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From Apocalyptic Eschatology to Apocalypticism
How "Apocalyptic" is the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII,3)?[1]

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1. Introduction

This study emerged as a questioning on apocalypticism in Gnostic movements, more specifically as it manifests itself (or does not manifest) in those texts that modern scholarship classifies under the label "Gnostic Apocalypses."[2] It is sometimes claimed that these do not contain future-oriented eschatological material, or that they do so only to a very limited extent, which is supposed to reflect a lack of interest in apocalyptic eschatology among Gnostic movements – such a conception goes back to the works by F. C. Burkitt and Robert Grant.[3] Based on this idea, one might think that the Gnostic Apocalypses do not have much to offer in terms of reflections on (anti-)apocalypticism in Antiquity. However, at least one of these texts, the *Apocalypse of Peter* (NH VII,3), clearly exhibits a (future-oriented) eschatological scenario. Though not the main focus of the text, it is transparent enough to give us a glimpse of how a specific Gnostic Christian group[4] envisaged the *Endzeit* in the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE. This essay aims to reconstruct this scenario as far as possible, based on a close study of the Coptic text, and discuss how it informs us on the apocalyptic beliefs of the group behind the *Apoc. Pet*.

2. Gnostic Eschatology and Apocalyptic Eschatology

In an article published in 1970 in *Novum Testamentum*, Malcolm Peel argued that Gnostic eschatology is neither uniquely "realized" nor "individual" but that it has both a temporal (futuristic) and cosmological perspective.[5] This holds in sharp contrast with the often alleged lack of interest of Gnostic believers in history and the traditional view that they

[1] This article and the paper from which it is derived are part of a postdoc.mobility research project funded by the SNSF-Swiss National Science Foundation (no. 214153). The redundant use, in the above title, of terms formed on the Greek noun ἀποκάλυψις (litt., "uncovering" or "revelation") echoes the numerous issues of definition raised during the conference held in Ascona (16–19 July 2023).

[2] For a list of Gnostic texts that can be considered to be "Apocalypses," see Francis T. Fallon, "The Gnostic Apocalypses," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 123–58. Fallon uses the Collins' definition of the apocalyptic literary genre (John J. Collins, « Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre », *Semeia* 14 [1979]: 1–20, esp. p. 9; cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre," *Semeia* 36 [1986]: 13–64, esp. p. 7).

[3] F. C. Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis* (Cambridge: University Press, 1932), esp. 10 and 125; Robert Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966 [1st ed. 1959]), 27–38.

[4] I am assuming here that the *Apoc. Pet.* reflects the beliefs of a specific community, i.e., there is a (more or less large) "group" behind the text.

[5] Malcolm L. Peel, "Gnostic Eschatology and the New Testament," *Novum Testamentum* 12/2 (1970): 141–165.

would experiment a kind of "instant eschatology," being saved in the "Now" through the "'gnosis' of who [they] is, whence [they] has come, and whither [they] returns."[6] This traditional idea, Peel noticed, has even led to "theories seeking to explain the origins of Gnosticism out of a failure of the imminent eschatological hopes of both Christians and Jews."[7] He mentioned two theories in particular, one by F. C. Burkitt (formulated in 1932) and the other one by Robert Grant (formulated in 1959):

> F. C. Burkitt, for example, held that the non-arrival of the Day of Judgment and thus the delay of the "Parousia" in Christian experience was the "prime factor in the rise of Gnostic systems." Futuristic eschatology was replaced by the Gnostic sense of having in the present the guarantee of eschatological rewards by virtue of [their] possession of an immortal "pneuma." Robert Grant, on the other hand, has […] advocated that Gnosticism emerged from the failure of Jewish apocalyptic hope. Salvation is found not in the distant or even imminent future but is realized in this life.[8]

As for Peel, while acknowledging that the traditional view accurately reflects the content of a number of the Nag Hammadi tractates, he argues that some of them (notably the *Gospel of Truth* [NHC I,3], the *Dialogue of the Saviour* [NHC III,5], the *Apocalypse of Peter* [NHC VII,3], *On the Origin of the World* [NHC II,5] and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* [NHC III,4]) do reflect a concern for the *Endzeit* and (futuristic) eschatological salvation.[9]

Almost ten years later, Francis T. Fallon presented in *Semeia* 14 a corpus of about twenty Gnostic apocalypses or texts of revelation from Nag Hammadi and the Berlin codex (Codex Berolinensis Gnosticus 8502). He stated that a considerable number of these writings do contain eschatological material with a futuristic orientation, including a final judgement of "sinners or ignorant" (for example, *The Apocalypse of Adam* [NHC V,5], *The Dialogue of the Saviour* [NHC III,5], *The Apocalypse of Peter* [NHC VII,3]), or of the world (for instance, the *Gospel of Mary* [BG 8502] and the *Paraphrase of Shem* [NHC VII,1]), or of other-wordly beings (for instance, the *Second Apocalypse of James* [NHC V,4] or *The Hypostasis of the Archons* [II,4]).[10] In 1989, it was the turn of George MacRae to oppose the traditionnal view by "seeking evidence of apocalyptic eschatology in Gnostic texts."[11] He found the most obvious traces of a future-oriented eschatology in *On the Origin of the World* (NH II,5 and XIII,2.), *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NH XIII,1), *The Paraphrase of Shem*

[6] Peel, "Gnostic Eschatology," 143.

[7] Peel, "Gnostic Eschatology," 144.

