remained) upon the ground for many days. But they could not make him arise because of their powerlessness. Like storm winds they persisted in blowing, that they might try to capture that image, which had appeared to them in the waters." *ApocAdam* 76.8–77.2: "Once again, for the third time, the illuminator of knowledge will pass by in a great glory, in order to leave (something) of the seed of Noah and the sons of Ham and Japheth—to leave for himself fruit bearing trees. And he will redeem their souls from the day of death. For the whole creation that came from the dead earth will be under the authority of death. But those who reflect upon the knowledge of the eternal God in their heart(s) will not perish. For they have not received spirit (*pneuma*) from this kingdom alone, but they have received it from an […] eternal angel. […] illuminator [… will] come upon [… that is] dead […] of Seth. And he will perform signs and wonders in order to scorn the powers and their ruler."

craftsman of idols is a poor imitation of God, in Isa 41:7 the craftsman looks at his work and declares: "It is good."

This instance of "it is good" is only one place in which someone other than the true God takes up God's characteristic language, however. Throughout Second Isaiah it is not only the voice of God that continually makes the assertion "I am the Lord" or "I am God and there are no others but me"; perhaps more striking is the way Babylon is depicted as taking up God's language:

> Come down, sit on the ground,
> virgin daughter of Babylon!
> Enter the darkness, daughter of the Chaldeans,
> because you shall no longer be called tender and delicate …
> Now hear these things, delicate woman, who sits securely,
> Who says in her heart, "I am, and there is no other"…[16] (Isa 47:1, 8)

This is precisely what the arrogant creator god of *On the Origin of the World*, *Reality of the Rulers*, and *Secret Revelation of John* claims for himself: "Their chief is blind; [because of his] power and his ignorance [and his] arrogance he said, with his [power], 'It is I who am God; there is none [apart from me].'" (*RealRulers* 86.27–32)[17]

The link to Babylon in Second Isaiah raises the question of imperial resonances within all of these texts. Indeed while so much traditional scholarship on Gnosticism reads these texts devoid of any kind of social context other than orthodoxy/heresy debates, or even reads these texts as anti-social, thereby debilitating anything other than literary or mythological kinds of analyses. Karen King's recent monograph on *Secret Revelation of John* reads the text for its many political implications, highlighting the text's investment in Roman republican values and virtues amidst a critique of the current age as a bastardization of those values.[18] Before King, Ioan Culianu and Elaine Pagels had separately noticed strong links, in some cases direct literary ones, between the *archons* (regularly left transliterated, obscuring the critique of real-world power) and Roman imperial figures.[19]

Some of the virtues of mining the connections between these four texts and Second Isaiah, a text arising out of social fracture and wrought with diasporic hopes and anxieties, include the reminder that cosmic claims and discourses

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16. *Ego eimi kai ouk estin 'etera* is actually uttered by Babylon and is repeated three times in this oracle (v. 8, and twice in v. 10).

17. Cf. also *Origin* 107.10–15, and the similar statement in *SecRevJohn*, "And he said to them, 'I am a jealous God; without me there is nothing'—already indicating to the angels who are below him that another God does exist. For if there were no other (god) over him, of whom would he be jealous?" (14.1–4)

18. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 157–75.

19. Culianu, "The Angels of the Nations and the Origins of Gnostic Dualism"; Pagels, "Christian Apologists and 'The Fall of the Angels': An Attack on Roman Imperial Power?" and "The Demiurge and His Archons—A Gnostic View of the Bishop and Presbyters?"

of world order and creation are always entangled and attempt to intervene in a web of social relations.[20] The suddenly elevated claims about God and new assertions of God's singularity are impossible to separate from the profound losses of the sixth century. Mark Smith, for example, describes the language of Second Isaiah as both profound and defiant, addressing both the loss of land and king in the wake of the Babylonian exile: Yahweh is "exalted" as Israel is "demoted."[21] Isaiah's monotheistic statements are thus also *colonial statements* that attempt to shore up diasporic identity when it is most in question.[22] In fact, so much of the defensiveness about God's assertive and creative power revolves around the rebuilding of Jerusalem. God must actively defend God's plan and ability to rebuild Jerusalem. The following passage is one of the places where one sees the overt theo-political interests of Second Isaiah following the destruction of the temple:

