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zum Neuen Testament · 2. Reihe 46

Walter T. Wilson

Love
without Pretense



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Begründet von Joachim Jeremias und Otto Michel

Herausgegeben von
Martin Hengel und Otfried Hofius

46

Love without Pretense

Romans 12.9-21 and Hellenistic-Jewish
Wisdom Literature

by

Walter T. Wilson



J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen

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In Memory of
George Bernard Walsh

1946-1989

*Associate Professor and Chairman
Department of Classical Languages and Literatures
University of Chicago
1971-1989*

εὔδουσι δ' ὀρέων κορυφαί τε καὶ φάραγγες
πρώονές τε καὶ χαράδραι
φῦλά τ' ἐρπύτ' ὅσα τρέφει μέλαινα γαῖα
θῆρές τ' ὀρεσκῶοι καὶ γένος μελισσᾶν
καὶ κνώδαλ' ἐν βένθεσσι πορφυρέας ἄλός·
εὔδουσι δ' οἴωνῶν φύλα τανυπτερύγων.

Now sleep both the mountain peaks and ravines,
the headlands and the valleys,
and all the creeping things that the black earth feeds,
the mountain-bred beasts and the family of bees,
and the monsters in the depths of the dark-gleaming sea--
asleep too are all the birds, their wings outstretched.

Alcman, fragment 89

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The book is dedicated to the memory of Professor George B. Walsh, former chairman of the Department of Classical Languages and Literatures at the University of Chicago, who died of cancer on February 7, 1989.

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Abbreviations

The abbreviations used for this study are from the "Instructions for Contributors," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988) 579-596, with the following additions:

BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BT	Bibliotheca Teubneriana
CQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
DSp	<i>Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique</i>
FF	Forum Fascicles
GBSNTS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship, New Testament Series
HB	Herders Bibelkommentar
KP	<i>Der Kleine Pauly: Lexikon der Antike</i>
LÄ	<i>Lexikon der Ägyptologie</i>
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
OCT	Bibliotheca Oxoniensis (Oxford Classical Texts)
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and its World
WF	Wege der Forschung

A more complete list of abbreviations for secondary literature may be found in Siegfried Schwertner, *IATG: Internationales Abkürzungsverzeichnis für Theologie und Grenzgebiete* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1974).

Introduction

In coming to terms with the role played by Judaism in the development of early Christianity, the various ideas and methods associated with wisdom--however this concept is to be defined--merit serious consideration. It appears that the sapiential traditions conditioned the thought of the early Christians in numerous and diverse ways, and that these traditions have some bearing on our understanding not only of the theological and ethical aspects of the New Testament writings but of their literary and rhetorical characteristics as well. The growing number of critical studies concerned with such issues bears witness to this fact and serves as an indication of the significance of such phenomena for modern interpretation.¹ It does not occasion any surprise, therefore, that in the New Testament the impact of sapiential forms and themes is evident in a number of texts, both gospels and epistles. Recent investigations of the synoptic sayings source Q, for instance, have emphasized its literary affinities with ancient wisdom genres.² Among the letters of the New

¹ In addition to the works cited below see Robert L. Wilken, ed., *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (University of Notre Dame Center for the Study of Judaism and Christianity in Antiquity 1; Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975); Max Küchler, *Frühjüdische Weisheitstraditionen: Zum Fortgang weisheitlichen Denkens im Bereich des frühjüdischen Jahweglaubens* (OBO 26; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979) esp. 553-592; John D. Crossan, ed., *Semeia 17: Gnostic Wisdom* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980); Klaus Berger, "Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament," *ANRW II.25.2* (1984) 1049-1074; idem, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1984) 62-67; Hermann von Lips, *Weisheitliche Traditionen im Neuen Testament* (WMANT 64; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990).