[8] Peel, "Gnostic Eschatology," 144. The quotations within the quotation are taken from F. C. Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis* (Cambridge: University Press, 1932), 10 and 125. Peel also refers here to Robert Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966 [1st ed. 1959]), 27–38.

[9] Peel, "Gnostic Eschatology," 155–59.

[10] Fallon, "The Gnostic Apocalypses" (see the table on page 148).

[11] G. MacRae, "Apocalyptic Eschatology in Gnosticism," in D. Hellholm (ed.), *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East. Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979* (2nd ed.; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989), 317–25 (319 for the quotation).

(NHC VII,1), and *The Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V,5), with even a periodization of history leading into the end time being found in the latter.[12]

In view of the above, one might expect to observe a certain scholarly interest in the topic of Gnostic eschatology in the last decades. It must be acknowledged, however, that studies in this field remain extremely rare.[13] Perhaps the multiple definitional difficulties surrounding the terms "gnostic," "eschatology" and "apocalyptic" have something to do with that – in addition to the cryptical language found in the Nag Hammadi tractates, the poor state of conservation of some of them, and the specific difficulties scholars face due to the fact that most of these texts appear to be translations from now lost Greek originals. Perhaps this situation also indicates that the traditional view of a (purely or mainly) realized eschatology is still influential in research, sufficiently enough so that scholars dealing with Gnostic writings do not pay attention to their potential (futuristic-apocalyptic) eschatological material because they simply do not expect it to be present.

The present essay does not aim to discuss Gnostic eschatology in general or to assess whether the traditional view contains some element of truth. I will contend to pursue McRae's investigation in a single Nag Hammadi tractate, looking for "evidence of apocalyptic eschatology" (i.e., future-oriented eschatology) in the *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII,3). I will show that this text outlines – subtly but undeniably – a scenario of the end of time, the main stages of which we can retrace by looking more closely at elements dispersed in the text. As a second step, to link our essay more closely to the topic of the Ascona conference, we will also address the question as to whether or not the *Apoc. Pet.* stems from an "apocalyptic movement" and reflects "apocalypticism" – where "apocalypticism" and "apocalyptic" are used in a popular sense to designate and refer, respectively, to the belief that the end of time is close or even imminent.

3. The *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII,3)

The *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* (also sometimes called the *Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter*)[14] has so far a single witness, found among the collection of 4th-century "Gnostic" papyrus codices discovered in 1945 in a sealed jar near the town of Nag Hammadi, in Upper Egypt.

[12] MacRae, "Apocalyptic Eschatology in Gnosticism," 323.

[13] We can mention P. de Navascués, "Liturgy, Eschatology and Arithmology in the 'Gospel of Judas,'" *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 44 (2008): 605–35; Sarah Parkhouse, "Matter and the Soul: The Bipartite Eschatology of the Gospel of Mary," in *Connecting Gospels: Beyond the Canonical / Non-Canonical Divide* (ed. Francis Watson and Sarah Parkhouse; Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2018), 216–32; Kimberley A. Fowler, "Eschatology in Nag Hammadi Codex II: A Monastic Reading of the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4) and *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II,5)," in *The Nag Hammadi Codices as Monastic Books* (ed. Hugo Lundhaug and Christian H. Bull; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), 185–221; and Lorenzo DiTommaso, "Apocalyptic Eschatology and Gnostic Eschatology" (under preparation).

[14] This text is not to be confused with the more well-known *Apocalypse of Peter* handed down to us in Greek and Ethiopic. Apart from their common title, the two texts are clearly distinct.

It occupies pages 70–84 in codex VII and is extremely well-preserved.[15] The Coptic appears to be mostly Sahidic, albeit it exhibits numerous Bohairic traits as well as some traits of Akmimik and Lycopolitan.[16] In all likelihood, the text translates a Greek original. Various dates have been proposed for the time of composition, ranging from the second half of the 2nd century up to the early 4th century, with most scholars placing it in the late 2nd century or early 3rd century.[17] No scholarly consensus has been reached so far about the production milieu and the specific branch of Gnosticism that the *Apoc. Pet.* represents.

The Saviour himself serves as the *angelus interpres* who accompanies Peter during his visions. The storyline opens in the (earthly?) Temple, in Jerusalem, possibly in a pre-crucifixion context.[18] After some discussion between Peter and the Saviour, the latter orders Peter to cover his eyes with his hands and his cloak (72.15-16) and to perk up his ears (73.6-7). Peter obeys and the visions begin. Based on the special revelations, Peter becomes an "[authority] (ⲁⲣⲭⲏ) for the remnant whom [have been] summoned to knowledge." (71.19-21).[19]

The text reflects an inner-Christian polemic. On one side are the Petrine Gnostics, who are "immortal souls" summoned to knowledge. This group, which is sometimes referred to as "the little ones" (78.22, 79.19; 80.11)[20] or the "brotherhood" (79.1), finds itself in a difficult situation since its members suffer harsh hostility from the part of another group that appears to dominate over them. These opponents are variously designated as the "sisterhood" (79.9) or "the adversaries" (78.11), but more often simply as "they" or "these."

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[15] For a description of Codex VII, see Frederik Wisse, "Introduction to Codex VII," in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII* (ed. Birger A. Pearson; Leiden / New York / Köln: Brill, 1996), 1–13; cf. Henriette Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag-Hammadi-Codex VII,3)* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999), 19–29. A facsimile edition was published in 1972 by James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices. Codex VII* (Leiden: Brill, 1972). An earlier set of photos is available online: https://ccdl.claremont.edu/digital/collection/nha (last accessed 2 March 2025). The best edition to date is the one by Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 30–53.

