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Published in:
Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies

DOI:
[10.1163/2451859X-12340025](https://doi.org/10.1163/2451859X-12340025)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Roig Lanzillotta, F. (2017). “Spirit, Soul and Body in Nag Hammadi Literature: Distinguishing Anthropological Schemes in Valentinian, Sethian, Hermetic and Thomasine Texts”. *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*, 2(1), 15-39. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451859X-12340025>

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Spirit, Soul and Body in Nag Hammadi Literature: Distinguishing Anthropological Schemes in Valentinian, Sethian, Hermetic and Thomasine Texts

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Abstract

A close analysis of the views on man in the Nag Hammadi texts reflects that the tripartite pattern distinguishing three elements in the human being (intellect or spirit, soul and body), even if majoritarian, is not the only one at work in the corpus: there is also a group of texts reflecting rather a bipartite scheme discriminating between soul and body only. Irrelevant though it may seem, this difference is seminal, since it not only implies a different psychology, or theory of the soul, but also a different cosmology, which in its turn also involves a dissimilar soteriology or theory concerning man's salvation. The present study, the first in a series of five, provides a first and general approach that intends to establish the existence of these two differentiated anthropological patterns in the Nag Hammadi corpus. Following studies will offer a more detailed and separate analysis of the textual evidence, assessing the anthropological frameworks behind the different textual groups allegedly found in the corpus, namely the Valentinian, Sethian, Hermetic and Thomasine texts.

Keywords

gnostic – soul – spirit – body – platonism – tripartite – bipartite

The anthropology at work behind the Nag Hammadi treatises, in other words, their view on the nature of human beings, is one of the numerous aspects of this intriguing corpus that has not yet been satisfactorily assessed by the

scholarly literature. Handbooks on ancient gnosticism are rather vague on the issue when they affirm that “gnostics” held widely diverging opinions both on the soul and the soul-body relationship.¹ Expressions such as “bewildering variety” or “great divergence” are frequently used, not always without disdain, to describe “gnostic anthropology.”² More specific studies on Nag Hammadi treatises, on the other hand, tend to stress that the most obvious anthropological framework is tripartite, distinguishing in the human being intellect, soul, and body—a trichotomy that allegedly is behind the (in)famous gnostic tripartite division of humanity into *pneumatikoi*, *psychikoi*, and *hylikoi*.

Admittedly, behind these modern approaches one still hears echoes of well known anti-heretical claims. While the latter is based on the gnostic alleged tripartition of humanity, the former more general approach still appears to assert with the ancient critics of gnosticism that, while truth is singular, falsehood has many forms.³ Based on the Greek distinction between *aletheia* and *doxa*, which allots soundness to unity and disorder to difference, the argument has an obvious rhetorical force: if gnostics had so many different conceptions their views on human being could not hold *true*. So much so that pagans also used the argument against Christians with a view to ridiculing Christian views about the soul,⁴ even though in paganism one finds the same variety of conceptions. As a matter of fact, ancient views about the soul were so divergent that we possess several doxographical summaries that intended to bring some order to this varied whole: Aristotle, Cicero, Aetius, Tertullian, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Nemesius all provide overviews of the numerous opinions on the soul held in their time.⁵

1 E.g., Rudolph 1990 [1977], 69–76.

2 See, for example, Logan 1996, 168.

3 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.9–11; 22. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 7.108.1–2. On the issue in the context of anti-heretical literature and more precisely on Irenaeus’s strategies against his adversaries, see King 2003, 20–54.

4 Celsus, cited in Origen, *Cels.* 8.49, ridiculed this variety of denominations. As an example of this diversity, see, for instance, the heresiologists’ interpretation of the nature of the gnostic “divine spark” or *ψυχαιος σπινθήρ*, “scintilla animae,” namely the portion of the intelligible light in man. Whereas in some testimonies it is interpreted as a reference to the soul or to the *πνεῦμα*, or “spirit,” (see Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.13.3; Satornil cited in Epiphanius, *Pan.* 37.4.1–3; Clement of Alexandria, *Exc.* 1.3; 3.1, who identifies it in 53.5 as *ἡ λογικὴ οὐράνια ψυχή* or “rational soul”), according to others this spark is clearly identified with the *νοῦς*, or “intellect,” (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.19.13–17; 10.11.7–10 at 10.11.10, where the *σπινθήρ* is explicitly explained with *νοῦς*).

5 Aristotle, *De an.* 406A–411B; Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.19ff.; Aetius, *Placita* IV, 2–3 (Diels, *Doxogr. gr.* 386–389); Tertullian, *An.* 5; Plotinus, *Enn.* 4; Iamblichus, *De an.* 1–9 Finamore-Dillon (Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 1.362–67); Nemesius, *De nat. hom.* 536–37.

Indeed, there was diversity of opinion not only concerning the nature of the soul but also its character or condition, and its position within the human being. As to its nature, the soul was either deemed to be divine or simply mortal. As regards its condition, in addition to the view of the soul as incorporeal and not a substance, which was held by Aristotelians, until the first century before the Common Era a rather materialist view of the soul seems to have reigned, conceiving of it as either as fire, breath, inflamed air, heart, brain, or blood.⁶ From the start of the Common Era, however, one sees a wide acceptance of the Platonic conception of the soul as an immaterial substance.⁷ As regards its relationship to the body, positions were as varied as in both previous cases, and as an example of the complexities surrounding the issue, it is sufficient to mention the variety of views one finds in Plato.

As has been pointed out, the *corpus platonicum* offers a wide range of views on the soul-body relationship, which are not necessarily from different periods of Plato's life.⁸ Dialogues from the so-called Socratic period provide up to three different conceptions. While in *Charmides* Socrates defends a monistic view of man, according to which soul and body form an indissoluble union as the part and the whole, *Alcibiades I* presents a moderate kind of dualism, since the body is seen as an instrument of the soul.⁹ The *Gorgias* in turn includes the famous dualistic conception of Pythagorean origin according to which the body is the grave of the soul.¹⁰ If we add to these opinions those expressed in later dialogues such as the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, or the *Timaeus*,¹¹ we may easily understand the ambiguous status the soul had in late antiquity. Plato's variety of views not only failed to help later Platonists to resolve their doubts regarding the soul-body relationship but also frequently made this even more complicated, as they seemed to provide scriptural support for many opinions. Consequently, if according to the heresiologists gnostics held much too different anthropological views,¹² we might safely affirm that this diversity of views

6 Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.17–19.

