

But What Do We Call It?

The *Secret Revelation of John* and Crises of Categories

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Introduction

So now that we have pulled back from our preconceptions and begun to ask, what is Gnosticism? It seems clear that the term carries so much intellectual baggage that it must be set aside in order to begin to examine the texts afresh. How then do we talk about these texts, if we don't label them Gnostic (or heretical or some such), but want merely to ask what they say?¹

In her monograph on the *Secret Revelation of John*, Karen King poses a version of the question I have heard easily a dozen times in my classes or from colleagues at conferences and lectures. In an obvious admission of having been persuaded by her argument in *What is Gnosticism?* (sometimes against their will), colleagues will say things to me like, "I know, I know. There is no gnosticism. But then what do we call it?" There is no "it," however, King presses:

I think initially we need to refer to individual texts. That is, rather than generalize about what Gnostics believe or what Sethians believe—especially as opposed to what Christians believe—I think it best to talk about particular texts. The goal is not to create the perfect category (an impossibility in any case), but to make these texts available for critical and constructive work, whether in historical reconstruction or theology.²

The persistence of the "it" in the question "what do we call it?" represents a certain attachment to the notion of a distinct phenomenon, a describable object with not-too-porous boundaries. The "it," that which Shall-Not-Be-Called-Gnosticism (but is really gnosticism), persists to preserve another ostensibly distinct phenomenon, another describable object with not-too-porous boundaries: Christianity. And while King suggests the goal is not to create the perfect

1. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, ix.

2. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, ix.

category, she does find one serviceable for the *Secret Revelation of John*: it is “Christianity,” if a tangled, rich, diverse, and contested one.³

In her introduction she offers a rendition of the many ways the text fits snugly within the urban school setting in Alexandria, and she notes, “We know that Christianity reached Alexandria relatively early (probably already in the first century).”⁴ While the *Secret Revelation of John* evokes a wide range of traditions and discourses, most emphatically Jewish scripture and interpretive traditions, it is clear to King that the “only tradition that escapes reproach is Christianity.”⁵ Yet curiously, the only ostensible hallmarks of Christianity present in the text are references to Christ and John, which frame the text rather than substantively affect its plot. “All of these [references] could have been added long after the rest of the work was written,” King admits.⁶ But she importantly emphasizes that we must examine *why* these references would have been added. “The only purpose of the addition would have been to strengthen and clarify the connection of the work to (Johannine) Christianity.”⁷

For King, as well as many of the projects influenced by hers, the elimination of the category of gnosticism means an expansion of the category of Christianity. Without the “it” of a distinct (and distinctly perverse, syncretistic, esoteric, etc.) gnostic phenomenon, more texts, more traditions, and more differences come to inhabit the category of ancient Christianity. Yet her emphatic positioning of the text as “Christian” comes into crisis—not just in her acknowledgement of the possibly minor status of Christ and John in the text but, I would suggest, through her own invaluable and game-changing close textual work. This “crisis of categories” in King is no small issue and hardly belongs to King or the *Secret Revelation of John* alone. In fact, I think it demonstrates just how ineluctably bound the categories of gnosticism and Christianity really are, and how rigorously rethinking the former will demand rigorously rethinking the latter—not just how we imagine, describe, or name “it,” but how to think without the “it.”

Secret Revelation of John and Questions of Belonging

In King’s rendering of the *Secret Revelation of John*, she makes legible rhetorical moves out of what have been read as obscure speculations. The *Secret Revelation of John* fuses the two creation narratives of Genesis with that of Plato’s *Timaeus*, making the first Genesis account into an account of the “realm above” and the second account into the “world below.” The lower world is characterized

3. King similarly suggests the collection of texts of Nag Hammadi could be described as “new and widely ranging works of Christian thought.” King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 2.

4. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 14.

5. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 16.

6. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 10.

7. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 10.

by pain and failure, as well as the devious and injurious nature of its creator god, Yaldabaoth. The lower world is full of darkness, chaos, and ignorance. It is a “counterfeit” reality in which humanity is held captive until or unless they know of their “true origin.” The messenger of this knowledge (through the revelation itself) is the Savior or Christ, also periodically identified with other figures (Pronoia, the Father, or the Mother–Father). King’s reading of the text suggests a frustrated protest of not only the casual violence of the Roman empire, but its hypocrisy in so thoroughly contradicting Roman republican ideals. She describes the text’s use of creation motifs and figures as generating a “devastating critique” of imperial rulers and the lived world, as well as a utopian (if compromised and assimilated) vision of justice, goodness, and “true humanity.”

