GOSPEL OF THE EGYPTIANS. Two rather fragmentary versions of the Gospel of the Egyptians are found in the NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY, the one appearing as the second tractate in Codex III and the other as the second piece in Codex IV. In their present form, they derive from the same Greek original of the document, each version possibly depending on an earlier, variant Coptic translation. Both copies are written in the Sahidic dialect of Coptic, with some orthographic and syntactic variations in the text of Codex III that have been explained as either preclassical features of the dialect (Bohlig and Wisse, 1975) or influences from the Mesokemic dialect (Bellet, 1978, pp. 44-65). These Coptic versions of the Gospel of the Egyptians exhibit no discernible connection with the text of the same name that is known reliably only from references and quotations preserved by Clement of Alexandria (Schneemelcher, 1963-1965, Vol. 1, pp. 166-78).

The proper title of the work is The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, an indicator that the work originated outside of Christian circles. In fact, it has been argued persuasively that because of the way Christian colorations are introduced in the text, they are to be thought of as additions made by an editor with Christian interests (Hedrick, 1981).

While the Christian touches are light and late, the strength of the connections with Seth is solid. Indeed, it is possible that the association of names between Seth, son of Adam, and the Egyptian god Seth has led to the naming of the work The Gospel of the Egyptians, since, as Bohlig and Wisse have noted, during the Hellenistic age considerable efforts were made to improve the image of the deity Seth in Egypt. Moreover, the use of the term "gospel" in the colophon probably does not refer to its added Christian features but rather to the fact that the treatise chronicles Seth's role in the drama of salvation, much as the New Testament Gospels speak of the ministry of Jesus (Bohlig and Wisse, 1975). For instance, the work relates Seth's premortal origin as son of Adamas, his stature as an important celestial personality, the origin of his posterity, their
preservation by heavenly powers appointed for this purpose, and his
descent into the world as the living Jesus.

The work itself divides rather neatly into four main sections, a
fact that may illustrate the separate origin of the traditions embedded
within them. The first and longest has to do with the origin of the
celestial realm that begins in the silent world of light, with the
"Great Invisible Spirit," who is the "incorruptible Father" and the
"Mother, the virginal Barbelon," emanating from themselves a
trinity of powers, namely, "the Father, the Mother (and) the Son."
By the end of the creative process, some forty aeons or emanations
have come forth, not the least of whom is "the great incorruptible
Seth, the son of the incorruptible man Adamas." The second
segment treats the need for Seth's salvific activity, which is to
counteract the evil efforts of Saklas, the god of this world, who
seeks to enslave the divine seed of Seth. The third division consists
apparently of two hymns of five strophes each, thus presumably
exhibiting an origin independent of that of the rest of the tractate
(Bohlig and Wisse, 1975). The last portion consists of the notation
that Seth authored the work and was responsible for hiding it on the
mountain named Charaxio and the colophon, which provides not
only the titles assigned to the tractate but also the name of the scribe
(Bellet, 1978).

The document clearly comes from the world of so-called Sethian
gnosticism, possibly exhibiting an earlier form of that movement
than is represented, for instance, in the THREE STELES OF SETH
or in the SECOND TREATISE OF THE GREAT SETH. While one
may be tempted to postulate that this text was composed outside of
Egypt, there seems no compelling reason to hold such a view, even
when it is understood that the title Gospel of the Egyptians is
secondary.

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