[16] For a discussion on the language of the *Apoc. Pet*., see Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 22–29; cf. Wolf-Peter Funk, "The Linguistic Aspect of Classifying the Nag Hammadi Codices," in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification* (ed. L. Painchaud and A. Pasquier; Quebec / Louvain: Les Presses de l'Université Laval / Peeters, 1995), 107–47.

[17] See Uwe-Karsten Plisch, "Die Apokalypse des Petrus – ein vernachlässigter Text aus Nag-Hammadi-Codex VII," in *Coptica, Gnostica und Mandaica. Sprache, Literatur und Kunst als Medien interreligiöser Begegnung(en)* (ed. Wolf. B. Oerter and Zuzana Vítková; Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter, 2020), 125–40, here 132–34; cf. the discussion in Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 15–16.

[18] There are debates to determine whether the earthly Jerusalem temple or a heavenly temple is meant, and thus whether a pre-crucifixion setting or the risen Christ is understood (a succinct overview can be found in H. Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 73–75). It must be acknowledged that the opening of the *Apoc. Pe.* is one of the Nag Hammadi passages which is especially difficult to understand and translate (see in this sense Peter Nagel, "Aufgaben eines Übersetzers beim Übersetzen der Texte von Nag Hammadi," in *Coptica, Gnostica und Mandaica*, 7–28, here 22–23).

[19] Unless otherwise stated, the translations of the *Apoc. Pet.* are mine. In some places, they are inspired by the translation by James Brashler ("NHC VII,3: *Apocalypse of Peter* – Text, Translation, and Notes," in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII* [ed. James E. Robinson and Birger A. Pearson; New York / Köln: Brill, 1996], 218–47) and/or by the translation by Henriette Havelaar (*The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 30–53).

[20] The designation "the little ones" seems to echo the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 10:42; 18:6.10.14).

There is little doubt that the author(s) oppose(s) the official, proto-orthodox Christianity – although they may also oppose various groups, including other Gnostic groups.[21] Our text presents the leaders of the "others" as profaning the truth, dispensing evil teachings and even "suppressing" their brothers (79.11-12). Whatever the real situation at the time of composition, what is certain is that the author(s) felt some kind of oppression towards the group to which they belonged.

One can find ironical that the *Apoc. Pet.* presents the apostle Peter as the guide of the Gnostic "knowers," while the same apostle was claimed as a founder by the leaders of the proto-orthodox Christian communities. As Michel Desjardins explains, "The author probably claims that Peter is the 'Urgnostiker' in order to counter the important role played by Peter among his opponents."[22]

4. The Stages of the Eschatological Scenario in the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*

In light of my understanding of the text, I propose to distinguish the following stages (events and periods) in the eschatological scenario of the *Apoc. Pet.* : (1) the crucifixion (around 30 CE); (2) the period preceding Peter's death (around 30–65 CE); (3) the period following Peter's death (ca. 65 CE); (4) the Parousia; (5a) the reign of the "little ones" on earth, and (5b) the final cosmic judgement. For each of these events and periods, we give below an overview of the passages concerned and a brief comment.

4.1. Jesus' Crucifixion

The crucifixion plays a key role in the soteriology of the group behind the *Apoc. Pet*.[23] It also serves as a turning point in the history of the cosmos, marking the beginning of the eschatological process. Jesus' crucifixion is recounted in the form of a two-part vision, associated with substantial explanations by the Saviour (80.23–83.15). The first visionary sequence (81.3-6) is followed by a dialogue between Peter and the Saviour (81.6-82.3), while the second one (82.3–1) is followed by a monologue by the Saviour (82.17–83.15).

In the first vision, Peter sees people "as if seizing" the Saviour (81.4–6). What he sees then is not narrated, but revealed through the series of questions he asks to his *angelus interpres*: "What am I seeing, O Lord? […] Who is this one on the cross, who is glad and laughing ? And is it another whose feet and hands they are hammering?" (81.7-14). So, Peter sees someone being crucified, but paradoxically, this same person on the cross

[21] The abundant use of the third person plural in the text, which in Coptic can also be used for the impersonal form and even the passive form, makes the logic of group boundaries difficult to grasp. For a detailed discussion on the identity of the opponents, see Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 193–204.

[22] Michel Desjardins, "NHC VII,3: *Apocalypse of Peter* – Introduction" in: *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, 201–16 (213, n. 41 for the quotation). Cf. *Apoc. Pet*. 73.19-28.

[23] On the soteriological significance of the crucifixion in the *Apoc. Pet.*, see Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 185–87 (cf. J. Cozby, *Gnosis and the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Gnostic Soteriology as Reflected in the Nag Hammadi Tractates*. PhD Diss. Duke University, 1985).

appears glad and laughing.[24] Not understanding what he is seeing, Peter requires an explanation. The Saviour reveals to him that the one who is being crucified and the one who is laughing on the cross are not the same person:

> ⲡⲏ ⲉⲧⲃ̅ⲛⲁⲩ ⲉⲣⲟⲩ ⲉ̅ⲓ̅ⲭ̅ⲙ̅ ⲡⲱⲉ ⲉⲩⲣⲟⲟⲩⲧ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲉⲩⲥⲱⲃⲉ· ⲡⲁⲓ̈ ⲡⲉ ⲡⲉ ⲧⲟⲛ̅ⲉ̅ ⲓ̅ⲥ̅· ⲡⲏ ⲇⲉ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲕⲱⲗ̅ⲉ̅ ⲛ̅ⲛⲓⲉⲓⲫ̅ⲧ̅ ⲉⲛⲉⲩⲥⲓⲍ ⲙ̅ⲛ̅ ⲛⲉⲩⲟⲩⲉⲣⲏⲧⲉ· ⲡⲓⲥⲁⲣⲕⲓⲕⲟⲛ ⲛ̅ⲧⲁⲩ ⲡⲉ· ⲉⲧⲉ ⲡⲱⲉⲃⲓⲱ ⲡⲉ ⲉⲩⲉⲓⲣⲉ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲩ ⲛ̅ⲥⲣⲁⲉ̅·
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> The one you see on the cross, glad and laughing, is the Living, Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they are driving the nails is his physical part, which is the substitute they are putting to shame. (81.15–22)

Later, in the secondary visionary sequence, Peter sees a pleromatic Saviour approaching, surrounded by a "great, ineffable light" and a "multitude of ineffable and invisible angels." (82.9–14). The narrator insists that "It was I who saw him when this one who glorifies was revealed" (82.15–16). The one who is revealed at this moment is the Living, Jesus, and the event described is the separation of Jesus from his bodily envelope – or at least, it is the moment where Peter becomes able to visualise this separation. This second vision is followed by an explanative monologue from the Saviour, in which the Saviour further elaborates on the difference between the crucified and the living Jesus:

> ⲡⲏ ⲉⲧⲁⲩϯ ⲉⲓϥ̅ⲧ̅ ⲛⲁϥ ⲡⲱⲟⲣⲡ̅ ⲙ̅ⲙⲓⲥⲉ ⲡⲉ ⲙ̅ⲛ̅ ⲡⲓⲏⲉⲓ ⲛ̅ⲧⲉ ⲛⲓⲇⲁⲓⲙⲱⲛ· ⲙ̅ⲛ̅ ⲡⲓⲕⲁⲡ ⲛ̅ⲱⲟⲩⲓ ⲉⲫⲁⲩⲥⲱⲣⲣ̅ⲥ̅ ⲛ̅ϩⲏⲧϥ̅ ⲛ̅ⲧⲉ ⲉ̅ⲗ̅ⲱⲉⲓ̅ⲙ̅· ⲛ̅ⲧⲉ ⲡⲓⲥⲣ̅ⲥ̅ ⲉⲧⲫⲟⲟⲡ ϩⲁ ⲡⲛⲟⲙⲟⲥ· ⲡⲏ ⲇⲉ ⲉⲧⲁϩⲉⲣⲁⲧϥ̅ ⲉⲩϩⲏⲛ ⲉⲣⲟϥ ⲡⲓⲥⲱⲧⲏ̅ⲣ̅ ⲡⲉ ⲉⲧⲟⲛ̅ⲉ̅· ⲡⲱⲟⲣⲡ̅ ⲛ̅ϩⲏⲧϥ̅ ⲉⲧⲁⲩⲁⲙⲁϩⲧⲉ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟϥ· ⲁⲩⲱ ⲁⲩⲕⲁⲁϥ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ
>
> He whom they crucified is the first-born and the house of demons and the vessel of stone in which they dwell, belonging to Elohim, belonging to the cross that is under the Law. But he whom stands near him is the living Saviour. This is the first in him that they seized, and they let him go." (82,21–32).

The text presents the crucifixion as the moment where the ruling archons – which are responsible for the creation of the material world – are defeated.[25] In fact, instead of crucifying Jesus, the archons crucify "the vessel of stone in which they [the demons]

[24] It is not entirely clear where the laughing Jesus is situated during the crucifixion. The Coptic text has ϩⲓⲭ̅ⲙ̅ ⲡⲱⲉ (81.11,16; 82.6), which most translations render as "above the cross" (see, among others, Brashler, "*Apocalypse of Peter* – Text, Translation, and Notes," 241; Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 47–48 [with hesitation, see the discussion on pages 65–66]; Jean-Daniel Dubois, "L'Apocalypse de Pierre," in *Ecrits gnostiques. La bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi* (ed. Jean-Pierre Mahé and Paul-Hubert Poirier; Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 1151–66, here 1163). I take the preposition ϩⲓⲭ̅ⲛ̅ to mean simply "on" in this context (see Crum 758b), so we have to think in terms of a superposition, where Peter sees a single person on the cross who is laughing while being crucified.

[25] See esp. *Apoc. Pet.* 81.28–82.3; 82.32–83.6. This idea fits with point 2 ("The Crucifixion as the Defeat of the Archons") of the general scheme that J. Cozby proposed for the Nag Hammadi accounts of the crucifixion (J. Cozby, *Gnosis and the Cross*, 317–45). See also in this sense Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 106; and Jean-Daniel Dubois, "Le docétisme des christologies gnostiques revisité," *New Testament Studies* 63 (2017), 279-304.

dwell," namely the carnal envelope which is their own creation[26] – this action releases the "incorporeal body" (83.6–7) of the Saviour. Thus, Jesus' laugher (81.11,16–17; 82.31–83.3) is a victorious, mocking laugher caused by the inability of the archons to realise what they are actually doing, namely destroying themselves.[27]

4.2. The first decades following the crucifixion (before Peter's death)

"It all began well" could be the appropriate formulation to summarise the first period following the crucifixion. The Saviour urges Peter, "Listen to the things that will be said to you and guard them. Do not tell them to the children of this aeon" (73.17–18). Thanks to the revelations given to him, Peter is able to instruct the "children of the immortal age" about what truly happened at the cross and about the path to knowledge. The number of followers seems to be high at the beginning: the text states that "many will be partakers of the beginning of our word."[28] We can understand this to refer to the fact that many people would initially adhere to the teaching delivered by Peter.