She parses with an intense literary meticulousness the ways the *Secret Revelation of John* uses, interprets, and departs from its sources. She outlines its steep juxtaposition of order with chaos and its anguished (but hardly negative) relationship with bodily life. She lends the figures and narrative pathos, locating the overriding sense of alienation and anger, not only within some very difficult political circumstances, but alongside hopeful counterclaims and imaginations of an otherwise/elsewhere. What King has done, in fact, is show the text to be a very relatable entrenchment in the conundrums of not just empire, but social life at large—full of savvy negotiations, twists, and vindications of received wisdom and caught in the necessary ideological contradictions of socio-political life.

It turns out that the political valences of the text go beyond even King’s associations. The reference to the Father’s realm as a “monarchy with nothing above it” (4:2), for instance, suggests counter-belonging and desires for sovereignty embedded in the “world above.” Likewise, Christ in the *Secret Revelation of John* is the savior of humankind, bringer of peace, and one through whom the world is created, calling to mind the Priene inscription that notably includes the figure of Pronoia, also a key figure in the *Secret Revelation of John*.⁸ In the paper I presented at the spring meeting of the Christianity seminar, I noticed the way a number of the texts from the Nag Hammadi codices, including the *Secret Revelation of John*, *On the Origin of the World*, and the *Apocalypse of Adam*, elaborate and interpret Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah also juxtaposes the superiority and legitimate creative work of a singular God with the flailing and counterfeit

8. The Priene inscription reads: “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.”

work of the maker of idols, who, like Yaldabaoth, presumptuously takes up the divine claim "I am, and there is no other." In that paper, building on scholarship that has observed the way that the sudden and unprecedented singularity and height of YHWH is a compensation for the stark "demotion" and helplessness of Israel after the Babylonian exile, I suggested that the *Secret Revelation of John* similarly adjusts for the loss of (what was left of) Israel's political coherence by the late first and early second centuries. The purity, oneness, and sovereignty of the Father's realm in the *Secret Revelation of John* is, I suggested, a projection of socio-political ideals and belonging "upward," an imagination of a homeland that remains untainted and whole against the odds and despite the machinations of evil rulers/lesser gods.⁹

The cue for my own reading came in part from the beginning of the text itself: the entire revelation to John is framed by John's confrontation with a Pharisee as he is on his way up to the temple. He is accused of abandoning the tradition of his fathers, and he turns away from the temple saddened, asking himself questions about origins and belonging:

How was the Savior appointed? Why was he sent into the world by his father who sent him? Who is his father? And of what sort is that aeon to which we will go? He told us that the aeon is modeled on that indestructible aeon, but he did not teach us about what sort the latter is. Just then, while I was thinking these things, behold the heavens opened, and the whole creation below the heaven was illuminated ... (*Sec. Rev. John* 3:1–2¹⁰)

This is where King's assessment of the text as having a vehement interest in "Christian tradition," so much so that all other traditions it evokes receive scouring critique, breaks down. While King suggests that the text lampoons the "Jewish creator God" of Genesis 2 (and this is true), the text only does so in order to preserve the singularity, purity, and height of the divine figure in Genesis 1. Likewise, it does so through a reading of Second Isaiah framed by a scene that is haunted not only by conflicts over what constitutes "true tradition" within the collectivity of Israel, but by one cohering symbol of Israel (the temple) that is gone by the time the *Secret Revelation of John* is written. It seems that rather than having any kind of investment in Christian belonging, the text is grappling with the *uncertainty of belonging to Israel*. It is grappling, I want to emphasize, not because the text is somehow inherently "Christian" and wonders whether Christianity belongs to the traditions of Israel, but because the question of what it means to belong to Israel at all in the late first and early second centuries (the period in which King locates the text) is not just contested (as it always had been to varying degrees) but in crisis. The *Secret Revelation of John* is full of dia-

9. Kotrosits, "Social Fragmentation."

10. Or *Ap. John* 3:1–2.

sporic melancholy.¹¹ It begins with an episode evoking the question of origins and impossibility of a geographic homeland and then proceeds to imagine and describe “true” origins in a world above.

Building on that work, I would like to notice just how much this diasporic reading of the *Secret Revelation of John* readjusts our vision around the categories of “gnosticism” and “Christianity.” Inspired by some of the diasporic characteristics of the *Secret Revelation of John* (heavenly recapitulation of homeland; Christ as providing knowledge of “true origins”), I will offer a reorientation to a broad swath of literature from both the NT and the Nag Hammadi codices that contain consonant themes that will hopefully move us forward in thinking without either “it.”