7 Nemesius, *De nat. hom.* 536–37 distinguishes three groups: (1) the soul is a body (Stoics); (2) the soul is incorporeal but not a substance (Aristotelians); (3) the soul is an incorporeal substance (Platonism). See Emilsson 1994.

8 T.M. Robinson 2002, chap. 2. For a more detailed discussion of the issue in the different Platonic dialogues, see T.M. Robinson 1995.

9 Plato, *Charm.* 156D 11ff.; [*Alc. maj.*] 130A 1–3.

10 Plato, *Gorg.* 493A 1–5. On the question of whether this view should be seen as Pythagorean or Orphic, see Maansfeld 1989, XIV, 261–314 at 291–292.

11 T.M. Robinson 2002, 45–55.

12 See the following range of ancient depictions of the soul, based on Logan 1996, 196–197. 1) Dichotomous: Saturninus in Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.24.1 (body plus spark of life). 2) Trichotomous: e.g. the Baruch of Justin referred to by Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.26.7–8 (body,

regarding the soul, the body, and their relationship simply reflected the variety of opinions available at that time.

Despite the obvious bias of ancient polemical writers, scholarly analyses of the Nag Hammadi corpus during the first years after the discovery seemed to follow the heresiological track. While in some cases, the testimony of these writings was approached as if documenting the alleged “bewildering variety” of anthropological conceptions,¹³ in other cases, it was presented as if supporting the mainly tripartite character of Nag Hammadi’s anthropology. During recent decades we have come to realize, however, that this corpus reflects a wider religious horizon than scholars were originally ready to admit: on the one hand, after Michael A. Williams’s book, the term *gnostic* is no longer accepted without qualification; on the other, we have come to understand that the Nag Hammadi library does not reflect a monolithic body of thought, but rather includes a wide array of texts representing a wide spectrum of views regarding religious and philosophical issues.

It is time therefore to attempt a fresh approach to the anthropological views emerging from a reading of Nag Hammadi writings that integrates the new advances in the study of this interesting corpus. A close analysis reveals to begin with that this group of texts does not reflect a bewildering variety of anthropological views. On the other hand, it also reflects that the tripartite pattern, even if majoritarian, is not the only one at work in Nag Hammadi: besides the view that distinguishes three elements in man there is a group of texts reflecting rather a bipartite scheme discriminating between soul and body only. Irrelevant though it may seem, this difference is seminal, since it not only implies a different psychology, or theory of the soul, but also a different cosmology, which in its turn also involves a dissimilar soteriology or theory concerning man’s salvation from the constraints of the material world.

It is my contention that the anthropological evidence reflected in the Nag Hammadi treatises can be reduced to two basic patterns, each implying a rather different worldview. From where do these differences arise? Does this tripartite structure reflect the development of a more philosophical anthropology

soul and spirit) and the Ophites (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30.13–14: body, soul and spirit or trace of light); 3) Dichotomous and trichotomous in combination in e.g. the Naassenes of Hippolytus where we hear both of the soul or inner man imprisoned in the earthly body (*Haer.* 5.7.30, 36), and of the three elements or types of soul in man (*Haer.* 5.6.6–7; 8.2–4). 4) Fourfold: in the Ptolemaic school of Valentinians according to Irenaeus *Haer.* 1.5.5f. and Clement of Alexandria, *Exc.* 50.1–52.3; 53–55.1 (hylic soul, psychic soul, spiritual soul and flesh).

13 Rudolph 1990, 90–106.

and the bipartite scheme its adaptation to a more basic Christian bipartite opposition distinguishing spiritual and physical realities? Is perhaps the dichotomy in the latter case influenced by the bipartite background of Genesis 2:7? Or do we need to explain the tripartite and bipartite anthropological schemes in an evolutionary way, assuming a genealogical relationship between them? The intention of this study will be rather to show that both anthropological patterns develop in parallel and that their origin should be traced back to diverse strands of Platonism existing at the time of composition of the Nag Hammadi writings: while purist Platonists claimed that Plato should be explained exclusively by Plato, less conservative Platonists tended to explain Plato with the aid of Aristotle.¹⁴ In fact, the bipartite and tripartite schemes do not result from mutual or external influences; they simply arise from the different conceptual milieus in which the texts first saw light.

The present study, the first in a series of five articles, provides a first and general approach that intends to establish the existence of these two differentiated anthropological patterns in the Nag Hammadi corpus. Following studies will offer a more detailed and separate analysis of the textual evidence, assessing the anthropological frameworks behind the different textual groups allegedly found in the corpus, namely the Valentinian, Sethian, Hermetic and Thomasine texts. My exposition includes three sections: the first section surveys the bipartite anthropological scheme, providing an analysis that traces the model back to Plato's standard dualism; the second focuses on the more widespread tripartite view of man found in some of the Nag Hammadi texts, which evaluates the influence of Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian views about man that were current among some Middle Platonists; and the third provides some conclusions.

The Twofold View of the Human Being in Nag Hammadi

As already discussed, the bipartite scheme distinguishes two aspects or elements of the human being, namely soul and body.¹⁵ This view has a very long history in Greek thought and appears for the first time during the transition from the archaic to the classical periods. Even if, according to some scholars, it is the result of internal conceptual developments in the Greek world,¹⁶ according to others, the idea of a soul separable from the body comes into

14 On these two strands within Platonism in general, see Merlan 2008, 53–83.

15 Roig Lanzillotta 2007a, 420–424.

16 Snell 1986, 56–81; see also Snell 1931, 82.

Greek culture from the East, together with the idea of the transmigration of the soul.¹⁷

What in the beginning was a simple dichotomy gradually evolves towards a hierarchy in which the soul occupies the higher position,¹⁸ but this only occurs after some hesitation. Democritus provides testimony to a view, in which the body still seems to hold a higher status than the soul, since the latter is conceived of as responsible for wrong choices and actions that may negatively influence the body's health.¹⁹ However, the soul very soon takes the highest rank in the hierarchy, since it is then conceived of as the real self, and the higher seat of intelligence, in contrast to the body which brings the individual closer to lower animals. In the final stage of this evolution, the ψυχή acquires a divine or quasi-divine nature and is consequently seen as the pre-existent and immortal element in man, only temporarily descending to inhabit its dwelling place, the material and mortal body (Plato).

