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XII. The Suffering Jesus and the Invulnerable Christ in the Gnostic *Apocalypse of Peter*

GERARD P. LUTTIKHUIZEN

This final chapter deals with a Gnostic writing of the same name as the Greek-Ethiopic *Apocalypse of Peter*. The Gnostic text is contained in one of the fourth-century Coptic manuscripts of Nag Hammadi (codex VII, 3)¹. What the two Petrine apocalypses have in common is that they speak of revelations granted by Jesus Christ to Peter at some time during the Holy Week². However, the actual contents of the two texts are entirely different. The Gnostic text discloses how, through several visions, Peter was led to full understanding of the nature and the mission of Christ, the mediator of the revelation. In the course of his teaching, Christ refutes the 'errors' of non-Gnostic Christian groups, notably the early orthodox Christians.

The Coptic papyrus manuscript contains the complete text of the Gnostic *Apocalypse of Peter* (*GApPt*) in a clear legible handwriting. However, in other respects, it is a poor copy. Almost every page contains one or more grammatically unclear phrases³. These obscurities

¹ This writing was the subject of the Groningen dissertation of H.W. Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 1993. It was published as volume 144 of *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin, 1999).

I assume that the so-called synoptic apocalypse (*Mt 24* and parallels) is in the background of the revelation in the Greek-Ethiopic writing. The setting of the Coptic-Gnostic revelation will be discussed below.

³ Virtually all grammatical problems are discussed in Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 54-69 ('Grammatical Annotations').

may be due to the incompetence of the translator or to an inaccurate transmission of the Coptic text. In some cases, the transcriber is likely to have inserted his own comments into the text. This could explain some of the convoluted sentences (see e.g. the opening lines quoted below). On several occasions we have no other choice than to accept that the text of the only surviving manuscript is corrupt.

I. Date of Origin

In their attempts to date the hypothetical Greek original of the *GApPt*, James Brashler and Henriette Havelaar rightly concentrate on the *terminus post quem*⁴. The text can hardly be earlier than the end of the second century. The many references to texts that later became part of the New Testament preclude this⁵. Brashler and Havelaar also point to the polemics directed at emerging mainstream Christians, notably the rejection of their claim that 'the mystery of truth' belonged to them alone⁶. In the third century, the exclusive claims of the great Church were increasingly pressed upon minority groups that did not accept orthodox teaching and practice.

The dating of the Greek original to the end of the second century or the beginning of the third century means that it was written 50 to 100 years after the original version of the Greek-Ethiopic *Apocalypse*. To Schneemelcher this seems reason enough to rank the *GApPt* with the later apocalypses and the Greek-Ethiopic writing with the earlier ones⁸. In my opinion, this is a somewhat arbitrary decision. It should be noted that the preserved manuscripts of the

⁴ J. Brashler, *The Coptic 'Apocalypse of Peter': A Genre Analysis and Interpretation* (dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1977) 217; Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 16.

⁵ See Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, ch. 6 ('The Apocalypse of Peter and the New Testament').

⁶ *GApPt* 76.31-34, quoted below, n. 2q.

⁷ For the dating of the Greek-Ethiopic *Apocalypse* see C.D.G. Müller, 'Offenbarung des Petrus', in W. Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen II* (Tübingen, 1985) 563f = NTA II, 622; Tigchelaar, *this volume*, Ch. IV.

⁸ Schneemelcher, *NTApok*^S II, 628-33 = NTA II, 700-12.

Greek-Ethiopic *Apocalypse* are centuries younger than the Coptic text of the *GApPt*. This is important if we bear in mind that we are dealing with 'living texts'⁹.

2. *The Literary Setting of the Revelation*

The *chronological setting* of Christ's revelations to Peter is extraordinary. Christ speaks to Peter *during* the events of Good Friday, not shortly *before* the day, as he does in the synoptic apocalypse and in the Greek-Ethiopic *ApPt*. In comparison with other Gnostic revelation texts, the setting of Christ's teaching is also exceptional. *The Secret Book of John*, *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, *The Letter of Peter to Philip*, and comparable Gnostic revelation texts typically refer to post-Easter appearances of Christ¹⁰. These writings pretend to reveal the full and definitive teaching of Christ granted to a select group of followers; Christ manifests himself to them – or his voice speaks – from the world above".