Heavenly City, Heavenly Temple, and Transcendence of Place

Particularly in the late first century, alternate and transcendent visions of Jerusalem intensify, and it is no coincidence that this is just after the destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple in the Jewish-Roman war. In the canonical book of Revelation, the New Jerusalem, for example, comes in the package of a vengeful redirection of violence against Rome-as-Babylon. A heavenly Jerusalem, a hyperbole of opulence and purity, actually descends to the “new earth,” appearing as a physical *restoration* for the holy who have avoided idolatry, other forms of impurity, and being deceived by Satan. The text regularly reads as a poignant account of and consolation against the loss of Jerusalem, the trauma of the war, and the abandonment of God it implied:

11. As I suggested in the spring meeting, I am not using diaspora here to suggest a state of separation from homeland, as studies by John Barclay and John Collins, e.g., have understood it. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*; Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*. Following work in diaspora theory (Rey Chow, Grace Cho, Brian Keith Axel, Stuart Hall, David Eng, and others), it seems that conceptualizing diaspora as (only) separation from homeland, naturalizes the borders and content of that homeland, as well as the collective that is said to have originated from it. Homeland is constructed by and out of diasporic circumstances rather than the referent from which diaspora identity naturally derives. The concept of “belonging” importantly includes experiences and articulations of *not* belonging, a continual negotiation of and repositioning of oneself relative to boundary-marking practices. So diaspora then refers to a range of social improvisations and creative constructions of collectivity within and across fractures and in the wake of colonization and/or national boundary-making. My use of diaspora here with reference to first- and second-century Israel means to include a whole host of reconsidered and colonially structured relationships to Israel, no matter where one might have actually lived. Likewise, “Israel” does not refer only or primarily to the ancient geographical instantiation, but to sets of histories, traditions, practices, texts, and cultural orientations, ones that are appealed to in an inconsistent, expressive, and impromptu fashion. Thus, to belong to Israel at all was to belong to a diasporic imaginary, a collective that constantly produced and reproduced itself by stitching up gaps in time, space, and circumstance and that naturalized such work as expressions of an always-already belonging.

See, the home of God is among mortals! He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (Rev 21:3–4)

Those who are marked for saving are, notably, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (7:4–8), as well as are the nations (“from all tribes and peoples and languages”) that stand before the throne and the lamb (7:9), a universalism deep in Israel’s history of visions of itself, if also conflicted in its implications.¹² While I will discuss the role of Christ in Revelation further on, the very fact that the theme of judgment, conquest, and destroying impurity are capped with a New Jerusalem suggests an imagination of idealized national reconstitution, the reality of which is articulated as concrete, but elsewhere in the sense that it arrives from heaven and is a projection into the future. Its larger-than-life size and impossible perfection highlight how the transcendent nature of the New Jerusalem not only thumbs its nose at the Romans with a magnificent comeback, but perhaps resolves some of the colonial ambivalences surrounding Jerusalem in the first place. Jerusalem and the temple were hardly pure places from a colonial standpoint (especially since, as in the case of Pompey and Hyrcanos, high priests were sometimes directly appointed by the Romans). The absence of a temple in the New Jerusalem, for instance, may not be an indictment of cultic practices as much as a statement about the absolute purity of the New Jerusalem itself. Just as the city requires no sun because God is its light (21:23), what would the need for a temple be in a Jerusalem in which “nothing impure will enter it” (21:27)?

In Hebrews one finds a similar set of rhetorical and imaginative flourishes. Juxtaposing the earthly temple with a heavenly “more perfect tent” in which Christ is figured as both the high priest and once-and-for-all sacrifice, Hebrews would seem to be negating the earthly temple, its cultic practices, and the priesthood in favor of a universalizing Christology. This fits well with the general characterization of Hebrews as a letter concerned with issues of Christian belief or ecclesiology. But the very use of this imagery suggests an attachment to the temple as a central symbol with ongoing significance. Likewise, while many scholars have shown interest in the very rich theological resonances of the verse “[w]e have no lasting city here, but we are looking for the city that is to come,” few have explored the possibility that this refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, which would not only situate Hebrews as a text steeped in mourning, but significantly change the valence of these imaginings of a heavenly temple.¹³ In fact,

12. Regarding universalizing and particularizing as compatible, rather than opposite, tactics for Jewish self-understanding, especially as they intensified around the first century, see Baker, “From Every Nation Under Heaven,” 79–100.