20. King (*Secret Revelation of John)* of course notes that ancient political critique often occurred in more oblique, "disguised" registers, and gives a broad range of examples from Justin to apocalyptic discourses and Stoic philosophy. Generally, there has been a push in scholarship over the last fifteen or so years to place cosmic claims around Jesus, and particularly the cosmic interests in Pauline literature, within the Roman imperial discourse on the "natural order of the cosmos." Empire-critical scholarship specifically has emphasized the investment of the Roman imperium in mythological and cosmological language to naturalize and articulate its rule. Cf. Kahl, *Galatians Re-imagined*; Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*. The relationship of the political to the cosmic has been addressed in more historical-contextual studies such as Michael Peppard's *The Son of God in the Ancient World* as well. However, the more basic suggestion that cosmic language always already has social relations embedded within it had appeared earlier in the work of Dale Martin, Elaine Pagels, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Cf. Martin, *The Corinthian Body*; Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*; Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Followers of the Lamb: Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation." But while the interest in socially situating cosmic claims about Christ has intensified, this has hardly been the case with texts included the Nag Hammadi codices. Case in point: while the Priene inscription has received a lot of attention for its striking language around Augustus as bringer of peace, savior of mankind, and one through whom the world is created—titles which obviously contextualize and give new political traction to claims made about Jesus—the parallels between the Priene inscription and the texts I am discussing here are no less impressive. Just as in *Secret Revelation of John*, Pronoia (Providence), associated with cosmic order, engenders a savior for humanity who is superior to those around him, and he/they defeat the forces of chaos. ["Since Providence [Pronoia], which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him."]

21. "Yahweh becomes more than the god above all other gods: the existence of other gods is denied and two images central to Second Isaiah's presentation of Yahweh, the warrior king and creator, are melded and scored in the text to counter the perceived reality of other deities and therefore the putative stupidity of cultic devotion to their images … Yahweh is not just the god of Israel (both as land and people) but of all lands and nations." Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 179.

22. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 33.

> Thus says the Lord God to my anointed Cyrus,
> Whose right hand I have grasped
> So that nations will obey before him
> And I will break through the strength of kings …
> I have raised him with righteousness,
> And all his paths shall be straight,
> He shall build my city
> And turn back the captivity of my people
> Not with ransom or with gifts
> Said the Lord Sabaoth. (Isa 45:1, 13–14)

(Note also that here the Lord is called "Sabaoth," a name that appears in *On the Origin of the World* and *Reality of the Rulers* as the son of Yaldabaoth who condemns and rises above his parent, even defeating the forces of chaos in the former.)

Reading Isaiah as a "diasporic" text, however, means more than simply noticing its cultural and theological defensiveness in the face of colonial crisis. It means attending to the kinds of productive social work diasporic discourses do. While the traditional understanding of diaspora has been that of a discrete group of people who become a fragmented network, recent scholarship theorizing on diaspora has instead focused on it as fragmented networks *that construct or imagine* a wholeness to solidify a shared sense of identity. Diaspora theory might generally be described as a thematic interest in the social and discursive dilemmas and creativities of displaced populations, an interest that has engaged a huge number of fields and disciplines.[23] It includes questions of which politics produce the condition of diaspora and of analyses of the violent effects of geographical and cultural dispersion. It additionally observes the ways diaspora as a condition enables the production of identity and (relatedly) the production of place and shared origins.

Stuart Hall, for example, writing on the "problem" of Caribbean cinema and the articulation of Caribbean identity, has outlined two conceptualizations of cultural identity. The first conceptualization is in terms of "oneness"—one shared culture, one people, common experiences, and one singular meaning beneath or despite surface variations/differences.[24] Much effort and creativity has been spent by colonized peoples in trying to "recover" and "research" an identity that has been "distorted" by colonization. However, he notes that cultural identity is actually made in the recovery process itself. Part of the work then entails "imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation.[25] These projects of "finding" (i.e., creating) underlying unity

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23. For a summary, see Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, eds., *Theorizing Diaspora*, 2–3.
24. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 234.
25. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 235.