It is this point in the development that interests us, since, thanks to the influence of Platonism, this conception gained wide acceptance in the Imperial Period and became the "natural" view of man, especially in Greek and Roman ethics. This is clear in the Platonic and Peripatetic view of the soul as being responsible for right or wrong behavior, and the consequent need to cultivate it as one would a piece of land.²⁰ It also plays an important role in the well-known *metriopatheia* of Platonic-peripatetic provenance, also adopted by the Pythagorean Pseudepigrapha.²¹ Human bipartition even makes its appearance, however, in the Stoic view of virtue and practical ethics, as Christopher Gill has shown for Marcus Aurelius.²²

As a result, bipartite anthropology tended to gain ground even in cultural environments with a monistic view of man, such as in Judaism and the Stoa.²³ As for the former, later writings of the Old Testament, such as Maccabees and Wisdom, show a bipartite anthropology that distinguishes soul and body.²⁴ In

17 Burkert 1972, 120–165; Burkert 1998, 59–82. On the issue, Bremmer 1983.

18 As T.M. Robinson (2002, 37) rightly comments, this began with the advent of Orphism, but it only reached wider sections of society through the influence of Platonism, which incorporated Orphic lore.

19 Democritus B 159 D-K.

20 See, in general, Nussbaum 1994.

21 On which, see Moraux 1984, 661–666.

22 According to Gill (2007, 190–192), it is precisely the practical ethics addressed in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius that explains Plato's influence on his Stoicism.

23 For the anthropological monism of the early Stoics, see Long 1983; Annas 1992, 37–70.

24 The bipartite view is clear in 2 Macc 3:16–17; 7:37; 14:38; 15:30; Wis 8:19–20 establishes a close relationship between purity of the soul and that of the body, and, more importantly,

line with Wisdom 9:15, Philo also presents a clearly negative view of the body, since its passions incline man to sin.²⁵ He believes that the body is a heavy burden for the soul and widely echoes a bipartite concept of man.²⁶ As to the latter, despite the clearly monistic view of the human being on the part of early Stoics, such as Zeno Cleanthes and Chrysippus, later Stoics such as Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus clearly show the influence of Plato's bipartite anthropology as well.²⁷

The testimony of the New Testament is equivocal: While the synoptic Gospels allegedly remain faithful to Jewish monism, in the letters, both Pauline and others, the situation is more complicated. Until very recently the epistles were placed in the conceptual world of Judaism, and their anthropological views interpreted as strictly monistic, but recent years have seen new insights that have definitively changed our views about early Christian anthropology. Even if Paul clearly shows a high degree of spiritualization of the human being, which can be seen in the opposition between an ἔσω ἄνθρωπος and an ἔξω ἄνθρωπος, namely an "Inner Being" as opposed to an external one, authors such as Hans Dieter Betz have done their best to present him as a monist.²⁸ In the same line, Troels Engberg-Pedersen's recent book, for example, still defends a monistic understanding of Paul's anthropology, claiming that his conception of *pneuma* is clearly materialistic and should be interpreted in reference to "materialistic and monistic Stoicism."²⁹ George van Kooten, however, has convincingly argued that Paul's discourse should be placed in the wider

seems to echo a belief in the pre-existence of the soul; see Reese 1970. Wis 2:2–4 describes the process of the death of both soul and body in diverse ways. According to Wis 9:15, the perishable body clearly burdens the soul in a way comparable to Plato's *Phaedo* (81B-E). Contra, Neher 2004, 131–133, following Georgi 1980, and Kaiser 1994, 118–119, attributes these ideas not to the original text but to a later addition.

- 25 Philo is not always consistent, however, and sometimes retains the positive Jewish view of the body; see Schweizer 1957, 246–50.
- 26 Body as burden: Philo, *Gig.* 31; *Leg.* 3.152; *Det. Pot. Ins.* 16. Bipartite anthropology: Philo, *Leg.* 3.62; *Cher.* 128; *Det.* 19; *Agr.* 46 and 152; cf. *Abr.* 96, etc. In *Opif.* 135 Philo affirms that man is mortal κατὰ τὸ σῶμα but immortal κατὰ τὴν διάνοιαν. The bipartition is also clear in his conception of the soul leaving the body after death (*Plant.* 147; *Abr.* 258; *Somn.* 1.31).
- 27 For early Stoics, see von Staden 96–105. As for the later, Zeller (1903) 1112, 256 calls them "Platonisierende Stoiker." The later tendency, however, has been to ignore or to minimize the influence of Plato. See for Seneca, Inwood 2008, 149–167. This is also true for Marcus Aurelius. See Rist 1982, 31, who refers to Marcus Aurelius's bipartite or tripartite anthropological schemes only in passing, and Gill 2007, 189–206.
- 28 Regarding Paul's "inner" and "outer" being: 2 Cor 4:16; cf. Rom 7:22. See also Heckel 1993. See also Burkert. Presenting Paul as monist: see Betz 2000.
- 29 Engberg-Pedersen 2010, 2–25.

Greco-Roman context and his anthropology interpreted in line with the widespread trichotomous pattern.³⁰ And indeed, in my view, Irenaeus's desperate efforts in his *Against all Heresies* to read 1 Thessalonians 5:23 in a monist way seems to provide external support for the view that, even in antiquity, Paul was also interpreted in a trichotomous way.³¹ But let's return to the more bipartite anthropological view we find in Plato.

Some Nag Hammadi texts include this kind of bipartite anthropological pattern; they tend to oppose spiritual and physical realities, and contrast the inner and true being with the external and materially sensible one. This dualistic understanding of Plato's anthropological bipartition is not restricted to Nag Hammadi writings, however. As a matter of fact, it belongs to the core of Plato's idealistic philosophy and as such was rather widespread in the Greco-Roman world—witness, for example, Maximus of Tyre and Plotinus.³² A good example of this bipartite view of man appears in the Sentences of Sextus (NHC XII,1). In discussing who should rightly be called a philosopher, the text states that only he who pays heed to the inner being is really wise:

No man who <looks> down upon the earth and upon tables is wise. The philosopher who is an outer body, he is not the one to whom it is fitting to pay respect, but (the) philosopher according to the inner man.³³

According to the dualistic view of these texts, the physical body is an odious accretion, something alien to man's real nature. The Letter of Peter to Philip (NHC VIII,2) echoes this widespread motif, since it asserts that due to the imprisonment of the inner man, the gnostics have to struggle against the "authorities" in order to "strip off (...) what is corrupted" and become "illuminators in the midst of mortal men."³⁴ The bipartite anthropological

30 Van Kooten 2008, 298–312. See also Bovon 2010, 400–401.

31 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.6.1.