13. An exception to this is Schenck, “The Levitical Cultus.”

an integral part of the contrast between heavenly/earthly is not simply perfect/imperfect, but destructible/indestructible. The text of Heb 12:18–29, for instance, claims that God has promised the removal of “what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.” “Therefore,” it goes on, “since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks ...” (Heb 13:27–28).¹⁴ Like Revelation’s New Jerusalem, the heavenly temple represents an adjustment for the loss of the earthly temple, an indestructible and perfect recourse for the clear contingencies of and colonial compromises around the physical one. The difference in Hebrews is that the temple remains heavenly and is expressed as the always-already image on which the physical temple was modeled, even as it is not yet accessible.¹⁵ This retrojection and futurization is part of the heavenly temple’s untouchability. It is an idealization that creatively repairs the threat of Israel’s dissolution, allowing for a constitutive piece of Israel’s sense of collective identity to remain intact.

In fact, retrojection and futurization are part of Hebrews’ work of creating a sense of continuity for Israel in the face of acute rupture. For instance, while the exhortation to “faith” in Hebrews is typically understood as referring to a belief in Jesus, it is more likely referring to a flagging confidence in Israel’s God (both understandable and common in the wake of the Jewish-Roman war). The chapter on faith is in fact a recounting of various models of faith through Israel’s history (Abel, Enoch, Moses, Rahab, Abraham ...), but it also suggests the faith of the ancestors happened in the face of travails and tests by God, ones that are to be rewarded, together with the faithful readers of Hebrews, with the always-already heavenly city:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw them and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13–16)

Hebrews reinterprets the history of Israel’s Promised Land, itself full of interruptions and exile, through the lens of a traumatic social upheaval in which geographical place is no longer viable as a touchstone for belonging. Thus Israel’s past and present generations are restored together in a way that aims to even surpass political or national restoration—they are restored into the “rest” (*katapausis*), a term that gestures not only the land in Israel’s history, but to a condition of perfection and (it would seem) relief as well.¹⁶

14. Cf. also, e.g., Heb 1:10–12.

15. Cf. Heb 8:5–6.

16. On the implicit referent of the history of the land in Hebrews, see Petterson, “The Land is Mine,” 69–93.

Such claims to a heavenly homeland need not only be seen as recourse for the destruction of Jerusalem however. Paul's figuration of a heavenly Jerusalem suggests that it filled other diasporic needs. In Galatians 4, Paul contrasts the Jerusalem "now" with the Jerusalem "above," as part of an argument about how to think about the relationships between "Jews" and "gentiles" and about the question of who might be considered "heirs" or "sons of God." "Jews" and "gentiles"/nations are not necessarily clear or obvious categories, as Cynthia Baker has pointed out, and "gentiles" sometimes specifically refers to Jews living outside of Israel.¹⁷ In the confusion of belonging, Paul seems to be struggling to sort out the several ways in which one might understand belonging to Israel (genealogy, homeland, circumcision, devotion to Israel's God), and choosing among them to suit a diverse constituency gathering under the aegis of YHWH outside of Israel. "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith" (3:26), he writes, following with the baptismal formula and noting, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (3:29). Abraham is carefully distinguished as a figure through which "gentiles"/the nations might belong to God and thus to Israel, but not through circumcision: Abraham is a model of faith (3:6). Israel's universality and particularly combine in Paul to produce his somewhat awkward allegorization of Sarah and Hagar: his interpretation instantiates belonging to Israel and its God through shared lineage, but not through physical genealogical lines—born "according to the spirit" rather than "according to the flesh" (4:29). Thus Paul's "Jerusalem above" offers a spiritualized homeland, a "true origin": a mode of belonging to Israel that seeks to override not only questions of physical markers of belonging,¹⁸ but perhaps the problems of physical distance from and/or colonial involvement in Jerusalem (as the "enslaved" woman) as well.

In an interpretation of not only Paul's experience of being called by God (Gal 1:15) and his having been "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Cor 12:2–4) but his envisioning of the New Jerusalem, the *Coptic Apocalypse of Paul* in the Nag Hammadi codices describes Paul's ascent through the heavens. In this relatively short text Paul encounters a small child and asks him, "By which road shall I go up to Jerusalem?" The child shows him the way "up to Jerusalem" to join the twelve apostles, who are "elect spirits." Notably Paul encounters a figure in the seventh heaven and tells him, "I am going to the place from which I came." "Where are you from?" asks the figure, an old man who rules the principalities and authorities below. Paul replies (with some redundancy), "I am going down to the world of the dead in order to lead captive the captivity that was

17. Baker takes Pentecost, in which Jews of "every *ethnos*" (Acts 2:5) are gathered in Jerusalem, as her starting point in examining the ways "Jews" and "gentiles" were not mutually exclusive or obvious categories. Baker, "From Every Nation Under Heaven."