"restore an imaginary fullness or plenitude to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed within the dominant regimes …"[26]

The second conceptualization Hall offers for cultural identity revolves around not unity or stability, but rather rupture and contingency. Cultural identity is "not something that transcends place, time, history and culture …" but is rather "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."[27] "Identities are the names we give the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past."[28] He proposes thinking about Caribbean identity along two axes—continuity and rupture. The first "reminds one of continuity with the past, the other reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of profound discontinuity … it was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that 'unified' these peoples across their difference, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past."[29] The similarity comes *less from shared past or originating geography than a similar positioning vis-à-vis the West*.

Hall discusses Africa as a constructed place of origin for those in the African diaspora, and does so through the language coined by Benedict Anderson, calling it an "imagined community." Africa gathers intense affective and figurative value: it is a place that cannot be returned to, in part because the notion of return suggests that the place has not changed and risks reifying the Western image of Africa as primitive and frozen in time. The "origin," constituted in some but not all diasporic cases as place, is a "reservoir of representation" precisely because there is nothing there.[30] Displacement gives rise to "a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating an endless desire to return to 'lost origins,' to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning."[31] He closes by suggesting, again following Benedict Anderson, that communities "are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[32]

Other scholars analyzing specific instances of the production of diasporic belonging have de-emphasized place as well. Brian Keith Axel, for instance, objects that analytics of place, and in particular place of origin, have been over-emphasized in studies of diasporic identity and belonging, and he suggests that for many diaspora groups, place/place of origin is not the most pressing matter. Instead, following the production of the Sikh diaspora, Axel highlights

26. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 236.
27. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 236.
28. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 236.
29. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 238.
30. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 245.
31. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 245.
32. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 245.

state violence as a "key means through which the features of a people are constituted."[33]

Along with a critique of original, uninterrupted wholeness claimed by diasporic populations, diaspora theory has illustrated how claims to and about diasporic cultural authenticity and purity—how Irish/Chinese/black/Jewish are you *really*?—play into colonial or imperial discourses of particularizing and monitoring, which also means targeting "others."[34] The question of who is inside and who is outside of any given category of belonging is a game *almost always played by insiders*, one whose rules are inevitably set by the colonial entity producing the diasporic situation in the first place. Claims to purity and authenticity are always rhetorical boundary-marking practices. Particularly, the appeal to the (ever elusive) authenticity of one's own origins constitutes a negotiation of one's own complicated, hybrid, diasporic identity, even while it claims to be a defense of the place of origin.[35]

These considerations deepen our understanding of the work of Second Isaiah. The competing claims of Babylon and Israel's God are part of a negotiation of social status, a negotiation that means to differentiate entities that were increasingly difficult to differentiate. Indeed, as Revelation observes through its representation of Babylon as a "whore," Babylon was singularly "enchanting" (cf. 47:9), and how might one decry the power of someone's enchantments without

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33. Axel, "The Diasporic Imaginary," 412. Axel analyzes the Sikh diaspora in relationship to the Indian national state and government. He discusses the notion of "Khalistan" (meaning "land of the pure"), a wished-for Sikh homeland "to set against constructions of India and Pakistan," conceived in the 1940s, and revitalized in the 80s and 90s, when as many as 100,000 Sikhs had been killed in conflict with the Indian government. Khalistan in its recent evocation, however, is meant not to describe a geographical location, but rather a "global reality" of identification. Particularly in the 80s and 90s, Sikh men were picked up, unlawfully imprisoned, tortured, and killed. He describes the way this state-inflicted violence and torture of Sikhs was a crucial component of the Sikh diasporic subjectivity. The importance of and common display of graphic images of the tortured or dead bodies of shahids, or Sikh martyrs, worked to produce the Sikh subject "through gruesome spectacle … the authority of this spectacle, moreover, is elaborated through reference to a monstrous, inhuman Other: the Indian nation state" (415).