It is more difficult to determine the exact *location* of Christ's revelation in the Gnostic *ApPt*. The opening lines give us a hint. Unfortunately, this occurs in one of the aforementioned obscure passages in the Coptic manuscript. In all editions, this passage has been emended. I quote Brasher's translation of 1996¹²:

APOCALYPSE OF PETER. As the Saviour was sitting in the temple, in the inner part of the building at the convergence of the tenth pillar, and as he was at rest above the congregation of the living incorruptible Majesty, he said to me: 'Peter, (...)'¹³

⁹ Texts that were constantly revised and adapted to new situations.

¹⁰ K. Rudolph, 'Der gnostische "Dialog" als literarisches Genus', in P. Nagel (ed), *Probleme der koptischen Literatur* (Halle, 1968) 85-107 at 91: 'Die Szene (Hintergrund, Ort) ist stets in die Zeit nach der Auferstehung Jesu verlegt.' Cf. Ph. Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue. The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York, 1980) 37-58.

¹¹ G.P. Luttikhuisen, 'The Evaluation of the Teaching of Jesus in Gnostic Revelation Dialogues', *NovTest* 30 (1988) 158-68.

¹² In B.A. Pearson, *Nag Hammadi Codex VII* (Leiden, 1996) 219.

¹³ *GApPt* 70.13-20.

The translation: 'the inner part of the building', is an emendation of a combination of Coptic words that does not make sense¹⁴. However, if we assume that this emendation and its translation are correct, what does the text mean?¹⁵ Is this a reference to the earthly temple in Jerusalem or, rather, to a spiritual temple in the divine world? It is quite probable that the reference is to both places at the same time. As we will see, *GApPt* frequently directs the attention to a spiritual dimension in visible reality. In particular, the subsequent phrase, 'and as he was at rest above the congregation of the living incorruptible Majesty', suggests that the Saviour is in his true spiritual environment together with all those who belong to the Father¹⁶.

3. *Physical and Spiritual Realities*

In our text, Peter speaks about teachings revealed to him by Jesus Christ on Good Friday. An important part of the revelation concerned the true meaning of the events of that day. Christ explained to Peter that he himself – the divine and, allegedly, impassible Saviour – would not be arrested and crucified, but only the physical body of Jesus. The apostle also intimates that Christ used special didactics to teach him. For instance, after the first words had been addressed to him, Peter noticed that the priests and the people were running to-

¹⁴ *GApPt* 70.15-16: \bar{n} <MEṬ NṬE ΠICMNE; Brashler: \bar{n} <Π> MEṬ NṬE ΠICMNE (the gender of the definite article is changed before MEṬ). In his dissertation (note 4 above) and in his subsequent translation in J.M. Robinson (ed), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden, 1988³), Brashler suggested reading: 'in the three hundredth (year) of the covenant'; A. Werner proposes, in Schneemelcher, *NTApok*⁵ II, 637: 'im dreihundertsten (Jahr) der Errichtung'; English translation, 705: 'in the three hundredth (year) of the foundation'; Havelaar: 'in the threehundredth <...> of the construction'.

¹⁵ J.-D. Dubois, 'Le Préambule de l'Apocalypse de Pierre (Nag Hammadi VII, 70.14-20)', in *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique: Actes du Colloque de Louvain-la-Neuve (11-14 mars 1980)* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982) 384-93, and the grammatical annotation by Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 54.

¹⁶ Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 73-5.

wards them. Christ used this occasion to instruct the apostle how he could inwardly transcend visible reality¹⁷:

And as he was saying these things, I (Peter) saw the priests and the people running toward us with stones, as if they were about to kill us. I was afraid that we were going to die¹⁸.