The Saviour warns Peter that such acceptance will, however, come to an end, as the "many [early] partakers" will "return themselves against them [the teachings], according to the will of the Father of their error" (73.25–28).[29] In other words, a lot (most?) of the early followers will let themselves be convinced by another, evil teaching offered by Peter's opponents – the "messengers of error" (74.24–25) – and thus they will turn away from the word. When is this massive apostasy supposed to happen? Although the text is not explicit on this point, we can conclude that the beginning of the degradation phase has something to do with the succession of Peter: there are some allusions to Peter's successors, who are presented extremely negatively. For instance, in 74,11–12, "those who will come after you" are qualified as "the men of the propagation of falsehood."[30] A few pages further on, there is an allusion to the hierarchical organization of the Church, conceived in a negative way: "they will name themselves bishops and also deacons as if they have received their

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[26] Note the polysemy of the term ⲕⲁⲡ, translated above as "vessel," but which can also designate a cutting tool like a knife, or a string of a harp, or a (single) hair, or a letter of the alphabet (Crum 113a-b). Although ⲕⲁⲡ is an unusual way to designate a receptacle (Tasha Vorderstrasse, "Terms for Vessels in Arabic and Coptic Documentary Texts and Their Archaeological and Ethnographic Correlates," in *Documents and the History of the Early Islamic World* (ed. Petra Sijpesteijn and Alexander T. Schubert; Brill, 2015), 195–234, see esp. 221), the rendering "vessel" seems to make more sense in the context.

[27] On the "lack of perception" of the archons, see *Apoc. Pet.* 83.1-2. Following Havelaar's suggestion (*The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 78), we can connect Jesus' laugh with the laugh of Eve in the Gnostic myth of Eve's rape by the archons (see *Hyp. Arch.* [NHC II,4] 89.19–30 and *Orig. World* [NHC II,5] 116.10–34), where Eve laughs because the archons do not understand that they only captured her bodily envelope, i.e., their own creation).

[28] ⲟⲩⲛ̄ ⲟⲩⲙⲛⲛⲱⲉ ⲅⲁⲣ ⲛⲁϫⲓ ⲉⲱⲟⲗ ⲉⲛ̄ ϯⲁⲣⲭⲏ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲡⲉⲛⲱⲁϫⲉ (73:23–25).

[29] ⲁⲩⲱ ⲥⲉⲛⲁⲕⲟⲧⲟⲩ ⲉⲣⲟⲟⲩ ⲟⲛ ⲉⲛ̄ ⲡⲟⲩⲱⲱ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲡⲓⲱⲧ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲧⲟⲩⲡⲗⲁⲛⲏ (73.25–28). The status of ⲉⲣⲟⲟⲩ is ambiguous as to whether it refers to "the teachings" (see 73.25) or to the leaders of the adversaries. An alternative translation would thus be "they will return to them [the leaders of the adversaries] according to the will of the Father of their error."

[30] ⲛⲓⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲡⲓⲕⲱ ⲉⲣⲣⲁⲓ ⲙ̄ⲙⲛ̄ⲧⲛⲟⲩϫ ⲛⲏ ⲉⲧⲛⲁⲱⲱⲡⲉ ⲙ̄ⲙⲛ̄ⲛ̄ⲥⲱⲕ (74.11–12).

authority from God" (79.25–27). In this narrative, Peter's death certainly constitutes a turning point, as it is when Peter dies that his "successors" can rise. According to the tradition, this death took place around 64–65 CE in Rome, under the reign of Nero.

4.3. Peter's successors and the rise of Hermas: one century of degradation

What happens in the period following the death of Peter can be described as a long decline. The Saviour states that Peter "will be blasphemed in these aeons" (73.18–20) and that his successors "will establish a harsh fate, in which the race of the immortal souls will run in vain […]" (78.1–2). This last formulation is probably an allusion to the situation of oppression the Petrine Gnostics had to endure – according to the storyline proposed – under the rule of the orthodox Christians, who gradually came to regard them as heretics. With the rise of Peter's successors, the "immortal souls" were not only persecuted but it seems that the number of (Petrine) Gnostics decreased as many of the early followers were convinced by the opposite teachings (73.25–28). Were they seduced or rather obliged? The text does not specify.

At a certain point, things even seem to get worse. In a cryptic way, the Saviour explains that the adversaries will build "a further imitation [ⲟⲩⲱⲱϫⲡ ⲛ̄ⲁⲛⲧⲓⲙⲓⲙⲟⲛ] in the name of a dead man, who is Hermas, the first-born of unrighteousness, in order that the real light might not be believed by the little ones." (78.16–22).[31] The most likely allusion is to the Hermas who lived in the 2nd-century, the alleged author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* and also the brother of Pius I (bishop of Rome from ca. 140–155) – at least according to the tradition.[32] As to the imitation, it may refer to the actions and teachings of Hermas (including the practice of second penance),[33] but it can also refer to Hermas himself. In the latter case, we could assume that the abstract noun ⲁⲛⲧⲓⲙⲓⲙⲟⲛ, *imitation*, is used instead of ⲁⲛⲧⲓⲙⲓⲙⲟⲥ, *imitator*, in order to stress that Hermas is not acting on his own but as a henchman of the evil archons. In any case, the evil purpose of Hermas' rise is that "the real light might not be believed by the little ones" (78.20–22). For various reasons – such as his proximity with the bishop of Rome and possibly his role in the promotion of second penance in the early Church – Hermas is a villain in the *Apoc. Pet*.

