

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS THE MOTHER OF THE SON?

ORIGEN'S INTERPRETATION OF A SURVIVING FRAGMENT FROM
THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE HEBREWS

While researching the so-called *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, I came across a reference in Book II of Origen's *Commentary on John* (written at Alexandria between 226 and 229), which aroused my interest concerning the manner in which some early Christians viewed the role of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity. Commenting on John's prologue, Origen wrote:

We were anxious to make it clear that if all things were made by him, then the Spirit also was made through the Word, and is considered to be one of the "all things" which are inferior to their Maker. This view is too firmly settled to be disturbed by a few words which may be adduced to the opposite effect. If anyone should cleave to the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, where the Saviour himself says, "My mother, the Holy Spirit took me just now by one of my hairs and carried me off to the great mount Tabor", he will have to face the difficulty of explaining how the Holy Spirit, who was made through the Word, can be "the mother" of Christ. But these things are not difficult to explain even by this [passage]: for if "the one who does the will of the Father in heaven is Christ's brother and sister and mother", and if the name "brother of Christ" may be applied not only to the human race, but to beings of a more diviner rank, then there is nothing absurd in the Holy Spirit being his mother, when anyone who does the will of the heavenly Father is called "mother of Christ"¹.

The beginning of the above passage presents us with the classic Origenian idea of the Spirit as inferior in rank to the Word, being his creation. The author carefully stresses that this basic picture cannot be modified by a few words. Nevertheless, he still feels the need to quote a puzzling statement in which Christ calls the Spirit His mother (a passage from the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, which was probably connected to *Ezek* 8,3) and then to solve it. As we have seen, Origen did not even try to discredit the quoted apocryphal gospel – which may testify to the fact that it was held in high respect in the second century – but

1. ORIGEN, *Clo* II, 11-12: *Commentaire sur Saint Jean*. Tome I (*Livres I-V*). Texte grec. Avant-propos, traduction et notes par C. BLANC (SC, 120), Paris, 1966; Tome II (*Livres VI et X*) (SC, 157), 1970; Tome III (*Livre XIII*) (SC, 222), 1975; Tome IV (*Livres XIX et XX*) (SC, 290), 1982; Tome V (*Livres XXVIII et XXXII*) (SC, 385), Paris, 1992.

appeals to *Matt* 12,50² for a reconciliatory (albeit hardly sufficient) explanation. We do not know the level of authoritativeness which Origen himself assigned to this *Gospel according to the Hebrews* (for in the text above he wrote: ‘if anyone should cleave’ or ‘give credit to’ this gospel), yet we have clear evidence coming also from the pen of Jerome that he (Origen) had frequently used it³. One thing is certain: even if he considered this gospel as being of a lower rank than the four canonical ones, Origen did not try to solve the above contradiction by attacking its trustworthiness as such. Moreover, he returns to this quotation again in his *Homily 15 on Jeremiah*, using a similar formula:

If someone can accept this: “My mother, the Holy Spirit took me just now by one of my hairs and carried me off to the great mount Tabor” etc. – one can see that she is his mother [or: one is able to see his mother]⁴.

Origen’s *Homilies on Jeremiah* can be dated to around 242, i.e. a good decade after the *Commentary on John*⁵. In this homily – connected to *Jer* 15,10 – Origen does not refer again to the Synoptic episode to furnish the same explanation concerning the Spirit’s alleged ‘motherhood’. Could this mean that our author, who (in the light of his other works) did not agree with the idea of the Spirit being a divine Mother, silently left this idea unchallenged in order ‘to let sleeping dogs lie’?

It is important to note that despite some confusion which surrounded the now lost *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, it is generally not regarded as having derived primarily from Gnostic circles⁶. This could be the reason why – despite being a critic of Gnosticism – Origen does not mount an attack upon the gospel itself. We know, however, that certain Gnostic trends – the Valentinians, for example – also referred to the Holy Spirit in feminine terms. The *Gospel according to Philip*, probably written in Syria in the second half of the third century, and preserved in the second codex of the Nag Hammadi Library, contains the following clear statement:

2. See also *Mark* 3,35 and *Luke* 8,21.

3. JEROME, *De viris illustribus* 2 in PL, 23, 612. See below.

4. ORIGEN, *Hier* XV, 4: *Jeremiahomilien – Klageliederkommentar – Erklärung der Samuel- und Königsbücher*. Herausgegeben von E. KLOSTERMANN (GCS, 6 = Origenes Werke, 3), Leipzig, 1901.

5. E. SCHADEL, *Origenes, Die griechisch erhaltenen Jeremiahomilien* (Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur, 10), Stuttgart, 1980.

6. A concise explanation concerning the origin and relevance of the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* can be found in ORIGEN, *Clo*, ed. BLANC (SC, 120), p. 262, n. 1. See also E. HENNECKE – W. SCHNEEMELCHER (eds.), *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, 2 vols., Tübingen, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 89-90 and 104-108.