Christ summoned the apostle to put his hands over his eyes and to describe what he could see. At first, Peter did not understand the instruction, for he said that he could not see anything in this way. However, when Christ asked him to do it once more, something changed. Peter reports:

Fear and joy came over me, for I saw a new light brighter than the light of day. Thereupon it came down upon the Saviour¹⁹.

This experience was repeated with Peter's auditory senses. Christ asked him to listen to what the priests and the people said. Peter describes what he heard:

I heard the priests as they sat with the scribes. The crowds were shouting with a loud voice (73.2-4).

When Christ insisted that he listen with his spiritual ear, Peter heard something quite different, for he said to Christ:

'You are glorified while you are seated'²⁰.

With his physical eyes and ears Peter heard chaotic and threatening things but the inner self perceived the joyful truth about the Saviour. In this way, the apostle was prepared for what he would experience shortly later on that day.

¹⁷ Cf. U. Schoenbom, *Diverbium Salutis. Literarische Struktur und theologische Intention des gnostischen Dialogs am Beispiel der koptischen 'Apokalypse des Petrus'* (Gottingen, 1995) 110-12.

¹⁸ *GApPt* 72.4-8 (trans. Brashler 1996, 223).

¹⁹ *GApPt* 72.21-27 (apart from a few minor points I adopt Havelaar's translation).

²⁰ *GApPt* 73.9-10. This statement recalls the opening lines of the text speaking about the Saviour sitting in the temple. In both cases the reference is to a spiritual temple in the divine world as well as to the earthly temple.

4. *Jesus' Arrest and Crucifixion*

The actual arrest and the crucifixion of Jesus are reported on the last pages of the text. First Christ encouraged Peter:

'Peter, come! Let us go and fulfill the will of the incorruptible Father. Behold, those who will bring judgment upon themselves are coming. They will put themselves to shame. But me they cannot touch. And you, Peter, will stand in their midst. Do not be afraid because of your cowardice. Their minds shall be closed for the Invisible One has opposed them.' When he had said these things, I saw him seemingly being seized by them (80.23-81.6).

In the last sentence of this quotation, the attention is shifted from the arrest (still in the temple?) to the crucifixion scene. Curiously enough, even during the crucifixion Christ remained Peter's *angelus interpres* and answered the questions posed by the apostle:

And I said, 'What am I seeing, O Lord?
Is it you yourself whom they take? And are you holding on to me?
Who is the one who is glad and laughing above the cross?
Do they hit another one on his feet and on his hands?'

The Saviour said to me,
'The one you see above the cross, glad and laughing, is the living Jesus. But the one into whose hands and feet they are driving the nails is his fleshly part (sarkikon), which is the substitute. They put to shame that which came into existence after his likeness' (...). The son of their glory, instead of my servant, they have put to shame''.

An essential feature of this vision account is the distinction made between the suffering Jesus and the impassible Saviour. What is more, the two figures are related to conflicting powers. The Saviour is an agent of the incorruptible Father, whereas the human body of Jesus supposedly is a product ('the son') of the cosmic powers''. Such an

²¹ *GApPt* 81.6-23, 82.1-3.

²² Cf. Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 102. This body 'came into existence after his likeness'. The idea that the human body was formed after a heavenly archetype by cosmic powers is elaborated in the Secret Book (*Apocryphon*) of *John* and in other Gnostic texts.

interpretation implies that the wrongdoers who arrested and crucified Jesus, did not torture the Saviour but a human body. Above the cross, 'the living Jesus' laughs at their blindness. Thereupon, Peter reports, he perceived another figure:

And I saw someone about to approach us who looked like him and like the one who was laughing above the cross. He was woven in holy Spirit. He was the Saviour. And there was a great ineffable light, surrounding them, and the multitude of ineffable and invisible angels, blessing them. And I saw that the one who glorifies was revealed (82.3-17).

After this vision of what seems to be a higher dimension of the Saviour, Christ resumed his explanations to Peter:

And he said to me, 'Be strong! For you are the one to whom these mysteries have been given through revelation in order that you will know that the one they crucified is the first-born, the home of the demons, the clay vessel in which they dwell; it belongs to Elohim and to the cross that is under the law.