It is possible, albeit uncertain, that the rise of Hermas is thought by the author(s) to hasten the end of time. This is supported by the absence of any other explicit allusion to another historical figure in the *Apoc. Pet.*, which may indicate that the actions of Hermas correspond to a turning point in the eschatological scenario. Furthermore, it would be tempting to draw a link between Hermas and the figure of the "lawless one" (ἄνομος) that

[31] Note that the Coptic expression ⲟⲩⲱⲱϫⲡ ⲛ̄ⲁⲛⲧⲓⲙⲓⲙⲟⲛ (78.16) can be interpreted in two different ways, either as "further imitation" or as "imitation remnant" (see the discussion in Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 96–97).

[32] The tradition that Hermas was the brother of Pius I is found in the *Fragment of Muratori*, 73–77.

[33] See in this sense Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum* (Leiden, 1978), 54–60; Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 96–97; Dubois, "L'Apocalypse de Pierre," 1146.

appears in the 1st-century Second Letter to the Thessalonians (2 Th 2:8–10). The manifestation of the lawless one is supposed to happen just before Christ's second coming on earth (see below, 4.4), where Christ "will destroy [him] with the breath of his mouth" (2 Th 2:8). Assuming that a close idea is present in the *Apoc. Pet.* (a negative figure who arises close to the end and will soon be defeated by Christ's return), then we would have an element that would enable us to date the *Apocalypse of Peter* to the time of Hermas or shortly afterwards, somewhere in the middle or in the second part of the 2nd century. This suggestion is to be taken with much caution, however, due to the absence in our text of any explicit notion that the Parousia is near.

4.4. The Parousia

That Christ would return to Earth is a reccurent theme in Christian eschatology, which is already found in the mid-1st century Paul's letter to the Thessalonians (1 Th 3:13), and then in the pseudepigraphic Second Letter to the Thessalonians (2 Th 2:1,8), in the Epistle of James (Jac. 5:7–8), in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 24:3–39), in the Second Letter of Peter (2 Pi 3:4), and so on. Probably the best-known narrative of this event is the one found in the canonical Revelation of John, where the Second Coming is followed by multiple battles and a period during which Christ reigns on Earth (the millennium) before the Last Judgement. In the *Apoc. Pet.*, we also find a reference to the Parousia, as part of a discourse by the Saviour. When this latter alludes to the "harsh fate" that the "messengers of error" will establish (see above, section 2.2.5), he also announces that this situation will come to an end when he returns: "the race of the immortal souls will run in vain" in the harsh fate "*until my Parousia*" (78,6). Another allusion to the Parousia possibly lies in the comment that "as long as the hour has not yet come, it [the immortal soul] will indeed resemble a mortal one" (75.28–31).

Although the modalities of Christ's return to earth are unspecified – there is no description of it in the text – it is possible to say a few words about its consequences. In the *Apoc. Pet*., the Parousia is closely associated with the liberation of immortal souls. Beyond that, there seems to be a notion of forgiveness for those (among the immortal souls) who have been temporality seduced by the false teachings: "And I have forgiveness for their transgressions into which they fell because of the adversaries" (78.8). If this interpretation is correct,[34] there would be hope of eschatological gathering for all immortal

[34] We must remain careful with this notion of eschatological forgiveness, since the formulation in 78.8-9 (ⲁⲩⲱ ⲡⲓⲕⲱ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲛ̄ⲧⲁⲓ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲛⲟⲩⲡⲁⲣⲁⲡⲧⲱⲙⲁ) is subject to various interpretations. See Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 63, who thinks that the expression depends on ⲡ̄ ⲉⲓⲉⲡⲱⲱⲧ in 77.33 (see her proposed translation on page 43: "they are merchandising with my word […] and with my forgiveness from their tresspasses […]"); cf. in the same sense the recent translation offered by Plisch: "Viele andere […] werden […] Handel treiben mit meinem Wort […] und mit meiner Vergebung ihrer Übertretungen […]" (Plisch, "Die Apokalypse des Petrus," 136). My translation above is closer to that proposed by Dubois: "Et ils établiront une destinée dure, en laquelle courra vainement l'espèce des âmes immortelles jusqu'à mon avènement […] *et jusqu'au pardon* – le mien – de leurs erreurs" (Dubois, "L'Apocalypse de Pierre," 1160; my emphasis). Cf. also with a close sense, although with a different understanding of the syntax, the translation by Brashler:

souls, including those who have turned away from the "word" to follow the evil teachings of the opponents.[35]

The text refers to some final punishment for the adversaries, notably with the imagery of the "outer darkness": the adversaries, the Saviour explains to Peter, "are the workers who will be cast into the outer darkness, away from the children of light" (78.23–26).[36] A few lines later, he declares that "They do not know the punishment of those who are delighted by what they have done to the little ones whom they sought out and imprisoned" (79.16–21). We also find a mention of a judgement in 73.29–31: "And he will make manifest in his judgement who the servants of the word are." In this context, it is difficult to determine who the "servants of the word"[37] are and also to whom the subject "he" refers. If we understand that the "servants of the word" are not the Petrinian Gnostics but instead their opponents – following a suggestion by Henriette Havelaar[38] – then the passage would be a further allusion to the judgement and punishment of these adversaries.