32 Maximus of Tyre, *Orations* 21.7 (Trapp 1997): "Yet in its [the soul's] dealings in this life it cannot see with complete clarity, separated as it is from true beauty both in place and status, exiled from the sights it used to enjoy, to this earthly region, where it is enveloped in a muddy carapace, as thick as it is impure, confused and imprisoned in a life of turmoil and darkness, overwhelmed in chaos and disharmony." For Plotinus, suffice it to recall Porphyry's statement, in *Vita Plotini* 15, according to which Plotinus was ashamed to live in a body.

33 Sent. Sextus NHC XII,1 34.16–20 (Wisse 1990).

34 Ep. Pet. Phil. NHC VIII,2 137.6–9 (Wisse 1991). See Meyer 1981, 135–139 for a commentary on this section. The motif of the odious body is frequent in Nag Hammadi. See Dial. Sav. NHC III,5 132.11–12; 138.20–139.2; Ap. Jas. NHC I,2 14.35–36; 2 Ap. Jas. NHC V,4 56.7–14; Gos.

conception behind this motif, however, is clearer in Interpretation of Knowledge, which describes the body as a “net of flesh” for the “man within,” as a temporary residence, in which humanity was imprisoned by the rulers and authorities, who, in Pauline fashion, seem to govern over the lower world of matter.³⁵

... he [the devil] brought us down, having bound us in nets of flesh. Since the body is a temporary dwelling which the rulers and authorities have as an abode, the man within, after being imprisoned in the fabrication, fell into suffering. And having compelled him to serve them, they constrained him to serve the energies.³⁶

The same conception can be found in the Hermetic treatise Asclepius, of which the Nag Hammadi codices also include a fragmentary translation.³⁷ Asclepius explicitly states that only man has a double nature, namely one which is simple and divine, which is called essential (οὐσιώδης), and another material one (ὕλικός) which is formed out of the four elements.³⁸ According to Gersch there is here a positive view of the latter due to Stoic influence,³⁹ but Asclepius nevertheless stresses the higher quality of man’s “essential” part by describing it as “divine,” “eternal,” and “substantial.”⁴⁰ Of course it could be argued that belief in a dual nature divine-human does not exclude the possibility of a tripartite division of the human being nous-soul-body. However, the fact that the Asclepius affirms that it is through this part that man ascends to heaven seems to exclude this possibility.⁴¹

Thom. NHC II,2 37.4–6; Gos. Phil. NHC II,3 66.16–20; 75.21–25; Three Forms NHC XIII,1 49.28–32; Acts Thom. 111; Corp. herm. 1.24–26. It also appears in tripartite anthropological contexts (see below note 53). According to Dodds 1963, 307, the origin of this motif might be Orphic-Pythagorean and refers to Empedocles (B 126 D-K) and to Plato, *Gorg.* 523C ff, where the body is conceived of as a garment (ἄμφιεσμα) that the soul takes off after death.

35 Interp. Know. NHC XI,1 6.30–35. For a similar but more general opposition see Gos. Phil. NHC II,3 123, 82.30–83.9.

36 Interp. Know. NHC XI,1 6.26–37 (Turner 1990). See also Plisch 1996, 97–99.

37 For a translation of the complete extant work, see Nock and Festugière 1960b, 256–401.

38 Man’s duality in Asclep. 7: 304.2–6; 8:305.15–306.2; 11:309.5–6; 22:324.18 (Nock and Festugière 1960b).

39 Gersch 1986, 379ff.

40 “Divine”: Asclep. 10: 309.3; 22: 324.18; 22: 323.25. “Eternal”: Asclep. 8: 306.4 (Nock and Festugière 1960b).

41 Asclep. 10: 308.23–309.1 (Nock and Festugière 1960b).

This basic bipartition is also preserved by the Coptic version of Asclepius, since the translation does not seem to have affected its basic anthropology. We find exactly the same bipartition of soul and body: the Coptic Asclepius also refers to the separation of the soul from the body and the ascension of the former to the region “in the middle of the air between the earth and heaven,” where it is judged by demons. Only after the positive result will the demon give the soul its free pass to the celestial region.⁴² This interesting mention shows that the bipartite scheme governs not only the anthropology of the text but also its cosmology and soteriology, since the archons or demons are not allotted to any specific region, but on the dividing line between heaven and earth.

However, the most obvious example of a bipartite anthropology in the Nag Hammadi collection I know of is the *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II,6).⁴³ Even if originally divine, the soul seems to have lost its nature due to its fall into materiality. *Exegesis on the Soul* states that the soul used to be virginal and androgynous, but lost both conditions as a result of the incarnation in a body.⁴⁴ The soul’s interaction with the sensible world is described in such dark hues that it is equated to prostitution and violation:

... when she (the soul) fell down into a body and came to this life, then she fell into the hands of many robbers. And the wanton creatures passed her from one to another (...). Some made use of her [by force], while others did so by seducing her with a gift.⁴⁵

Due to the loss of its original androgynous condition and the subsequent lack of a rational faculty (its male part), the soul appears to be trapped in the bonds of nature. Behind this conception we see the background of the partition of the soul into rational and irrational halves standard in Middle Platonism (below).

42 Asclepius (Perf. Disc. NHC VI,8 76.22–37). Brashler, Dirkse, and Parrott 1977.

43 For translations of *Exeg. Soul* NHC II,6, also known as the *Expository Treatise on the Soul*, see Layton and W.C. Robinson 1989; Bethge 1976; Sevrin 1983; Scopello 1985. See now Kulawik 2006.

44 A similar conception can be found in *Auth. Disc.* NHC VI,3 25.6–9, which describes the soul’s contact with the world and the subsequent appearance of desires as a “contamination” of man’s virginity: “For if a thought of lust enters into a virgin man, he has already become contaminated.”