34. E.g., Chow, *Writing Diaspora,* who critically examines the Western academic self-interestedness in discussions of third world particularity, "the oppressed," and descriptions of cultural pluralism. The Western academic tendencies in discussions of non-Western people have been either to regionally universalize, thus describing transcultural phenomenon, or almost fetishistically hyper-particularize. In the latter tendencies, naming cultural particularity has been seen as an ethical redress, but for Chow, almost inevitably becomes a kind of poker-game of Western (self-righteous) cultural sensitivity, as well as Western attachment to an essentialized "authentic" other-cultural identity. Diasporic identity plays into this dynamic. She discusses discourses of Chinese poets and academics who are engaged with the Western academy, noting how such poets and academics often compete for, trade on (or are accused of not) being "authentically" Chinese enough, either in their political alignments, theory or language. Being more "authentically Chinese" then ironically becomes the mode in which one's status in the Western academy is underwritten. She sees this happening in all sorts of identities that are considered marginal—feminist, Caribbean, queer—in which appeals to that identity are part of an upward mobility within academic circles.

35. Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 99–118.

firsthand experience of them? The mirroring of Israel's God and the Babylonian figure and the competitive differentiation of their power poignantly express questions of who is really in charge and suggest the mutual entanglement, indeed *dependence*, of diasporic identifications with violent and oppressive political powers. The apparently disclaimed allure of Babylon might also be read as articulating diasporic anxieties about assimilation. Israel's God competes for the title of singular god over all the earth, but the competition betrays the title itself. As *Secret Revelation of John* candidly notices, "And he said to them, 'I am a jealous God; without me there is nothing'—already indicating to the angels who are below him that another god does exist. For if there were no other (god) over him, of whom would he be jealous?" (14:1–4). This passage, like Second Isaiah's incorporation of cosmic themes from Genesis with the particularizing impulses of Exodus, demonstrate how particularizing and universalizing may be in tension with each other, but they are certainly not mutually exclusive.[36]

In keeping with this diasporic analysis of the texts I have introduced and summarized above, a number of scholars have importantly begun to rethink the landscape of the late first and early second centuries. They too write that the "early Christian" literature produced during this period was imbued with a sense of trauma and confusion after the Jewish-Roman war, the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, the failed Jewish revolts, and the realization that Jerusalem was perhaps lost forever.[37] These massive assaults to and concomitant reconfigurations of Jewish belonging are no small side notes to what we call "early Christian" history. To read any literature in this difficult period that invests itself in Jewish traditions, scripture, themes, or figures without attending to the traumatic and haunting capacity of these large-scale devastations would not only miss some important interpretive possibilities, but lose an important dimension, that is, historical plausibility.[38]

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36. In this discourse of national identity, Chow notices how "universal" and "particular" are treated as separate, mutually exclusive categories but actually "reinforce and supplement each other." She quotes Naoki Sakai: "They are never in real conflict; they need each other and seek to form a symmetrical, mutually supporting relationship by every means in order to avoid a dialogic encounter which would necessarily jeopardize their reputedly secure and harmonized monologic worlds. Universalism and particularism endorse each other's defect in order to conceal their own; they are intimately tied to each other in their accomplice. In this respect, a particularism such as nationalism can never be a serious critique of universalism …" One of Chow's most salient points is that diaspora identity, despite its interests in specified "particularism," appeals to not only an origin, but a whole (ethnic, geographical, political and/or religious), and these appeals should be interrogated as not only universalizing in their own right, but as performative deployments of identity, rather than referential; so Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 5.

37. Cf. Moreland, "Jerusalem Destroyed: The Setting of Acts"; Calaway, "Heavenly Sabbath, Heavenly Sanctuary"; Schenck, "The Levitical Cultus and the Partitioning of the Ways in Hebrews."