² See John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) esp. 171-245, 263-316. Numerous other studies have focused on the gnomic features of the synoptic tradition, for example Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Blackwell, 1968²) 69-108; James M. Robinson, "LOGOI SOPHON: On the Gattung of Q," *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (ed. idem and Helmut Koester; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 71-113 [= *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honor of Rudolf Bultmann* (ed. idem; New York, Evanston, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971) 84-130]; Dieter Zeller, *Die weisheitlichen Mahnsprüche bei den Synoptikern* (FB 17; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1983²); Charles E. Carlston, "Proverbs, Maxims, and the

Testament, James has generated the most interest on account of the sapiential nature of its structure and message.³ Of course, such discussions of wisdom influence in early Christianity are hardly restricted to the canonical texts; the Gospel of Thomas, for example, has attracted a fair amount of attention in this regard.⁴

Like any other field of comparative study, the investigation of how the wisdom traditions influenced early Christianity carries with it a host of basic interpretive problems. First of all, the terms 'wisdom,' 'sapiential,' and so forth are notoriously difficult to define with any precision. For this study, we will take as a starting point the corpus of 'wisdom' texts in the Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha, especially Proverbs, Qohelet, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira, and the 'wisdom psalms'. The definition of wisdom may then be extended secondarily to describe materials of different dates and provenances that possess theological, ethical, or literary qualities comparable to these sources. Thus many texts that are not primarily sapiential in character may be understood to take advantage of sapiential themes or conventions. In practice,

Historical Jesus," *JBL* 99 (1980) 87-105; idem, "Wisdom and Eschatology in Q," *Les Paroles de Jésus--The Sayings of Jesus: Mémoial Joseph Coppens* (ed. Joël Delobel; BETL 59; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1982) 101-119; John D. Crossan, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); Leo G. Perdue, "The Wisdom Sayings of Jesus," *Forum* 2 (1986) 1-34; Ronald A. Piper, *Wisdom in the Q-Tradition: The Aphoristic Teaching of Jesus* (SNTSMS 61; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Alan P. Winton, *The Proverbs of Jesus: Issues of History and Rhetoric* (JSNTSup 35; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990); cf. von Lips, *Weisheitliche Traditionen*, 197-227.

³ For instance, Ulrich Luck, "'Weisheit' und Leiden: Zum Problem Paulus und Jakobus," *TLZ* 92 (1967) 253-258; idem, "Der Jakobusbrief und die Theologie des Paulus," *TGl* 61 (1971) 161-179; idem, "Die Theologie des Jakobusbriefes," *ZTK* 81 (1984) 1-30; J. A. Kirk, "The Meaning of Wisdom in James: Examination of a Hypothesis," *NTS* 16 (1969-70) 24-38; Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (rev. Heinrich Greeven; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) s.v. wisdom, wisdom literature; Franz Mußner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (HTKNT 13.1; Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1975³) esp. 168-175; Rudolf Hoppe, *Der theologische Hintergrund des Jakobusbriefes* (FB 28; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1977) 39-71, 146-148; Ernst Baasland, "Der Jakobusbrief als neutestamentliche Weisheitsschrift," *ST* 36 (1982) 119-139; idem, "Literarische Form, Thematik und geschichtliche Einordnung des Jakobusbriefes," *ANRW* II.25.5 (1988) 3646-3684; Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 51-56 and s.v. wisdom; idem, "The Epistle of James in Modern Discussion," *ANRW* II.25.5 (1988) 3621-3645; Ralph P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988) s.v. wisdom; von Lips, *Weisheitliche Traditionen*, 409-437.

⁴ See, for instance, William A. Beardslee, "Proverbs in the Gospel of Thomas," *Studies in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays for A. P. Wikgren* (ed. David E. Aune; NovTSup 33; Leiden: Brill, 1972) 92-103; Stevan L. Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (New York: Seabury, 1983); F. T. Fallon and Ron Cameron, "The Gospel of Thomas: A Forschungsbericht and Analysis," *ANRW* II.25.6 (1988) 4195-4251 with further bibliography.