– But he who stands near him, is the living Saviour, he who was in him before, (in) the one who was seized. And he was released. He stands joyfully, looking at those who treated him violently. They are divided among themselves. Therefore, he laughs at their inability to see. He knows that they are born blind.

– So, the one who suffers will stay (behind), because the body is the substitute.

– But the one who was released is my incorporeal body.

– I am the intellectual spirit filled with radiant light.

– The one you saw coming to me is our intellectual Pleroma, who unites the perfect light with my holy spirit' (82.17-83, 15).

Peter's visions are characterised as 'mysteries' given exclusively to him²³. In his explanations, Christ paid special attention to the temporal dwelling of the Saviour in the physical Jesus: until the arrest of Jesus, the Saviour was in him ('he was in him before'); after his 'release' from Jesus, he witnessed how 'the one staying behind' was seized and treated violently.

²³ Cf. 71.8-21, where Christ says to Peter, 'from you I have made a beginning for the others whom I have called to knowledge', and 71.25-27, where Peter is reminded that he was called 'to know him (Christ) in the proper way'.

Actually, the vision accounts and the subsequent interpretations refer to two different aspects of the impassible Christ. Like the physical Jesus, these higher forms were seen by Peter as more or less independent figures:

- 1) 'the living Jesus' or 'living Saviour', also designated by Christ as his 'servant' and his 'incorporeal body'
- 2) 'the intellectual Pleroma', who in Peter's vision looked like 'the living Jesus'

These two distinctions within the concept of the Saviour indicate that *GApPt* does not conceive of two 'natures' (one human and one divine, as in later orthodox Christology) but of three. In particular, 'the living Saviour' deserves closer examination. His position between Christ's intellectual, or pleromatic, spirit and the physical body of Jesus reminds us of the role of the soul in a trichotomous concept of reality.

In this view of man and the world, the innermost centre of the human being (designated as the mind, *nous*, the spirit, *pneuma*, or also the soul, i.e. the rational part of the soul) is related to the supramundane realm of God. In contrast, the soul (or its irrational part) is, supposedly, of the same ethereal substance as the stars and the planets. In this concept, the soul mediates between the incorporeal spirit and a body composed of the four elements.

Ethel-, the fine-material substance of the soul, was regarded as the fifth element (*quinta essentia*) and was seen as a special kind of 'body'²⁴. In Hellenistic and Roman times, it was thought that when the immaterial soul or spirit left the supramundane world, it was wrapped in ethereal 'clothes'. The function of this ethereal 'body' was to protect the spiritual principle, to bridge the distance between the spirit and the earthly body, and, more specifically, to serve as a vehicle (*ochêma*) for the spirit. In this 'body', the spirit descended to the lower world and, after the death of the earthly individual, returned to the world above²⁵.

²⁴ P. Moraux, 'Quinta essentia', in RE 47 (Suttgart 1963) 1171-1263 at 1245-56. According to the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John*, humans have a 'psychic body' (made of the fine-material substance of the planetary spheres) as well as a carnal body.

²⁵ Cf. Galen, *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* VII.7.25-26: 'if we must

The cryptic designations, 'my incorporeal body' and 'my servant', that Christ used to refer to the figure who left the body of the earthly Jesus before he was arrested and later appeared to Peter above the cross, become more comprehensible if we relate them to the speculations about an ethereal soul-body and its mediating role between the spiritual and the earthly-material components of man.

5. Peter's Example

GApPt claims that the Saviour was immune to the attacks by the forces of evil²⁶; it was not he who was tortured and humiliated but his temporal 'substitute': the human body of Jesus. This claim is also voiced in the sections dealing with the 'future' errors of other Christian groups²⁷.