45 *Exeg. Soul* NHC II,6 127,29–31. Some scholars, however, tend to interpret this as a reference to sexuality as “the soul’s plight.” See, for example, Scopello 1985, 58–59; Layton and W.C. Robinson 1989, 137–38. See, however, Roig Lanzillotta 2010, 405–406.

Due to its irrational condition, the soul is now controlled by both the influence of sensorial perception and by the passions.⁴⁶

There is no trace of a third element in the text's anthropology. There is no reference to the intellect whatsoever, and the only passage that mentions the *pneuma* does not seem to consider it as a differentiated part of the soul, but rather as the divine element by means of which God awakens the soul's dormant rational capacity.⁴⁷ The strictly binary nature of the opposition at work behind these texts can also be seen in the strict correlation between anthropology and cosmology.

As is also the case in the Asclepius, the dichotomous scheme that governs the text's anthropology is also reproduced at the level of its cosmology, which opposes the divine celestial region to the earthly realm. There is no reference to a third intermediate region either. This means, of course, that from a soteriological perspective human salvation consists in regaining the rational pristine nature, in letting the soul supersede all bodily influences with a view to regaining her original abode. There are no other obstacles the soul has to deal with, such as the password owed to the archontic powers occurring in tripartite worldviews. Salvation is automatic once the soul regains, after repentance and the Father's grace, its original rational nature. As the text expressively affirms: "This is the ransom from captivity. This is the upward journey to heaven."⁴⁸ Let us now take a look at the tripartite anthropological scheme.

The Trichotomous Conception of the Human Being in Nag Hammadi

As already discussed, most of the Nag Hammadi texts fall within the tripartite category and add a third element, namely the intellect (or spirit, or logos), to soul and body. Admittedly, some might object that bipartite anthropological

46 The anthropology of the Auth. Disc. NHC VI,3 is very close to that of Exeg. Soul. In spite of the view that considers it a composite work that includes various theories on the soul, it presents a rather consistent view in its overall bipartite view of man. As in Exeg. Soul, the soul is said to have dwelt in the pleroma or divine region and to have changed its condition due to the fall into a body (23.12–17): "... when the spiritual soul was cast into the body, it became a brother to lust and hatred and envy, and a material soul." Her contact with the body not only means she becomes a material soul, it also produces the oblivion that will keep her attached to the world (24.17–22): "Therefore she does not remember her brothers and her father, for pleasure and sweet profits deceive her. Having left knowledge behind, she fell into bestiality."

47 Exeg. Soul NHC II,6 133.34–134.2, on which Roig Lanzillotta 2010, 418–419.

48 Exeg. Soul NHC II,6 134.13–15.

schemes also include frequent references to a third element, be it νοῦς (intellect) or πνεῦμα (spirit). However, it is important to note that this third element is never considered a constitutive part of the human, but rather a kind of *deus ex machina* that comes from without to free the soul from her present physical condition. In contrast, in trichotomous schemes the intellect is a constituent of the human being in its own right.

Trivial though it may seem, the appearance of a third element is of crucial importance and has far-reaching consequences. To begin with, it influences the conception of the human to the extent that it replaces the soul, in assuming the highest position in the human hierarchy: Not only is the intellect higher than the soul but it is also man's only immortal part. Furthermore, the soul is no longer conceived of as divine and everlasting, as in the previous scheme, but clearly as mortal. As far as its internal structure is concerned, the soul is still described as possessing rational and irrational parts, but their function has slightly changed. Given the intermediary position it occupies between intellect and body, the rational and irrational halves are now related to intellect and body, respectively. As we will immediately see, these alterations produce important changes at the level of cosmology and soteriology.⁴⁹

Nag Hammadi texts widely attest this anthropology. The tripartite scheme is at work in the Treatise on the Resurrection (NHC I, 4) and is clearly expressed in its conception of the "spiritual resurrection, which swallows up the psychic in the same way as the fleshly."⁵⁰ The same view appears in The Teachings of Silvanus (NHC VII,4), which presents a triadic conception of man formed of a physical body, a soul and a "divine mind which has come into being in conformity with the image of God. The divine mind has the substance of God."⁵¹ According to this text, humans:

have come into being from three races: from the earth, from the formed, and from the created. The body has come into being from the earth with

49 Dunning 2014, 175–197 at 178, has rightly pointed out that anthropological issues are intrinsically related both to creation and soteriology.

50 See Treat. Res. NHC I,4 45.39–46.2 and Peel 1985b ad loc., Peel 1969, 48f, 74f., 112f., 148; see also Layton 1979, 65–66, 71–73, 78, 82–84; Gos. Mary BG 1 10.14–16. See also Thomassen 2009, which stresses the similarity of this process and Paul's view of resurrection in 1 Cor 15:44.

51 Teach. Silv. NHC VII,4 92.23–26 (Peel and Zandee 1996). See also Teach. Silv. NHC VII,4 102.34ff, "My son, do not allow your mind to stare downward, | but rather let | it look by means of the light | at things above. | For the light will always come from above. | Even if it (scil. the mind) is upon the earth, | let it seek to pursue the | things above. Enlighten your | mind with the light of heaven | so that you may turn to the light of heaven" (Peel and Zandee 1996, 249–369).

an earthly substance, but the formed, for the sake of the soul, has come into being from the thought of the Divine. The created, however, is the mind, which has come into being in conformity with the image of God.⁵²

The heresiologists report a very similar conception among the Valentinians, although in this case the νοῦς has been replaced by the πνεῦμα.⁵³ According to Irenaeus and Hippolytus, Valentinians explained the origin of this tripartite constitution by way of a mythical narrative:⁵⁴ The material substance originated in the passion of Sophia, the soul in her repentance and conversion, and the spiritual substance in her joyful response to the vision of the savior. It is only after Sophia orders these “substances” and creates the cosmos and man by means of the demiurge that humans come to have the three elements: While the demiurge creates the body and insufflates in it a soul, Sophia inserts the spiritual seed.⁵⁵

The same anthropological scheme is behind the anthropological myth included in the *Nature of the Rulers* (NHC II,4), which presents an interesting tripartite reinterpretation of Genesis 2:7:

The rulers laid plans and said, “Come, let us create a man that will be soil from the earth.” . . . They had taken some soil from the earth and modelled their man after their body and after the image of God that had appeared to them in the waters. . . . And he breathed into his face; and the

52 Teach. Silv. NHC VII,4 92.15–25 (Peel and Zandee 1996).

53 The motif of soul or body as a garment which must be removed in order to ascend to divine regions appears in tripartite contexts as well. According to Clement of Alexandria, *Exc.* 64, Valentinians affirmed that the spiritual elements must leave behind their souls before they can achieve the vision of God. Souls are further explicitly referred to as ἐνδύματα in 61.8; 63.1. See Nock and Festugière 1960, 131n57. According to Dodds 1963, 307, behind the Valentinian interpretation of the “coat of skin” (χιτῶν δερμάτινος) of Gen. 3:21 as a reference to the fleshy body (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.5.5) we might have the idea of Orphic-Pythagorean origin (see Dodds’ opinion above note 34) that saw the body as the garment of the soul. See also Nock and Festugière 1960, 82–83, note 9. Similarly, Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.7.1) had pointed out that according to Valentinians, souls were not admitted in the pleroma. According to the Marcosians described by Irenaeus, the spiritual element, after leaving behind the body in the tangible world, abandons its bondage (δεσμός), namely the soul that is given to the demiurge before returning to its original abode (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.5, with fragment 11 cited in Epiphanius, *Pan.* 36.2–3).

54 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.1–8; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.29–36. See Roig Lanzillotta forthcoming.

55 Thomassen 2009, 171.

man came to have a soul (and remained) upon the ground many days. But they could not make him arise because of their powerlessness.⁵⁶

Numerous Nag Hammadi writings reflect a rather low opinion of the world and of its creator. According to this worldview, Genesis could not narrate the deeds of the true God, but referred to the creative activity of some lower and ignorant creator god(s), whose imperfection was apparent in the results. Nature of the Rulers therefore reinterprets Genesis 2:7a such that it accords with this negative view of both creator and creation, attributing the formation of the human soul and body to the ignorant gods that populate the astral sphere. The rulers first shape the body from the soil according to the likeness of god reflected in the waters; then the chief ruler breathes into his face and the body becomes soul-endowed. In spite of their efforts, however, their creature remains lifeless on the ground because of their lack of power. It is the intervention from above, from the invisible spirit of the highest God, that will provide the spark of life, the *ψυχαιος σπινθήρ* according to other sources, to animate the first man. Only then we find a reference to the “living soul” in Gen 2:7b:

Now all these events came to pass by the will of the father of the entirety. Afterwards, the spirit saw the soul-endowed man upon the ground. And the spirit came forth from the Adamantine Land; it descended and came to dwell within him, and that man became a living soul.⁵⁷

The Nature of the Rulers describes all three anthropological elements referred to above: While the body proceeds from the earth, the soul proceeds from the demiurgical sphere, namely from the rulers who breathe it into man, and the intellect or spirit from the highest godly region.

Other texts, especially of Valentinian origin, explain man's three constitutive elements as a result of a downward movement that determines the intellect's devolution from its divine origin. Even if the cause initiating this process is never completely clear, at the end of the devolutive movement the intellect (or the spirit or the logos) has to cope with the accretions of soul and body. At any rate, after the first step has taken place we see a dispersion of the intellect's unity, which necessarily results in ignorance. This ignorance is the cause of a second stage of degradation because it initiates a series of affections: first of all, insecurity and doubt, then fear and, finally, a desire to know, since knowledge can remove all previous emotions. The third and final step consists of a

56 Nat. Rulers NHC II,4 87.33–88.8 (Layton 1989).

57 Nat. Rulers NHC II,3 88.10–15 (Layton 1989).

kind of “substantialization” of affections that produces the appearance of matter and the physical body.

The Tripartite Tractate (NHC 1,5) explains how the first dispersion takes place: due to the inability of the Logos to grasp the ungraspable and to bear the intensity of the light, it “doubts” and “looks down to the depth.”⁵⁸ As a result, a “division” and a “turning away” take place, and these in turn produce the appearance of ignorance and oblivion.⁵⁹ The *Gospel of Truth* (NHC 1,3) in turn describes the two subsequent steps, namely the appearance and development of affections that will generate the psychic and *hylic* levels of reality. Anguish and fear appear as direct consequences of ignorance, and as anguish grows solid like a fog, it provides the suitable context for error to appear, which “became powerful” and “worked on its own matter foolishly.”⁶⁰ The final stage of devolution is the alienation of the intellect and the soul in the realm of physis.⁶¹ The original ignorance remains unaltered, and is perpetuated by oblivion and by the deficiency of the body’s cognitive means. Sensorial perception is not only unable to help man achieve knowledge but also prolongs his ignorance since it delivers him to the delusion of externals.⁶²

As was the case in bipartite schemes, we see a strict correlation between the view of man and that of the universe, consisting of transcendent, celestial, and earthly realms. Anthropology and cosmology are so intrinsically related that each anthropological element is conceived of as belonging to one cosmological realm: The intellect is related to the transcendent realm, the soul to the celestial region, the body to the earth. As could be expected, soteriology presents exactly the same trichotomous structure. Given the intellect’s divine nature, its liberation consists in deconstructing the accretions gained during its downward movement to *physis*. The body returns to the elements, the soul is given back to the archons, who populate the astral region, and the *nous* or *pneuma* speeds to its divine abode.

58 Tri. Trac. NHC 1,5 77.18–20 (Attridge and Pagels 1985). For a nice treatment of the complexities behind the text’s anthropological tripartition, see Dunning 2014, 180–187.

59 “Division” and “turning away” in Tri. Trac. NHC 1,5 76.23–77.11: according to the text, the fall of the Logos has been planned by God. See Kasser et al. 1973, 340, and Painchaud and Thomassen 1989, 333ff. Reference to ignorance and oblivion in Tri. Trac. NHC 1,5 77.21–25.

60 Gos. Truth NHC 1,3 17.10–17 (Attridge and MacRae 1985).

61 The same view can be found in the Acts Andr., see Roig Lanzillotta 2007b, V^r 213–14 (Bonnet 44.12–14) with Chapter 4, § 3.4.2.1.