of course, such descriptions can be problematic; as we will see below, not the least difficulty is posed by the fact that the Jewish wisdom texts themselves exhibit considerable diversity. Second, as these comments suggest, the extent to which ancient Jewish wisdom may be fairly designated a 'tradition,' as if it constituted some coherent and uninterrupted religious movement, is suspect. It seems rather more accurate to speak of the distinct sapiential qualities of individual texts and then to explore in what ways and to what degree these materials are related to one another. This raises a third question, explaining precisely how one wisdom text or corpus of texts 'influenced' the thoughts of a particular author, especially a non-sapiential author. In many instances there is no evidence of direct borrowing, and so attention must be paid to more subtle matters of shared theological perspectives and themes as well as common literary and rhetorical practices. Finally, it should be emphasized that none of these questions can be correctly addressed by treating Jewish and Christian wisdom in isolation. As a means of comprehending and describing human experience wisdom in its various modalities exercised considerable influence throughout the ancient world, and it became a prevalent aspect of life not only--or even especially--in Judaism and Christianity, but in Near Eastern and Greco-Roman civilizations as well. Thus wisdom represented a nearly universal phenomenon, and numerous parallels in content, form, and function may be detected among the different texts and traditions.

As these observations indicate, there were indeed many facets to the ancient sapiential traditions. One of the most common practices, and the focus for this study, was the composition and collection of sententious sayings, or maxims (Greek γνῶμαι, Latin *sententiae*). Ancient people valued such gnomonic sayings not only because they were artistic and memorable, but also because they were useful for making practical decisions about day-to-day life and functioned as a means of preserving the insights of other cultures and previous generations. On account of their succinct form and universal utility, gnomonic sayings were also characterized by a relatively high degree of cross-cultural influence and borrowing. In addition, the style of communication associated with gnomonic wisdom exhibited considerable flexibility with respect to content, setting, and purpose, and its impact on the literature of the time was hardly restricted to any particular group of texts or genres.

That the apostle Paul and his congregations also participated in the sapiential traditions of their time seems clear, and an array of modern analyses has been devoted to the topic of wisdom in the Pauline corpus, particularly as it is

discussed in 1 Corinthians 1.18-3.23.⁵ Like many of his contemporaries, Paul also formulated gnomic sentences in his writings; these precepts often figure prominently in the ethical sections of his letters, though they are on occasion employed elsewhere as well.⁶ Commenting on a sequence of such *sententiae* in Galatians 5.25-6.10, Hans Dieter Betz noted that the investigation of Paul's wisdom sentences "remains a *desideratum* of New Testament scholarship."⁷ Indeed, outside of Betz's occasional though insightful observations, the form, function, and background of Paul's gnomic wisdom has prompted only scant interest.⁸ The purpose of the present study is to meet, in part, this need by conducting a critical investigation of the sort Betz has called for in his *Galatians*

⁵ For a survey of recent literature see E. Elizabeth Johnson, *The Function of Apocalyptic and Wisdom Traditions in Romans 9-11* (SBLDS 109; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 23-49. Among the numerous noteworthy studies are Ulrich Wilckens, *Weisheit und Torheit: Eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu 1 Kor. 1 und 2* (BHT 26; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1959); Hans Conzelmann, "Paulus und die Weisheit," *NTS* 12 (1965-66) 231-244; idem, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (trans. James W. Leitch; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Birger A. Pearson, "Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Paul," in Wilken, *Aspects of Wisdom*, 43-66; Richard A. Horsley, "Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom in Corinth," *CBQ* 39 (1977) 224-239; James A. Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit: An Investigation of 1 Corinthians 1.18-3.20 against the Background of Jewish Sapiential Traditions in the Greco-Roman Period* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984); Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul: A Tradition Historical Enquiry into the Relation of Law, Wisdom, and Ethics* (WUNT 2.16; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985); Hans Dieter Betz, "The Problem of Rhetoric and Theology according to the Apostle Paul," *L'Apôtre Paul: Personnalité, Style et Conception du Ministère* (ed. Albert Vanhoye; BETL 73; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986) 16-48; von Lips, *Weisheitliche Traditionen*, 318-350.