Some said, "Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit". They are in error. They do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever conceive by a woman? Mary is the virgin whom no power defiled (55, 25-30)⁷.

To this passage another Nag Hammadi gospel may be added, namely *The Gospel of Truth* (from Codex I), attributed even to Valentinus himself (composed perhaps between 140 and 180), which again provides a Trinitarian picture different from that which became established in orthodox Christianity:

Thus the Logos of the Father goes forth into the All, being the fruit of his heart and expression of his will. It supports the All. It chooses and also takes the form of the All, purifying it, and causing it to return to the Father and to the Mother, Jesus of the utmost sweetness. The Father opens his bosom, but his bosom is the Holy Spirit⁸.

The above assertion concurs with the conclusion of Theodoret of Cyrus, who in his anti-heretical work entitled *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* (written in 452-453) claims that Valentinus considered God as being 'Metropator', i.e. 'Mother-Father':

They [i.e. the Valentinians] claim that he [God] made all visible things separately and call him both Metropator [Mother-Father] and Father and Demiurge⁹.

After this short excursus into the Valentinian-Gnostic system of thought, it would be useful to review a few other occurrences of the same passage from *The Gospel according to the Hebrews* as explained by St. Jerome.

In his *Commentary on Micah* 7, 6, while explaining the passage 'the daughter-in-law rises against her mother-in-law', Jerome wrote:

Yet whoever has read the Song of Songs and understands the Word of God (*sermo Dei*) to be the bridegroom of the soul (*sponsus animae*), will also believe the *Gospel published according to the Hebrews*, which we recently translated (in which it is said by the Saviour personally, "Just now my mother, the Holy Spirit, took me by one of my hairs"), will not hesitate to say that the Word of God proceeds from the Spirit (*ortum esse de spiritu*), and that the soul, which is the bride of the Word, has the Holy Spirit (which in Hebrew is feminine in gender, RUAH) as a mother-in-law¹⁰.

7. J.M. ROBINSON (ed.), *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, Leiden, 2000, vol. II, p. 151 (trans. W.W. ISENBERG).

8. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 93 (23, 30 – 24, 10). See also R.M. GRANT, *Gnosticism*, New York, 1961.

9. THEODORET OF CYRUS, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* I, 7 in PG, 83, 357.

10. See PL, 25, 1220-1222.

At least two things are quite remarkable in the above passage. First, that the explanation of Micah's prophecy is carried out with the help of an idea derived from the Song of Songs in a manner which is meant to actually increase the trustworthiness of an apocryphal gospel. Further, that even at the end of the fourth century (more exactly in 391-392, when Jerome wrote this commentary), i.e. after the closure of the New Testament Canon, such an authority-strengthening reference – and not an attack – is granted to the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* by a Latin theologian, who, after this passage, even quotes *Luke* 1,35 to support the birth of the Word and Son of God from the Holy Spirit. In comparison to the aforementioned quotation from the *Gospel according to Philip* – which asserted that a woman [Mary] could not conceive by a woman [i.e. by the Spirit understood in feminine terms] – Jerome seems (or perhaps chooses) to ignore this logical difficulty, and while calling the Holy Spirit 'the mother-in-law' of the human soul, tries to solve the puzzle by other means, i.e. by referring to the feminine gender of the Hebrew RUAH. Moreover, the entire passage does not suggest in any way that Jerome would strongly oppose or vehemently condemn the idea of the Spirit being feminine. A possible explanation of this acceptance may be found in Jerome's *Commentary on Isaiah* 40, 9, written between 408 and 410:

In the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* that the Nazarenes read, the Lord says, "Just now my mother, the Holy Spirit, took me". Now no one should be offended by this, because "spirit" in Hebrew is feminine, while in our language (*scil.* in Latin) it is masculine and in Greek it is neuter. In divinity, however, there is no gender¹¹.

This attitude could indeed be considered as being utterly progressive at the beginning of the fifth century, especially after the condemnation of the heresies against the Holy Spirit (including Macedonianism) in 381. To be so relaxed about a 'gender issue' within the Trinity in connection with a passage from a clearly apocryphal gospel (as the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* was in 408 by all standards) raises at least two questions:

1. Did Jerome feel that there were still so many orthodox believers clinging to this gospel, that a criticism directed against its authority would be harmful?

2. Did he really believe that the (however inconspicuous) acceptance of a divine motherhood assigned to the Spirit (however feminine in Hebrew) would not generate a major theological confusion?