18. The "circumcision of the heart" (Rom 2:29) is perhaps another awkward moment of trying to renegotiate physical representations of belonging.

led captive in the captivity of Babylon."¹⁹ This text makes explicit the connection between heavenly origins and diaspora, describing Paul quite pointedly in terms of Israel's restoration.

Another and rather lyrical text from the Nag Hammadi codices, the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, is worth recounting at more length. Framed as a parable about the rich and the poor, it begins when the apostles find a ship moored on the shore, ready to set sail, and they ask the sailors if they can go with them. The apostles sail for a day and a night, after which the wind brings them to a "small city in the midst of the sea." The name of the city is "Habitation," associated with "foundation" and "endurance." They encounter a pearl merchant who is not an inhabitant of the city but a "stranger" like Peter and the others. The rich of the city ignore him, but the poor pay attention to him. The merchant offers, "Come to my city, so that I may not only show it before your very eyes, but give it to you for nothing" (4:10–15). Revealing the allegory, Peter asks about the "hardships" on the way to the city, because they are "strangers and servants of God" (5:10–11). The merchant suggests that no one can travel that road, because they must give up everything. Peter sighs in response, saying, "If only Jesus would give us power to walk it!" The merchant says that he too knows Jesus and that Jesus indeed gives strength.

After the merchant disappears, Peter asks an old man sitting nearby if the name of the city is really "Habitation." The old man confirms it, saying, "We inhabit here because we endure." "Justly [...] have men named it," Peter says, "because by everyone [who] endures his trials, cities are inhabited, and a precious kingdom comes from them, because they endure in the midst of the apostasies and the difficulties of the storms. So that in this way, the city of everyone who endures the burden of his yoke of faith will be inhabited, and he will be included in the kingdom of heaven" (7:6–19). Peter and the others travel the road, evading some of the obstacles, and then are greeted by Jesus, the Savior and "son of a great king," who reveals himself to be the pearl merchant and becomes a physician for the apostles, healing them from their hardships. Rather than a text about "Christian persecution" (a case difficult to make for the second century at all), we might see the road to the "other" city, one embarked upon by a group inherently symbolic of Israel (twelve apostles), as a diasporic return. It does not seem as if the city "Habitation" refers to a specific city (it does not hint at anything like the earthly Jerusalem or Babylon), but nonetheless it is presented as the grim, unjust other of the promised city.

These projections of a new or heavenly city or temple as an attempt at transcendence of place might be associated with some other rhetorical moves that are less explicitly geographical in reference. There is, for instance, the Gospel of John's recourse to a Jesus whose origins are cosmic, not geographical, and

19. *Apoc. Paul* 22:24–23:30.

whose kingdom is “not of this world” (18:36), which might be understood as not just a pitching of “homeland” upward, but as an attempt to circumvent the complexities of place by delocalizing altogether. In John 4, for example, Jesus’ proclaiming of a God who should be worshipped “as he truly is” (i.e., irrespective of place) is introduced through an encounter with a Samaritan woman who questions why he is speaking to her, since Jews do not associate with Samaritans. Pressing the distinction between the two, the Samaritan woman says that her ancestors worshipped “on this mountain” but Jews claim they must worship in Jerusalem (4:19). “Believe me,” Jesus says, “there will be a time when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain or Jerusalem ... A time is coming when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (4:21, 23). Considering when the Gospel of John was composed, for the readers of John the claim of a placeless God is haunted by the loss of not just one but both temples it mentions. Placed in a dialogue with a Samaritan woman, it also provokes long running questions (or anxieties) around Israelite diffuseness and cultural purity.²⁰

The *Gospel of Truth* too generously invites (and sensuously describes) a return to the Father, a true reality of fullness described as “the Totality,” over and against being lost in ignorance to nightmares and violence. In Ephesians, which imagines Jesus as being seated “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (2:21), readers are promised, as heirs to the Father, an inheritance of riches, fullness, and grace, and are thus (as in the *Gospel of Truth*) relieved of alienation, darkness, and ignorance.²¹