4.5 The reign of the "little ones" and the End

The Parousia is not expected to bring the cosmos to an immediate end. It should first invert the power dynamic, with the "little ones" dominating their adversaries on earth. The eschatological hope clearly has a political dimension:

> ⲟⲩⲭⲣⲟⲛⲟⲥ ⲡⲉⲧⲧⲏⲩ ⲛⲁⲩ ⲉ̅ⲛ̅ ⲟⲩⲏⲡⲉ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲧⲟⲩⲡⲗⲁⲛⲏ ⲉⲩⲛⲁⲣ̄ ⲣ̄ⲣⲟ ⲉⲭ̅ⲛ̅ ⲛⲓⲕⲟⲩⲉⲓ· ⲁⲩⲱ ⲙ̄ⲙⲛ̄ⲛ̄ⲥⲁ ⲡⲓⲭⲱⲕ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲧⲡⲗⲁⲛⲏ ⲉⲫⲉⲣ̄ ⲃ̅ⲣ̅ⲣⲉ ⲛ̄ⲥⲓ ⲡⲓⲁⲧ̅ⲣ̅ ⲉ̅ⲗ̅ⲗⲟ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲧⲇⲓⲁⲛⲟⲓⲁ ⲛ̄ⲁⲧⲙⲟⲩ· ⲁⲩⲱ ⲉⲩⲉⲣ̄ ⲣ̄ⲣⲟ ⲉⲭ̅ⲛ̅ ⲛⲏ ⲉⲧⲉ ⲛ̄ⲣ̄ ⲣ̄ⲣⲟ ⲉⲣⲣⲁⲓ̈ ⲉⲭⲱⲟⲩ·
>
> For a (period of) time determined for them in proportion to their error, they will rule over the little ones. And after the completion of the error, the never-aging race of the immortal intellect […] shall rule over the ones who are ruler over them (80.11–16).

This notion of the inversion of power seems close to the idea of a millennium found in Revelation 20:2–3. How long is the reign of the "little ones" supposed to last, according to the author(s) of the *Apoc. Pet.*? The text gives no indication on this issue. As for what happens at the very End (i.e., after the period of reign by the little ones), the Gnostic orientation of the text allows us to speculate on an ascent of the immortal souls, who experience a separation from their corporeal envelopes to go back to their place of origin, the final defeat of the archons and the dissolution of the cosmos. These last stages are not, however, made explicit in the *Apoc. Pet.*

"And I have forgiveness of their transgressions […]" (Brashler, "*Apocalypse of Peter* – Text, Translation, and Notes," 235).

[35] See *Apoc. Pet*. 73.23-28.

[36] The "outer darkness" here may echo the Gospel of Matthew (8:12, 22:13, and 25:30), where this image is closely associated with the idea of "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

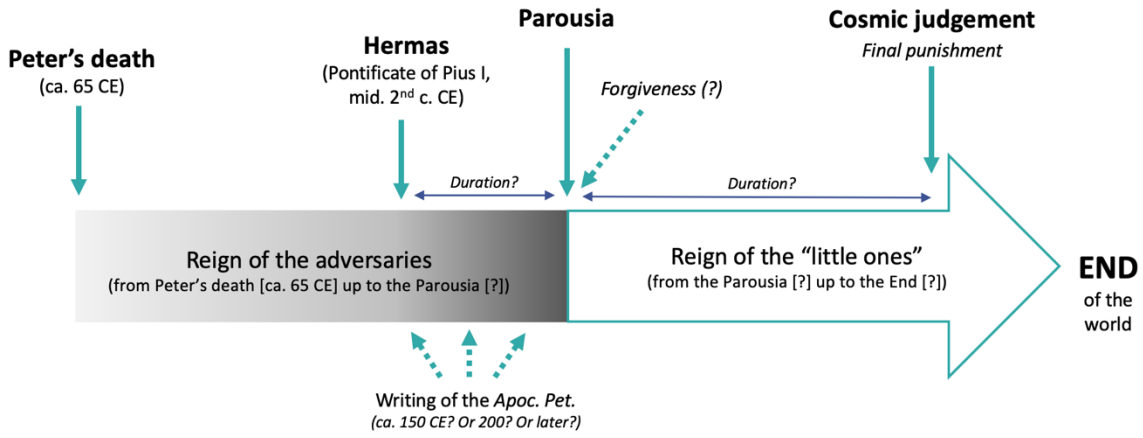
[37] Cf. Lk 1:2.

[38] Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, 87–88.

Another point that remains unclear is the order in which the events of forgiveness, punishment, and judgement are supposed to take place. In particular, are forgiveness (for the "little ones") and punishment (for the adversaries) both part of a final Judgement supposed to come at the very End, after the earthly reign of the little ones? Or does forgiveness takes place first, soon after the Parousia, so that all of the immortal souls participate in the domination over their adversaries? This last option may find support in the passage where the Saviour alludes to his Parousia, specifying that "the race of the immortal souls will run in vain" in the harsh fate created by the adversaries "until my Parousia" (78.6).

4.6. Recapitualtive schema

We can summarise the stages of this eschatological scenario in the form of a timeline schema. The gradation from light grey to dark grey indicates the progressive oppression of the "little ones," following the language found in the text itself (78.20–26). The interrogative points signal that the timing or duration is unclear.