38. Again, my book *Rethinking Early Christian Identity* argues this at length, re-reading a number of late first- and early second-century "early Christian" texts and proposing that the primary interpretive consideration for these texts should be as responses to diasporic trauma and loss.

It is practically imperative then to think about these texts' claims about divinity as full of diasporic clamoring and questions of belonging in a way that is reflective of (and shaped by) those in Isaiah. In fact, in certain instances in these texts, diasporic belonging is an explicit consideration. *Secret Revelation of John*, for instance, frames its entire vision of the cosmos with a relatively mundane interaction: John is on his way to the temple and finds himself entangled, via an accusation made by a Pharisee, in the question of what constitutes true tradition. In grief over the question, he turns away from the temple and goes to a desert mountain where he ponders matters of origins and authority. Diasporic social conflicts—questions of where one "really" belongs—seem to be the driving force behind the revelation. A central symbol of Jewish belonging—a symbol destroyed by the writing of the text—even haunts the scene. *Secret Revelation of John* carries the intensified focus on oneness and unity from Second Isaiah, imbuing the Father and his realm with strong desires for social restoration, even calling the Father's realm a "monarchy with nothing above it."

But while *Secret Revelation of John* most readily presents itself as steeped in diasporic fracture, all of these texts feature themes that establish them as reflections on belonging and diasporic crisis. The "double genealogy"[39] of humanity in these texts (humanity is composed of elements from both this world and the world above) speaks very much to colonial cultural conflicts and anxieties, as do the recurring themes of the "seed" of imperishability, defilement by the powers, and the repeated desire to preserve spaces of "incorruptibility," corruption being a term that importantly holds together impurity and abuse of power.

As an extended illustration, *Apocalypse of Adam* reads as much less enigmatic and extraterrestrial with Isaiah and a diasporic crisis foregrounded. Not only does the Christ-like figure of the "illuminator" and the luminousness of those he saves seem to be a clear extension of Second Isaiah's figuration of Israel (or the servant) as a "light to the nations" (cf. Isa 42:6),[40] but its story of a remnant who survives disaster resonates broadly with post-war existential questions. Those who carry the "seed of imperishability" in *Apocalypse of Adam* are Ham and Japheth, not Shem (from whom Abraham descends), which simultaneously gestures towards the wiping out of a significant "home" population in the Jewish-Roman war and articulates hope for the survival of Israel's people and traditions through other genealogical and textual lines, though ones obviously still embedded in Israelite traditions. It is, in short, a retelling of what it means

39. King writes, "[T]he body's double genealogy represents the dual nature of reality above and below. The body is both at once spiritual and material, divine and fallen, immortal and mortal, perfect and flawed, pure and alloyed"; *The Secret Revelation of John*, 124. But if the world above and the world below represent national and imperial belongings, respectively, one can easily understand this to be an expression of the push and pull of those tensive (and clearly mutually reliant) belongings.

40. A connection also true in the *SecRevJohn*'s and *Origin*'s appeal to luminous figures and bodies.

to be "true Israel" in the wake of the obliteration of that which would seem to be or has claimed to be the essence of Israel.

I find myself especially struck by *Apocalypse of Adam*'s statement that the chosen have "stood in his presence in a knowledge of God like light that has come forth from fire and blood," which resonates with Josephus' description of the destruction of the temple:

> For one would have thought that the hill itself on which the temple stood, was seething hot from its base, so full of fire was it on every side, and that the blood was larger in quantity than the fire, and that those that were slain were more in number than those that slew them. (*War* 6.5)

For the *Apocalypse of Adam*, those who are "outside" of Israel—meaning those geographically outside of Judea, but perhaps also those who were affiliated with Israel but who were especially sensitive to their multiple cultural heritages or investments—are the surviving hope for Israel.

In general, these texts appeal to the purity of one's own origins, origins one can return to if one recognizes the rulers for what they are and can divest oneself of the trappings of the rulers' world, not only speak to a colonial mournfulness about having lost a sense of who one is and where one belongs, but actually also *produce* that place of belonging, a kind of homeland, when the possibility of a geographical homeland was questionable, if not moot. Like Second Isaiah's tensive and mutually enhancing claims of universality and particularity, so too these texts engender specified belonging through cosmic universalizing visions.