A return to the Father, the Father’s realm or kingdom as one’s origin, may be ethereal and delocalized, but that itself should be seen as a specifically diasporic move. The vagueness of such visions is typically rendered as abstract, speculative, or spiritual, but it seems that nebulous quality of these transcendent imaginations might have some experiential reverberations. Grace Cho (borrowing from Hortense Spillers) describes the psycho-social conditions attending slaves on slave-ship voyages to unfamiliar places, for example, suggesting that the suspense in the non-place of the ocean produces, or is at the very least a metaphor for, an “oceanic feeling,” a sense of identity loss and erasure that comes with being “culturally unmade.”²² Importantly, Cho argues, “the vessel’s movement toward an unknown destination implies not only the vulnerability and erasure, or unmaking, of the subject but also a moment of radical possibility.”²³ One might then easily read the vague, undulating, plump, and oceanic

20. Once the capital of the Northern Kingdom, but largely de-populated by the Assyrians (cf. 2 Kgs 17:6), Samaria held a dubious but distinct relationship to Israel as part of its history and self-understanding.

21. *Gos. Truth* 3:14–19; 4:17–25.

22. Cho, “Voices from the *Teum*,” 160. Cf. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 65.

23. Cho, “Voices from the *Teum*,” 160.

space or experience envisioned in these texts as a re-valancing of such diasporic senses of being dislodged.

Christ, Sovereignty, and Citizenship

In the *Secret Revelation of John*, Jesus/Christ (again associated with or called Providence/Pronoia) is a divine spark of light, the “autogenes” or self-generated one (who is an emissary of the divine realm and offers the knowledge of the God above all) and humanity’s luminous origins. While light is figured in the text as divinity itself, it regularly also becomes a diffuse form of divinity that inhabits or is inhabited by humanity. In a retelling of the story of Noah, the text describes the flood as an act of the Chief Ruler and his powers. Noah, however, is instructed by Providence, the reflection of the divine light, and she shelters him (and others) from the “immovable generation”:

They were sheltered by a luminous cloud. And [Noah] recognized his sovereignty along with those who were with him in the light which illuminated them, for darkness flowed out over everything upon the earth. (*Sec. Rev. John* 24:26–29²⁴)

Light is both a metaphor for knowledge, a quality of individual subjects, and the very location of one’s origins, entangling *knowing* one’s belonging with the fact of belonging itself. Christ is clearly special, embodying light, but also engendering knowledge of belonging to the light. It is important to note how closely the light is connected to sovereignty—both in the more specific reference in the story of Noah, as well as in the more implicit reference to a “self-generated” one. That is to say, the text seems to evoke both the sovereignty of Israel in its monarchical histories and in its broader connotations of agency and invulnerability. Christ, though clearly a special and idealized figure, is also the figure through which “the immovable generation,” a term with deep resonances in the LXX,²⁵ recognizes its own sovereignty against a cruel world full of darkness, violence, and separation, enabling its return to its true origins.

Wisdom/knowing/instruction has a long history in the Israelite tradition of not only associations with sovereignty, but (not unrelated) a mode of forming ideal subjects or citizens. The *Secret Revelation of John’s* description of Sophia as a figure who ruptures divine wholeness by acting “out of place,” and thus

24. Or *Ap. John* 24:26–29.

25. Michael Williams has written on “the immovable race” and a wider range of similar terms, including stillness, stability, and rest, as they occur in a number of Nag Hammadi texts (including *Gospel of the Egyptians*, *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Secret Revelation of John*). In this work he has noted not only the perhaps more obvious Platonist contexts for these concepts, but resonances between these notions and the OT/LXX notions of the people, city, or king being unshakable/immovable because they have placed their hope in YHWH, though he focuses on the former. Williams, *The Immovable Race*.

must herself be saved,²⁶ is a familiar (highly gendered) way of allegorizing and working out questions of Israel's subjection and loss of sovereignty: the rules of God's patriarchal household were violated.²⁷ But it is of course notable that Jesus, associated with another wisdom figure, Pronoia, performs restoration of a kind of sovereignty through knowing.