Orthodox followers of Jesus are criticised for worshipping 'a dead man'²⁸ and for imposing their belief in redemption, through Jesus' death (?), on others:

...speak of the substance of the soul, we must say (...) either that it is this, as it were, *luciform and ethereal body* (...) or that it is an incorporeal substance, and (that) this body is its first *vehicle*, by means of which it establishes partnership (*koinōnia*) with other bodies'; similar views are expressed by Philo (*Quis rerum div. her.* 281-2), Cicero, Plutarch, and also by Patristic authors. According to Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* I.6-7, the Valentinian Gnostics had very definite ideas about the three levels of being. Among others things, they believed that when Christ's spirit came down it was wrapped in a 'body having psychic substance'. See further H.S. Schibli, 'Origen, Didymus, and the vehicle of the soul', in R.J. Daly (ed), *Origeniana Quinta* (Louvain, 1992) 381-91, and A.P. Bos, *The Soul and its Instrumental Body* (Leiden, 2003), ch. 14; cf. *idem*, *De ziel en haar voertuig* (Leende, 1999) 99-116.

²⁶ This is already alluded to in the first words addressed to Peter (*GApPt* 71.5-7): 'the principalities sought him but they did not find him'.

²⁷ For this aspect of *GApPt* see K. Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum* (Leiden, 1978), and Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 193-204.

²⁸ *GApPt* 74.13-15: 'they adhere to the belief in a dead man, thinking that they will become pure'; Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 89: 'The belief in the name of a dead man will appear to be the core of the conflict between the Petrine Gnostics and their opponents'.

They are the ones who suppress their brothers saying to them: 'through this our God has mercy, because salvation comes to us through this''.

The Christians in question are depicted as victims of the archontic powers:

Many will accept our teaching in the beginning but turn away again in accordance with the will of the father of their error³⁰, because they have done what he wanted³¹.

Peter feared that in this way many of 'the living ones' would be led astray, but Christ reassured him:

For a period of time determined for them in proportion to their error, they will rule over the little ones. But, after the completion of the error, the ageless (race) of immortal understanding will be renewed, and they (the little ones) will rule over their rulers³².

When the text was written, the Petrine Gnostics were still in conflict with other Christian groups and they had reasons to believe that they lived in a world dominated by cosmic rulers. They could feel encouraged by the last words addressed to Peter and by Peter's exemplary reaction:

'You. therefore. be brave and do not fear anything, for I will be with you so that none of your enemies will domineer over you. Peace be with you. Be strong!'

When he had said these things, he (Peter) came to his senses (84.6-13).

The translation of the concluding words was proposed by Alexander Bohlig and adopted by Brashler and Havelaar³³. I suggest that the rel-

²⁹ *GApPt* 79.1-16; cf. 76.31-34: 'they will boast that the mystery of truth is with them alone'.

³⁰ This seems to be a designation of the demiurge, the chief archon, who in several Gnostic texts is seen as the cause of evil and as the enemy of spiritual humanity. Cf. *GApPt* 74.29-30: 'they (non-Gnostic Christians) stand in the power of the archons'.

³¹ *GApPt* 73.23-27; cf. 74.22: 'they will be ruled in a heretical manner'.

³² *GApPt* 80.8-16 (trans. Brashler, 1996, 239; I added 'race' between brackets). The designation of the Gnostics as 'the little ones' recalls the expression 'these little ones' used by Jesus to refer to his followers in Matthew's Gospel (10.42; 18.6,10,14). See Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 97, 152, 179f.

³³ A. Bohlig, 'Zur Apokalypse des Petrus', *Göttinger Miscellen* 8 (1973),

evant Coptic phrase is laden with far more meaning³⁴: after Christ's teachings Peter 'came to himself (i.e. to his true self)'. This interpretation means that when the Saviour had completed his teachings, Peter achieved the state of perfection to which he was called before by Christ:

You, too, Peter, become perfect (...) just like me, the one who has chosen you. For from you I have made a beginning for the others whom I have called to knowledge (71.5-21).

6. Conclusions

The Gnostic *ApPt* claims to contain Peter's own account of the revelations granted to him by Jesus Christ on Good Friday. The revelations pertain first and foremost to the true meaning of the things seen and events experienced by the apostle on that day. It is remarkable, and somewhat confusing, that Christ, the Saviour, is both the subject and object of the revelation. Peter saw different forms of Christ, while at the same time Christ was with him and spoke to him.