Again, the scholarship on these texts has largely been on how they read Genesis alongside Platonic traditions, primarily Plato's *Timaeus*, and this emphasis has connected these texts meaningfully in a web of larger literature, including Philo's *On Creation* and the Gospel of John, for instance. But the rather faithful recourse to Isaiah in these texts belies some of the exaggeration of theological difference inherent in "Gnostic" assumptions about them (whether or not the term "Gnostic" is actually used). The recourse to Isaiah primarily counters the idea that these texts, however you designate them, contain a set of distinctive mythological notions, ones that are said to lack social and political implications, and these texts are essentially different from ones found in more properly Christian or Jewish literature.

Dropping "Gnostic" assumptions about a particular heretical, or at least non-orthodox, group creates new, less overdetermined, possibilities for reading these texts socially. For example, *Secret Revelation of John*, as well as a number of other texts in the Nag Hammadi codices,[41] make recourse to an "immovable race" or "immovable generation" (cf. *SecRevJohn* 3.16). In his book *The Immovable Race*, Michael Williams sets out the LXX uses of *asaleutos/akinetos*,

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41. Though the term does not occur in the other texts I've discussed here, it does occur in the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Zostrianos*.

the Greek translation of the Coptic word *atkim*, both meaning "immovable." Yahweh is described as immovable or unshakeable, and described as causing other things to shake, whether in a divine theophany or otherwise.[42] While Williams suggests that "immovable race" (or "immovable generation" in King's translation) has the sound of an "oppressed and persecuted group" and has resonances with the "biblical theme of the people protected by Yahweh from being shaken or moved by enemy or catastrophe,"[43] he nonetheless pursues mythical and Gnostic-stereotypical interpretations of this theme in *Secret Revelation of John*, understanding the text as only ironically pursuing this theme, since it has what he considers to be a "negative" take on (one of) the God(s) of Genesis. He also separates the Greek and Israelite meanings of "immovability," whereas it seems to me that in Israelite diasporic culture these resonances might be rather productive and meaningful or even inseparable in the face of a thoroughly Hellenized Jewish population.

Conclusion

A reconsideration of these texts as reckoning with diasporic conundrums and colonial disempowerments puts them precisely in the same space as so much other "early Christian" literature of the late first and early second centuries. All show interest in Jesus/logos/Christ/the Savior, but develop themes of dislocation, intensify imaginations of chosenness (as well as those of being mired in darkness/evil/sin), and cast their longings for homeland upward in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction. For example, the texts I have discussed here must be placed alongside Revelation's own vigorous interpretations of Isaiah, its similar insistence on the possibility of purity and chosenness in a world soaked in corruption, not to mention its cosmic recapitulation of geography in the Jerusalem that descends from heaven. Likewise, they resonate with Hebrews' lament that "we have no lasting city here," its explicit claims to being a displaced population, and its imagination of a "greater and more perfect tent" outside the realm of creation, and the Gospel of John's placeless God and its stark colonial tale of a luminous figure who offers universal belonging to those trapped in darkness. While scholars have regularly noticed affiliations between NT literature and texts in the Nag Hammadi codices, such affiliations are typically cast as the "infiltration" of Gnostic ideals into orthodoxy or evidence of a rhetorical engagement with (and rejection of) Gnosticism. That way of conceptualizing relationships between texts is an ideological, systematic theological, or even creedal model, which assumes different texts "stand" for different belief systems. What I am suggesting, on the other hand, is that these texts be read alongside NT texts without investments in categorical differentiations, as highly contingent

42. Williams, *The Immovable Race*, 1–7.
43. Williams, *The Immovable Race,* 12.

and necessary social improvisations at a critical historical moment, as resonant responses to the grief of belonging to that complex imaginary called "Israel" when its saliency as a collective is most in doubt.

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