62 So, too, Acts Andr. V^r 208–09 (Bonnet 44.7–8), with Roig Lanzillotta 2007b, Chapter 4, § 3.4 *passim*.

The Origin of the Trichotomous View of the Human Being

Now, where does this trichotomous scheme come from? It is well known that a tripartite conception of man is explicitly stated for the first time in late antiquity in Plutarch's *On the Face of the Moon*, where Sulla defends the view that man does not consist of two parts, but rather of three, namely intellect, soul, and body. In doing so, Sulla rejects the view that considers the intellect a part of the soul, but also establishes a clear hierarchy among the parts: νοῦς γὰρ ψυχῆς, ὅσῳ ψυχῇ σώματος, ἄμεινόν ἐστι καὶ θεϊότερον.⁶³

If we were to accept Werner Deuse's hypothesis, this tripartition of man should be traced back to the bipartition of the soul into rational and irrational halves, which on the basis of Plato's views in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, was standard in Middle Platonism.⁶⁴ In Deuse's view, Timarchus's myth in the Plutarchan *On the Sign of Socrates* allows us to see how Plutarch develops his distinction between intellect and soul from a basic bipartite conception of the soul consisting of a rational and an irrational part.⁶⁵ Philo of Alexandria might also seem to provide some precedent for this conception. Even though mostly endorsing the regular Platonic bipartite view of man, Philo's application of the bipartition of the soul sometimes brings him close to a trichotomous view of man. For example, in *De migratione Abrahami*, the first chapters present a clear tripartite view of man, distinguishing body, soul, and logos, the latter being a specific aspect of the rational part of the soul.⁶⁶ Not only his allegorical

63 Plutarch, *Fac.* 943A, Τὸν ἄνθρωπον οἱ πολλοὶ σύνθετον μὲν ὀρθῶς, ἐκ δυοῖν δὲ μόνων σύνθετον οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἡγοῦνται. μῶριον γὰρ εἶναι πῶς ψυχῆς οἶονται τὸν νοῦν, οὐδὲν ἦττον ἐκείνων ἀμαρτάνοντες, οἷς ἡ ψυχὴ δοκεῖ μῶριον εἶναι τοῦ σώματος. νοῦς γὰρ ψυχῆς, ὅσῳ ψυχῇ σώματος, ἄμεινόν ἐστι καὶ θεϊότερον. For the Aristotelian background of this assertion see Bos 2001, 57–70, and Bos 2003, 280.

64 Against the view expressed in the *Phaedo* (783BC) that the soul is not “composite”—and therefore not liable to destruction—the *Republic* affirms that the soul has three parts: the spirited, the irrational and the rational ones. As Dörrie 1959, 167–68 has pointed out, however, Middle Platonists reduced the former to a single part in order to bring it into line with the bipartition irrational-rational in the *Timaeus*. See on the bipartite structure of the soul in Middle-Platonism, Dillon 1996, 102 (Antiochus of Ascalon), 174–76 (Philo), 194 (Plutarch), 256–57 (Atticus), 263 (Severus), 290–94 (Alcinous).

65 Deuse 1985, 46–47, sees in Timarchus's myth in *De genio Socratis* 591D a first step towards the theory exposed in *De facie*. Other scholars, such as Hamilton 1934, 175–82 and, more recently, Vernière 1977, 126, consider that in spite of Plutarch's confusion at the level of formulation or expression, the exposition of *De Genio* presents exactly the same trichotomy as that of *De facie*. See also Deuse 2010, 182–87.

66 The *logos*, however, is nevertheless clearly seen as a differentiated part of the soul—witness his assertion, some lines below, that discursivity (*dianoia*) is the rational part of the soul as opposed to the irrational one that rules over sensation. Philo of Alexandria,

interpretation of God's command to Abraham in Gen 12:1 ("‘Land’ or ‘country’ is a symbol of the body, ‘kindred’ of sense-perception, ‘father’s house’ of speech [logos]"),⁶⁷ but especially his use of the term *nous* to describe the rational part of the soul, seems to point in this direction. Note that *De migratione* 13 even asserts the separability of mind from the soul-body complex: "... when Mind (*nous*) begins to know itself and to hold converse with the things of mind, it will thrust away from it that part of the soul which inclines to the province of sense perception."⁶⁸

However, there are several reasons not to accept this inner Platonic origin of the trichotomous anthropology:

- a) To begin with, there is the fact that trichotomous patterns do not oppose the intellect to the body, but rather the intellect to the soul-body complex. In a Platonic context this seems to be too drastic a re-characterization of the soul, since it implies changing its status from divine to mortal.
- b) Another important argument is that, as we have seen, anthropological schemes in antiquity normally coincide with cosmological ones. This means that both patterns are expressions of a more fundamental conception of reality and that one cannot change without affecting the other.
- c) Last but not least, not all Middle Platonists presenting a bipartition of the soul develop it into a trichotomous anthropological scheme, witness Maximus of Tyre.⁶⁹

Given that the trichotomous view of man is not exclusive to Philo or Plutarch but also appears in other Middle Platonists, such as Alcinous, in the Corpus

Migr. 3.4–5, αἴσθησις δὲ συγγενὲς καὶ ἀδελφόν ἐστι διανοίας, ἄλογον λογικῆς, ἐπεὶδὴ μιᾶς ἅμφω μέρη ψυχῆς ταῦτα.

67 Philo of Alexandria, *Migr.* 2.5–7.

68 Philo of Alexandria, *Migr.* 13.4–5, ἐπειδὴν γοῦν ὁ νοῦς ἄρξεται γνωρίζειν ἑαυτὸν καὶ τοῖς νοητοῖς ἐνομιλεῖν θεωρήμασιν, ἅπαν τὸ κλινόμενον τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς τὸ αἰσθητὸν εἶδος ἀπώσεται. On which see van Kooten 2008, 292–293. See also Philo, *Her.* 69–74, where he expounds his view of ecstatic experience, conceived as the action by means of which the mind quits itself.

69 Maximus of Tyre echoes Plato's strict bipartition of the human being. See, for example, *Orations* 7.1 (Trapp 1997): "There are two components in the Human compound, body and soul"; see also 7.5; or 9.5: "In the partnership of soul and body, it is the body which is held together, and the soul which does the holding"; see also 9.6; 10.9; and, especially, 11.10, where mind is clearly conceived of as a part of the soul rather than as anthropological element in its own right.