⁶ In addition to Romans 12.3, 13.7, 14.7, 22b; 1 Corinthians 1.25, 3.18b, 19a, 8.1b, 2, 13.13, 16.13-14; 2 Corinthians 6.14b, 8.12, 9.6, 10.18, 14b, 13.5a; Galatians 4.18a, 5.9; Philippians 2.4, 14, 3.16, 4.5a; 1 Thessalonians 5.13b-22. Cf. Romans 1.22, 2.11, 3.4a, 8b, 5.3-4, 13.8; 1 Corinthians 1.29, 14.38, 15.32-33; 2 Corinthians 8.21, 9.7, 12.9b; Galatians 4.12; Philippians 2.1-3, 4.8. Further see the references in note 8.

⁷ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 291 n. 5.

⁸ Hans Dieter Betz, "De laude ipsius (Moralia 539A-547F)," *Plutarch's Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature* (ed. idem; SCHNT 4; Leiden: Brill, 1978) 378-381; idem, *Galatians*, 291-311; idem, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9: A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) s.v. *sententia*. Regarding Paul's gnomic sentences, Betz (*Galatians*, 291 n. 5) also refers to Johannes Weiss, "Beiträge zur Paulinischen Rhetorik," *Theologische Studien: Herrn Professor D. Bernhard Weiss zu seinem 70. Geburtstag dargebracht* (ed. C. R. Gregory et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1897) 165-247; Rudolf Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe* (FRLANT 13; Göttingen: Huth, 1910) [reprint, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984]; Norbert Schneider, *Die rhetorische Eigenart der paulinischen Antithese* (HUT 11; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1970).

commentary. As he demonstrated there, a careful reading of Paul's gnomic sayings in terms of their historical context can be of use not only in the exegetical task, but also in clarifying the nature of the apostle's relationship with contemporary literary practices and in better understanding the presuppositions and methods of his ethical teaching. In the course of addressing these more specific interpretive problems, it is hoped that the analysis below can also contribute to some of the broader issues regarding gnomic wisdom in the ancient world and the significance of such wisdom for early Christianity.

While Paul has recourse to gnomic sentences on a number of occasions, this investigation will focus on a passage where a fairly high concentration of such sayings occurs, Romans 12, and in particular Romans 12.9-21. To be sure, this represents only a sample of the apostle's gnomic wisdom, and so its investigation here may be considered a kind of test-case for the study of this literary form in the Pauline corpus. Yet, having stated this caveat, the significance of the chapter for the interpretation of Pauline theology and ethics ought to be emphasized. As most commentators acknowledge, this chapter forms an integral part of the most careful and thorough exposition of Paul's theology that we possess, his epistle to the Romans. In many respects, Romans 12 represents the nearest thing we have to a general statement of Paul's program for Christian ethical thought and behavior. It serves as both an essential corollary to the theological discussions that precede in chapters 1-11 as well as an introduction to the explicit treatment of ethical questions in chapters 12-15. In this chapter the apostle presents a number of his most crucial ethical concepts: the cultic self-sacrifice of Christian life, the discernment of God's will, the church as the body of Christ, and ἀγάπη ("love") as the basic perspective and motivation of Christian ethical conduct.

As an examination of any recent commentary on Romans will show, the exegesis of chapter 12 poses a range of serious and intriguing challenges to modern scholars.⁹ While a familiarity with the basic exegetical issues

⁹ The most significant contributions to the modern interpretation of Romans 12.9-21 have come from the various commentaries on Romans; those consulted most often for this study are Hans Lietzmann, *An die Römer* (HNT 8; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1933⁴, 1971⁵); C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1979); Heinrich Schlier, *Der Römerbrief* (HTKNT 6; Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 1977); Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (MeyerK 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955¹⁰, 1978¹⁴); Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* (EKKNT 6; 3 vols.; Zürich, Einsiedeln, Cologne: Benziger Verlag; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978, 1980, 1982); Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Franz-Josef Ortmeier, *Leben aus dem Glauben: Christliche Grundhaltungen nach Römer 12-13* (NTAbh 14; Münster: Aschendorff, 1980); Dieter Zeller, *Der Brief an die Römer* (RNT; Regensburg:

connected with the chapter will have a bearing on our study, the objective here is to investigate Romans 12 against the background of relevant ancient texts that make use of gnomic wisdom and to explore what implications this has for the interpretation of the literary composition and rhetorical function of the chapter as well as for our understanding of the importance of the gnomic style for Paul's ethics. Because the bulk of gnomic forms and themes is concentrated in 12.9-21, this section will constitute the center of attention for the discussion. As we will see below, the structuring of the material and the presentation of the exhortation in this passage conforms in numerous ways to the conventions observed in composing ancient gnomic wisdom.