5. Conclusion: From "Apocalyptic Eschatology" to Apocalypticism

Despite there is not an ongoing narrative of the end of time in the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, it is possible to grasp in it the main stages of an eschatological scenario and to glimpse traces of an apocalyptic hope. For sure, readers familiar with the rich apocalyptic imagery found, for example, in the Revelation of John may be surprised by the sober character of this apocalypse. No cosmic war is described, no terrible destruction of the evil forces, there is no trace of serpent, dragon or beast, there is no trumpet, no detailed depiction of the Judgement, and so on. However, we should not jump to the conclusion that

the apocalyptic hope was *ganz blass* or *bedeutungslos*[39] for the group behind the *Apoc. Pet*. There is no simple, direct connection between the amount of details in an eschatological scenario and the "degree" of eschatological hope. As was argued above, our text expresses a hope of eschatological reunion for the immortal souls in addition to their liberation from the rule of their adversaries.

We must now return to the question of apocalypticism. Of course, we cannot simply deduce from the above investigation that the *Apoc. Pet.* stemmed from an "apocalyptic movement" or from a group strongly influenced by "apocalypticism" – at least if we adopt the narrow, popular definition of apocalypticism and apocalyptic proposed in our introduction.[40] Theoretically, it is possible for a group to expect the world to come to an end and to describe that end without believing that it is imminent or particularly close. The question to be addressed, then, is: can we find in the *Apoc. Pet.* a sense of imminence with respect to the final events? In particular, is the Parousia conceived as a near or even imminent event? In his introduction to the *Apocalypse of Peter* published in the reference edition "The Coptic Gnostic Library" (Brill), Michel Desjardins responds in the affirmative, without, however, discussing the stages of the eschatological scenario, nor providing significant arguments in favour of his interpretation. He simply states that "Both the apocalyptic genre chosen by the author and his message suggest that he considered the Parousia to be imminent […]."[41] As our schematic timeline above illustrates, however, the timing of the Parousia is not that obvious in the text, such that it seems preferable to remain cautious in our conclusions. The difficulty is that we can find in the *Apoc. Pet*. arguments both in favour of and against the imminence of the Parousia.

In favour of a notion of the imminence of the Parousia – and thus, an apocalyptic production milieu – we can note the way Hermas is referred to (78.16–22). First, the text seems to interpret his rise as a crucial stage (78.15–16: "they will build a further imitation") in the degradation process initiated one century before when Peter's successors acceded to power; second, he is the only negative figure whose name is given in the *Apoc. Pet*. These two elements might indicate that, in the production milieu of our text, Hermas was considered to be the last (or one of the last) negative event(s) preceding Christ's Parousia – making him akin to the figure of the "lawless one" (2 Th 2:8–10). If we also postulate that the *Apoc. Pet.* was composed at the time of Hermas or shortly afterwards (somewhere in the middle or second half of the 2nd century), then we may conclude that the *Apoc. Pet.* reflects the strong apocalyptic beliefs of its author(s).

[39] I refer here to Adolf von Harnack statement that "scheinen […] die Zukunftserwartungen für die Meisten [der Gnostiker] ganz blass und vor Allem bedeutungslos gewesen zu sein" (*Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. I [Tübingen: Mohr, 1909], 289, n. 1).

[40] True, if we define apocalypticism in a very broad sense as a vague idea that the world will come to an end at some point, then the *Apocalypse of Peter* is clearly apocalyptic.

[41] Desjardins, "NHC VII,3: *Apocalypse of Peter* – Introduction," 213.

In favour of a longer temporality – and therefore of a non-apocalyptic production milieu – we may note that there is no pattern such as "this will happen soon" or "be ready" in the text. Furthermore, we find no indication concerning the "sign that all these things are about to be accomplished" (to borrow the question that Peter, John, James and Andrew ask Jesus at the beginning of his eschatological discourse in the Gospel of Mark).[42] The absence of these traditional patterns suggests that the author(s) and their first audience had no immediate concern for "how to recognise when the End will come." To nuance the last remark, however, we could also make sense of the absence of such patterns if we consider the possibility that Hermas himself is the sign of the end of time in the minds of the Petrine Gnostics. In other words, it *might* be that the Christians behind the *Apoc. Pet.* felt no need to discuss how to recognise that the Parousia was approaching because they considered that the sign of the end of time had already occurred.

In conclusion: based solely on our analysis of the text, it is not possible to give a definitive answer to the question of whether the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* originated from a Gnostic group marked by "apocalypticism." The text – at least in the preserved Coptic translation – appears to be compatible with various beliefs about the *Endzeit*, including apocalypticism in a strict sense (belief in the imminence of the end) and more vague notions that the world would come to an end in the more or less distant future.

One last remark should be added. In our discussion above, we have focused on the time of composition and first reception of the *Apocalypse of Peter*. It goes without saying, however, that the apocalyptic features of this text were certainly reinterpreted differently in its reception in 4th-century Egypt, when codex VII was copied and bound before being hidden in a jar near Nag Hammadi. At that time, Hermas was long dead for a long time and the *Apoc. Pet.* was interpreted together with the other texts that are part of codex VII (the *Paraphrase of Shem*; the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*; the *Teachings of Silvanus* and the *Three Steles of Seth*), in light of the specific beliefs and concerns of its 4th-century readers.

[42] "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (Mk 13:4, NRSV).