Of course, Jesus is a figure who regularly promises or symbolically performs the restoration of a whole. It is through the vulnerable, injured, glorious, sovereign Jesus that Paul's mixed and diaspora communities become "one" under Israel's God, for instance, that Israel fulfills its promise as the true Israel, drawing people far and wide in Acts, and that the New or heavenly Jerusalem is available or initiated. Although the *Secret Revelation of John* does not specifically mention Jesus' death, many other texts associate Jesus' delivery of knowledge of true origins with his death.²⁸ The *Concept of Our Great Power*, for example, recounts the destruction of a worldly kingdom and its rulers, and the salvation of "the pure" to the "Great Power," which (much like the Father in the *Secret Revelation of John* and others) is the power above all powers, divinities, and rulers. It is the "immeasurable, universal one" whose light makes souls holy (47:10–15). The text introduces the Logos, who "knows the Great Power," "speaks in parables," and "opens the gates of the heavens with his words" (40:25–41:10). The rulers try to destroy the Logos in order to gain access to the Great Power. The text emphasizes the specialness of some (the seed of the Logos and those who wish to follow him, those who are uncircumcised), though suggests the final salvation of all, saying that all those who know the truth find rest in the heavens (42:30–31) and come to reside in the "unchangeable age" (48:13–14). Similarly, the *Gospel of Truth* strikingly describes the cross of Jesus turning into a tree in which, in a play on and reversal of the garden of Eden, Jesus becomes the "fruit of the knowledge of the Father," a way of drawing the Father's children back to "the Totality." The plot of the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* not only relies on him as a figure who endures suffering, but (through the narrative of the pearl merchant) figures him as the purveyor of a knowledge that leads one to the city.

In each case, Christ/Logos/Savior has a socially productive value and one different from his assumed place catalyzing Christianity. Jesus' social productivity might be understood in a specifically diasporic vein, as seen through Brian Keith

26. Cf. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 90.

27. This motif immediately calls to mind some other figurations of Israel's infidelity or its possibilities as female sexual unruliness or impurity, such as Hosea 2, the "strange woman" of Proverbs, etc.

28. Compatibly, one of Paul's better known rhetorical inversions is the contrast between the wisdom of "this age" versus God's secret wisdom: "Yet among the mature, we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:6–8).

Axel's work on the Sikh diaspora. In Axel's essay "The Diasporic Imaginary," in which he notes how analytics of place have been over-emphasized in studies of diasporic identity and belonging, he suggests that for many diaspora groups place/place-of-origin is not necessarily the most pressing matter. He instead highlights violence as a "key means through which the features of a people are constituted."²⁹ This proposal is "intended to account for the creation of the diaspora, not through a definitive relation to place, but through formations of temporality, affect, and corporeality."³⁰ His use of the term "imaginary" is not meant to recall Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" (often cited in diaspora studies), but recalls Lacan's mirror stage, in which identification plays out in constructions of time and images of the body.

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 more 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 (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."³¹

Axel tracks the gendered and sexualized implications of torture, employing the Lacanian notion of *le corps morcelé* ("the body in bits and pieces"). For Lacan this fragmented body presents a "time before" against which the wholeness of the nation is constructed. "Countering this national fantasy," he writes, "the sight of the tortured body within Khalistani practices of subject formation provides the opportunity to elaborate repeatedly a time before the apotheosis of the Indian nation-state, before contemporary violence, and before a history of movement and mobility that scattered the members of an integral Sikh quam—a desire of the total body politic."³² Importantly, the tortured body belongs in a certain way to both the Indian state and Khalistan. The victim of torture is

29. Axel, "The Diasporic Imaginary," 412.

30. Axel, "The Diasporic Imaginary," 412.

31. Axel, "The Diasporic Imaginary," 415.

32. Axel, "The Diasporic Imaginary," 425. The temporal dimension of this might shed some light on Hebrews and the always-already heavenly city as well. In my recent monograph, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, I use Axel's work to think about the letters of Ignatius, particularly his archaizing of *christianismos* against *ioudaismos*, as well as some dimensions of the *Secret Revelation of John*.

both disciplined citizen and abjected other of the state, as well as the “abject subject” through which Khalistan re-emerges (as if dormant) in one and the same move.³³

Axel’s work crystalizes the work of Jesus’ martyrological inferences (as one who died “for us”) specifically, but more generally the weighted importance of the subjected, even sometimes gruesome, dimensions of his death. He is at once a disciplined subject under “the rulers” and the ideal citizen of Israel, a diasporic projection sustained and revived in part through elaborations of a new and heavenly homeland, a “land of the pure” in its own right. As Paul puts it, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Phil 3:20–21). The ideal citizen of the diasporic collective, Jesus/Christ/Logos/Savior concretizes not only the subjugation attending diasporic self-understanding, but the fantasies of power, self-determination, and belonging that attend it as well. As the *Concept of Our Great Power* claims, “And he was victorious over the command of the rulers, and they were not able by their work to rule over them” (42:6–10).