At the same time, it appears that Paul has also carefully integrated this passage into its immediate literary environment, Romans 12.1-21, and that the ethical appeal made in vv. 9-21 is effective and meaningful only when interpreted within this larger context. Consequently, the investigation of 12.9-21 must also take into account the fundamental literary and rhetorical characteristics of chapter 12 as a whole as well as the unity and development of its material argument. The analysis will show that the sapiential features of Romans 12 are not restricted to vv. 9-21, but rather the character of the literary composition and mode of argumentation in the entire chapter is intelligible in terms of the ancient wisdom materials. Thus it appears that the literary setting that Paul provides for the material in 12.9-21 and the manner in which these verses have been integrated into their context are intelligible in terms of gnomic wisdom.

In addition to these considerations, it is also important to bear in mind that Romans 12 comprises part of the larger body of the epistle and contributes in a number of ways to Paul's overall intention in addressing the Roman Christians. Thus the material and functional relationship between chapter 12 and Paul's letter to the Romans in its entirety will also be a topic for consideration.

In order to come to grips with the problems of the composition and purpose of Romans 12 most effectively, it is necessary to analyze in some detail how the passage corresponds with existing literary parallels. Because they constitute the most immediate background for interpreting Paul's epistles, Hellenistic-Jewish and early Christian gnomic texts play a prominent role in this regard. However, on account of the typically cosmopolitan scope of the content and appeal of gnomic wisdom, the relevant comparative materials must extend beyond these texts to include Near Eastern and Greco-Roman sources as well. This is also necessary because it is plain that Paul himself has been influenced to

Pustet, 1985); James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (WBC 38; 2 vols.; Dallas: Word Books, 1988); Walter Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief: Ein Kommentar* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1988).

a significant degree by Hellenistic as well as Jewish and Christian literary conventions and ethical ideas.

Because of the importance of these ancient comparative materials for our analysis, as well as the complicated nature of gnostic wisdom in general, it will be useful to consider these sources at some length before proceeding to the text at hand. This involves, first of all, investigating the basic features and distinctions to be found within the corpus of gnostic texts, paying attention to both basic sayings as well as more complex structures and genres. Beyond this we will also consider in what ways gnostic forms may interact with non-gnostic genres and be utilized by authors to develop more sophisticated arguments and exhortations. Thus our inquiries will not be limited strictly to gnostic forms and genres, but will also take into account related and complementary forms of communication.

In clarifying the relationship of Romans 12 with these comparative materials, it is plain that Paul did not rely on any specific model or special source, either from the body of wisdom texts or elsewhere. Rather it appears that he has to some degree inculcated the fundamental ethos of the sapiential traditions familiar to us from these texts and takes advantage of a number of their basic conventions here, creating a new composition that suits his own ethical and literary needs in writing to the Roman Christians. So while the degree to which the chapter resembles the ancient gnostic texts is a central consideration, there is also a pressing need to remain sensitive to any ways in which Paul has adapted or modified the forms and concepts typical of the sapiential idiom. Hence it is crucial to look for innovations as well as conventions in the composition of Romans 12, especially when dealing with an author as creative and versatile as Paul.