11. See PL, 24, 405.

It is certainly difficult to determine all the reasons behind Jerome's solution, who repeats it in his *Commentary on Ezekiel* 16, 13 (written between 410 and 415)¹², yet one thing is clear beyond any speculation. What Origen did almost two centuries before – i.e. to exclude a divine motherhood *per se* of the Spirit and provide a rather superficial explanation by referring to *Matt* 12,50 – still seems to have been a much more dogmatic standpoint in a less dogmatic time in terms of Trinitarian controversies than Jerome's relaxed attitude in a period when doctrinal matters concerning the Trinity were in the focus of many theologians and a 'slip' or even a lenient compromise in this area could have brought the author significant criticism. To ask a simple question: could this apocryphal gospel be worth such a risk for either of them? The available evidence and the very few surviving fragments from this work which originally had a total of 2200 lines¹³ (just 300 lines less than the canonical Matthew) do not allow us to provide a satisfactory answer, yet it seems that the two theologians may have been influenced not merely by the gospel itself, but also by its readership.

On the one hand, we may almost feel compelled to suppose that the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* had such an authority in itself even at the beginning of the fifth century that a compromise, like Jerome's, was still possible. On the other hand, taking the testimony of Philip Sidetes into account, this conclusion may not seem so unambiguous. In a surviving fragment of his *Church History* written in 430, Philip Sidetes wrote that most of the old teachers had entirely rejected the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* as well as the so-called *Gospel of Thomas* and that of *Peter* inasmuch as they said that these writings were the works of heretics¹⁴.

Philip could hardly refer to Jerome as to 'one of the old teachers', since the latter died only ten years before the composition of his (Philip's) *Church History*, moreover, Jerome could not be considered as one of those who 'entirely rejected' the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*. Origen,

12. Here Jerome writes: "In the Book of Judges we read 'Deborah', which means 'bee'. Her prophecies are the sweetest honey and refer to the Holy Spirit, who is called in Hebrew by a feminine noun, RUAH. In the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which the Nazarenes read, the Saviour is introduced by saying, 'Just now my mother, the Holy Spirit, seized me'". See PL, 25, 137.

13. The figure comes from Nicephorus of Constantinople, who composed a *Chronography* in the first half of the ninth century. To this he also appended a canon catalogue (the *Stichometry*), the origin of which has not been conclusively determined, although it may come from Jerusalem.

14. See e.g. B. BLATZ – W. SCHNEEMELCHER, *Das Thomas Evangelium, Einleitung*. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/texteapo/thom-einleit.html>> (accessed 8 August 2005). See also L. VANYÓ (ed.), *Apokrifek (Apocrypha)* (Ókeresztény írók [Early Christian Writers Series], 2), Budapest, 1988, p. 291.

however, would certainly qualify as an 'old teacher' despite being criticised during the first half of the fifth century, yet he did not expressly reject or refute the aforementioned gospel either. The same has to be said about Didymus and Epiphanius as well.

Finally, although Quasten dates this gospel to the second century¹⁵, if we can trust the testimony of Jerome, who not only read but translated it both into Greek and Latin¹⁶, then this work could have already been used by Ignatius of Antioch (who died in 110), and thus may have been put in writing by the end of the first century¹⁷.

Whatever the date of the final redaction may be (since it is not later than the first half of the second century), it is clear that the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* preserved an important theological stratum of the earliest Christian times – perhaps challenged during the course of doctrinal development. It was nonetheless held in high respect by at least two reputable theologians of the Christian Church, neither of whom being prepared to challenge its textual authority as such. We may well be disappointed because of the loss of this gospel, which – as it seems – was of sufficient worth for them to put their own doctrinal authority at some risk; a gospel, which allegedly contained the Hebrew version of the canonical Matthew and other writings, and which may have indeed preserved for us a however fragmentary picture of the Holy Trinity as perceived by some early Christians who did not necessarily belong to the so-called Gnostic trend of thought. One might even claim that the image of the 'brooding' RUAH (or the 'hovering Spirit of God') over the face of the waters in *Gen* 1,2 returns in Jesus' admonition addressed to Jerusalem in *Matt* 23,37 and *Luke* 13,34:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

The above (albeit incomplete) evidence may lead us to conclude that although it cannot be ascertained that the Holy Spirit was generally viewed as a feminine-motherly hypostasis within the Trinity by Early Christendom, nevertheless, it seems more than likely that not only did

15. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 4 vols., Utrecht, 1950-1986, vol. I, p. 112.

16. JEROME, *De viris illustribus* 2 in PL, 23, 612.

17. See JEROME, *De viris illustribus* 16 in PL, 23, 633. There is some dispute around Ignatius' alleged quotation from the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, since Origen considers the excerpt as coming from a work entitled *Doctrina Petri* (ORIGEN, *Prin*, Preface 8). For a fuller account of this issue, see e.g. B. JACKSON (trans.), *The Ecclesiastical History, Dialogues, and Letters of Theodoret*, ed. H. WACE – P. SCHAFF (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 3), Oxford, 1892, p. 201, n. 1306.

some restricted Gnostic circles nourish such ideas, but also other ancient Christian communities (including Nazarenes, Ebionites and further groups recognised as orthodox during the time of Origen and of Jerome), and that this view was to a certain extent tolerated – despite not being universally accepted – by some theologians until perhaps as late as the beginning of the fifth century.

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