It bears mentioning that the production of an idealized and abstracted (and usually “pure”) collective such as Khalistan, the New Jerusalem, the Father’s realm, etc., through representations of violence and martyrological discourses, resonates with the history of the production of *ioudaismos*, a term that, however ambiguous in its content, first appears in martyr discourses as the abstracted entity giving significance to the martyr’s death.³⁴ That is to say that *ioudaismos* may very well do the work of homeland, a diasporic projection of counter-belonging in the face of social fracture and disciplinary states.

While scholarship has typically read phrases such as “the immovable race,” notions of election, and retellings of primal genealogy (e.g., the seed of Seth) as indicators of a specifically gnostic self-understanding, they are better understood, I think, alongside these instances as ways of working out ideals and histories of sovereignty, crises of belonging, notions of Israel’s election, its abandonment by God, or being lost at large. This focus on diaspora also presents us with new possibilities for understanding the rhetoric of purity/defilement that have again been given a rarefied spin in gnosticizing scholarship.

33. Axel writes: “Torture enacts a drama of contestation between the ‘real’ people of India and the people of an ‘illusory’ Khalistan. Such divisions of peoplehood notwithstanding, the performative act of torture produces its object, the body, as both Indian and Sikh, as both citizen and traitor, and both as belonging to the state and something that exceeds the state. Conjoined to Punjab, the ‘disturbed area’ and the ‘sensitive border state,’ the tortured male Sikh body has become a sign of the fragility of the national territory.” Axel, “The Diasporic Imaginary,” 420.

34. As Judith Lieu argues. Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 251–52.

Conclusion

If neither “gnostic” nor “Christian” is a suitable category for these texts, we might simply dispense with them for a broader, more diffuse and more accommodating (not to mention much more historically viable) heading: that is, *diasporic literature*. I am suggesting “diaspora” here rather than “construction of Jewish identity” for several reasons. For one, the limits of the term “Jewish” for the first and second centuries have been well noted.³⁵ Second, in addition to the individualized implications of “identity” to describe texts as constructing an identity at all applies a single, totalizing category to the text. While the notion of constructions of Christian identity arose to intervene in the essentialisms inherent to notions of “Christian origins” and to enable topography of “early Christian” diversity, fluidity, and contestation, the term “construction” itself suggests solidity that is at odds with its very initiating impulse. In other words, while “identity construction” gestures to the messiness of selfhood, it falls short of accommodating very much of it.

On the other hand, diaspora and belonging as conceptual terms (at least in terms of recent diaspora theories) tend to make room for more complicated, qualitative assessments of social life: the manifold forces giving shape to senses of belonging, the experiential intricacies involved in one’s attachment to a given entity or entities, and the ways those attachments constantly re-form themselves. Diaspora assumes not “hybridity” over against some kind of cultural purity, but that articulations of “pure” cultural belonging involve, paradoxically, multiple belonging from the outset, since diaspora collectives are always already entangled in colonial or imperial intervention, mapping, racialization/minoritization, and violence. As such, diaspora theory tends to eschew such locational politics, seeing interest in precise positioning and mapping as partaking of the diasporic rhetoric of authenticity (who is “really” in).³⁶

While Karen King attaches herself to an expanded notion of Christianity (a rich, diverse, and contested phenomenon), what King *enables* is a reading of ancient literature against even her own categorical inclinations. In an exquisitely precise way, she attends to the ways the text resources traditions and themes that would otherwise seem categorically at odds with one another: its simultaneous engagement of Genesis and Platonic themes generates not only a burning critique of life under the Roman empire, but an almost conservative vision of Roman republican values. Even more significantly, at least from my point of view, is the way she enables a reading of the text that de-emphasizes

35. Cf. esp. Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism,” 457–512.

36. Rey Chow has made the point about diasporic rhetoric of authenticity quite powerfully in her book, *Writing Diaspora*.

the diagnostic reductions that have plagued gnosticizing scholarship in favor of questions about experiences of captivity, nostalgia, idealization, and suffering.

King's most exploitable point is that gnosticism as a category will all-ways uphold some version of an orthodox Christianity. And it turns out that "Christianity" itself is an orthodox category, one that presumes certain directionality in the flow of history and that seeks to crowd out complex and multidirectional affiliations in the name of a certain overarching social coherence. Without an intense scrutiny to what we label as Christian and why, orthodox coherence and directionality will be the implicit underwriter of our histories. Thus the collapse of gnostic categorical assumptions will require the collapse of Christian categorical ones, as well and a rigorous attention to the poignant, pressing, and more textured questions of human experience at the fusion of various powers, histories, and commitments.

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