Christ insisted that the suffering Jesus should not be mistaken for the divine Saviour. In Christ's explanation, the human body of Jesus was merely a temporary dwelling-place. Moreover, he repudiated this *sarkikon* as the product ('the son') of quasi-glorious cosmic powers. In *GApPt*, the cosmic powers are the attackers and enemies of Christ and the Gnostics. As Christ disclosed in his first words addressed to Peter, 'the principalities' sought him but could not find him³⁵. Christ himself was fully immune to the attacks of the forces of evil. His followers could attain this level of protection if they allowed themselves to be enlightened by Christ's teaching and, accordingly, were prepared to live in this world as 'strangers' and 'children of light' (78.25-6, 83.17-9).

Actually, Christ predicted that some of his followers would turn away from the truth and accused their leaders, 'the messengers of er-

11-3. For the use of the third person style in this interpretation of the last sentence of the text see Havelaar, *Coptic Apocalypse*, 68-9 and 78f.

³⁴ ⲁϥⲱⲱⲡⲉ ⲉⲣⲁⲓ ⲛⲉⲗⲏⲧⲉ̅

³⁵ *GApPt* 71.5-7; cf. note 26 above.

ror', of siding with his enemies (77.24ff, 80.2-6). The 'children of this age' would do what 'the father of their error' wanted them to

Christ made great demands on Peter (and, through, him on the others whom he had called to knowledge³⁶). He frequently encouraged and reassured the apostle. Peter's fears concerned the future as well as the present. He was afraid of what might happen to Christ, and to himself, when he saw what the priests and the people wanted to do. But he also feared future oppression by the cosmic forces and the people 'in their power'³⁸. Only gradually did the apostle overcome his fears; and through Christ's revelations he was led, finally, to full understanding. Of course, the inner transformation of Peter was meant to set an example to the Gnostic readers of this writing³⁹.

In conclusion, it has to be noted, that *GApPt*'s interpretation of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion does not deviate substantially from what we find in some of the other early-Christian Gnostic writings. For instance, the Letter *of Peter to Philip* in codex VIII of Nag Hammadi contains a sermon by Peter in which the apostle first summarises the well-known account of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection, but subsequently he says: 'My brothers, Jesus is a stranger to this suffering'⁴⁰. His argument was that it was not the divine Saviour, the bringer of the Truth, who suffered but rather the Gnostics who, before his coming, had lived in darkness and were in need of Christ's redemptive message.

We could also compare the Gnostic chapters of the *Acts of John* (99-101), where a distinction is made between the 'wooden cross in Jerusalem' and the 'cross of light' revealed to John when he fled from the crucifixion scene to the Mount of Olives. John was asked by the Saviour to scorn the 'humble' and 'unworthy' beliefs of those who assumed that he had been crucified in Jerusalem. The story ends

³⁶ Cf. note 30 above.

³⁷ *GApPt* 71.20f.

³⁸ *GApPt* 73.17-18.

³⁹ This aspect of the *GApPt* is particularly highlighted in Schoenborn, *Diverbium Salutis*.

⁴⁰ *Letter of Peter to Philip* 139.13-25.

with an account of how John laughed at the people around the wooden cross.

In these, and other Gnostic writings⁴¹, Christ is viewed as an Illuminator from the transcendent world. The idea that he could suffer as a physical being, is explicitly and vehemently rejected⁴².

⁴¹ Cf. the *Treatise of Seth*, the writing that precedes *GApPt* in NHC VII, esp. 51.20-52.3 and 55.16-56.20: Christ laughed at the ignorance of the executioners when they crucified 'their man'.

⁴² See further the discussions in G. Luttikhuisen, 'The thought pattern of Gnostic mythologizers and their use of biblical traditions', in J.D. Turner and A. McGuire (eds), *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years* (Leiden 1997) 89-101 at 90-93; *idem*, 'A Gnostic reading of the Acts of John', in J.N. Bremmer (ed), *The Apocryphal Acts of John* (Louvain 1995) 119-52 at 127-47. ■ thank dr. A. Hilhorst for his critical comments and for several valuable suggestions.