Hermeticum,⁷⁰ as well as among gnostics, one needs to find a more general explanation for its appearance.⁷¹ As has been pointed out, all trichotomous schemes are mainly concerned with a clear distinction between intellect and the soul-body complex, and this seems to reflect a clear Peripatetic background, since it was Aristotle who redefined Plato's conception of a dichotomy in man, opposing his soul to his body when he opposed the νοῦς or "intellect" to the ψυχή or "soul."⁷² Following Aristotle, all the examples dealt with above not only deny immortality to the human soul but repeatedly state that the intellect is man's most divine and only eternal element.⁷³

Conclusions

From the preceding it seems obvious that anthropological schemes correlate with cosmological ones.⁷⁴ Following the old Democritean view that the human being is a microcosmos, the human tends to be considered in the light of a cosmological framework. In Plato, for example, his bipartite conception of man consisting of soul and body strictly correlates with his view of the cosmos, which opposed ideas to matter. The same holds true for Aristotle, since

70 The same hierarchy is at work in the tenth Hermetic tractate (10.24: 125.10–16, Nock and Festugière), which not only clearly distinguishes intellect, soul, and body but also stresses the higher rank of the former, without which the soul resembles an irrational animal; only the intellect is divine and recovers its true nature after taking off the clothes of the soul that served it as a vehicle (Corp. herm. 10.16–17, 120.22–121.19 Nock and Festugière).

71 See Bos 2001, 61ff.

72 Barbotin 1954, 220; Armstrong 1991, 117–18. This differentiation is also stressed by Atticus, frag 7 Des Places (cited in Eusebius, *PE* XV.9.14). See Merlan 1967, 73–74; Bos 2002, 277n16, and Bos 2003, 216–29; Luttikhuisen 2002, 190. On Aristotelian elements in Nag Hammadi, see Luttikhuisen 2006, 29–43, esp. 32–42.

73 Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 1177B 26–1178A 2: the intellect as the divine element in man by which he achieves complete happiness and partakes in the divine. See his conclusion in *Eth. nic.* 1178A 2–7, that the intellect is man's true self; *Eth. nic.* 1179A 22–32, the man who lives according to his intellect, that is, the man who pursues intellectual activity, cultivates his intellect and keeps it in the best condition is the most beloved of the Gods; *Eth. eud.* 1248A 24–29, where the intellect is said to be man's highest element and to be connected with God; *De an.* 430A 23–25; *Metaph.* Λ, 1072B 23–26; *Part. an.* 656A 8; 10; 686A 27–28; *Gen. an.* 736B 28; 737A 8–11; *Protr.* fr. 108 Düring. See Moraux 1973, 230 and additional bibliography in note 24.

74 On the correlation between macro- and microcosm in ancient anthropology, see Roig Lanzillotta 2015, 179–195, *passim*. In general, see already the old (but still valid) studies by Stenzel 1931, 29, and Allers 1944.

a tripartite conception of man that differentiates *nous* or intellect from soul and body also correlates with his tripartite vision of the cosmos consisting of the realm of the Unmoved Mover, the astral sphere, and sublunary world. As has been pointed out, even the Stoic dualistic conception of the cosmos with its two principles, namely the active (τὸ ποιῶν) and passive (τὸ πάσχων), is determinant for their view of man, which sharply distinguishes soul and body.⁷⁵

As we have seen, Nag Hammadi texts are no exception to this rule. Texts including a bipartite view of man coherently present a bipartite view of the cosmos. The fullness of the *pleroma*, or divine region, is contrasted to the barrenness of *kenoma*, or “emptiness,” the realm of creation: They oppose divine and earthly regions in the same way as they contrast soul with body. This naturally affected both their view of salvation and of the ethical procedure that must be followed to attain it. As for texts including a tripartite view of man, they present, also coherently, a tripartite worldview, insofar as they oppose the transcendent divine region to the realm of movement, including the astral and earthly regions, in the same way that they contrast the intellect with the soul-body conglomerate. Ethics and soteriology, as might be expected, cohere with cosmology and anthropology as well.

It is precisely this relatedness of the different aspects of the conceptual world behind the texts, including cosmology, theology, anthropology, ethics, and soteriology, that prevents us from attempting too simplistic an explanation of the anthropological differences among them. In my view, the different anthropological schemes are neither due to the influence of a more basic Christian opposition of spiritual and material realities nor to the bipartite background of Genesis 2:7. Furthermore, their relatedness also poses clear difficulties for a genealogical or developmental explanation. Given the existence of several strands of Platonism at the time of composition of the Nag Hammadi texts, it seems preferable to explain the diverse anthropological schemes as due to the diverse philosophical influences of the conceptual milieus in which they were composed. The existence of two anthropological strands within Platonism sufficiently explains the diverse frameworks in Nag Hammadi texts: While bipartite schemes appear to remain faithful to traditional Platonism, free of Aristotelian influences—as represented, for example, by Atticus⁷⁶—trichotomous anthropologies reflect the tripartite view of man current in Middle-Platonic contexts under the influence of the Peripatetics, which from the second century onwards is more visible, thanks to the edition of the *Corpus Aristotelicum* by Andronicus of Rhodes more than a century earlier.

75 Emilsson 1994, 5332.

76 On which, see Merlan 1967, 53–83.

We may then conclude that the diverging opinions referred to at the beginning are not due to the incoherence or erratic thought of the Nag Hammadi authors. They rather reflect the different intellectual milieus behind the texts and the changing philosophical influences on their authors. More importantly, differences between both anthropological frameworks are not simply due to questions of detail; they instead imply rather diverging worldviews that affected the way the cosmos was conceived of, the position humans occupied in it, and the conception of a relatedness between human constitutive parts and the parts of the cosmos. But this also had an important impact on ethics and soteriology. Each system sought coherence in describing how humans should best live their lives with a view to achieving, both during this life and after it, salvation from the physical constraints that oppressed their divine core, be it the soul, or the intellect, or the spirit.

Acknowledgements

A preliminary and less developed version of the views expressed in this article was published in J. van Ruiten & G.H. van Kooten (eds), *The Development of a Dualistic Anthropology in Early Judaism and Christianity, and their Umwelts* (Leiden: Brill, 2016) 136–153, which includes the text of a paper held in 2009 at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Groningen.

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