Significantly, the similarities that Romans 12 exhibits with ancient gnostic sources are not restricted to a particular section of the chapter or to a certain sort of feature. Rather, its sapiential qualities are manifest on a number of levels, and each of these will have some bearing on the conclusions to be reached concerning its design and meaning. Most important are the following:

- 1) the overall literary organization of the chapter and the structure of its larger formal units, vv. 1-2, 3-8, and 9-21,
- 2) the chapter's mode of argumentation, the rhetorical objectives and strategies which it exhibits,
- 3) the nature of the constituent literary forms employed within the chapter, for example, maxims and proverbs, and
- 4) the substance of the chapter's message and appeal, such things as its themes, concepts, and terminology.

With respect to each of these features Romans 12 demonstrates important similarities with other ancient literary materials that employ gnomic forms and take advantage of the gnomic style. Furthermore, and as we will see below, analyzing Romans 12 in terms of gnomic literature also underscores the unified and sophisticated character of the chapter's composition and message, and is of use in understanding the role that gnomic wisdom plays in Paul's ethical thought.

Chapter One

The Gnostic Saying in Antiquity

A practice that seems to be shared by virtually every culture is the coining, use, and preservation of wise or sententious sayings. While this is particularly true with respect to pre-modern societies, even in modern times the study and employment of such sayings continues, and the variety of terms used to denote these sayings--maxim, proverb, epigram, aphorism, precept, and so on--are an indication of both their currency and their complexity. Perhaps the most remarkable quality of gnostic wisdom is its multi-dimensional character; gnostic utterances may exhibit features and applications that fall under the auspices of such diverse fields as poetry, rhetoric, ethics, philosophy, religion, and law. This diversity, in combination with the memorable formulation and practical insight that these sayings typically possess, often ensures them of longevity as well as wide circulation. On account of these qualities, gnostic wisdom as a whole is not a strictly literary phenomenon, and to a greater extent than many other forms gnostic sayings operate within the unsettled territory that separates written and oral communication.

In light of these characteristics, it comes as no surprise that the identification, description, and classification of the varieties of gnostic wisdom have proven to be notoriously difficult tasks.¹ Different attempts, both ancient and modern, to impose clear distinctions on the gnostic saying and its literary neighbors are often too vague or arbitrary to be of use in categorizing given

¹ For some broader and more recent treatments of the issues involved in the investigation of gnostic communication see Heinz Krüger, *Studien über den Aphorismus als philosophische Form* (Frankfurt am Main: Nest, 1957); Joseph P. Stern, *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1959); Archer Taylor, *The Proverb and an Index to the Proverb* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates; Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1962²); Gerhard Neumann, ed., *Der Aphorismus: Zur Geschichte, zu den Formen und Möglichkeiten einer literarischen Gattung* (WF 356; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976); Lutz Röhrich and Wolfgang Mieder, *Sprichwort* (Realien zur Literatur; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1977). While such studies possess a decidedly modern vantage-point they are still of use in comprehending the functions of ancient gnostic wisdom and will be cited on occasion in the discussion that follows.

forms or in understanding precisely what an author may have intended by a saying. Generally speaking, any investigation of gnostic wisdom must take into account a host of ambiguities associated with creating and applying precise generic or functional definitions. Frequently it is impossible to render a firm decision regarding the form and purpose of a particular saying, and careful analysis must allow for qualifications and complexities in its descriptions as well as a certain degree of indefiniteness.

Such interpretive complications arise in part from the fact that sententious sayings participate in a wide arena of literary and cultural conventions, and these must be examined in order to grasp the complexities of the gnostic style. An additional problem is the great flexibility gnostic sayings demonstrate rhetorically. On account of the utility and compactness of gnostic sayings, generally they are free to roam from their original or intended context and enjoy the potential to operate in new and varying literary and social settings. More than other forms, for the gnostic saying context is determinative for meaning. Thus we must be sensitive to the functional and hermeneutical flexibility that gnostic communication exhibits; determinations regarding identity and purpose for a certain saying in one rhetorical situation do not necessarily hold true when it is incorporated into a different one. And so as a guideline for the study of gnostic texts it seems more constructive to concentrate on the sorts of exegetical methods and critical questions that must be brought to bear in a particular investigation rather than to insist on rigorously-defined genres or hard-and-fast functional distinctions.

In this chapter and the next we will examine some of these critical questions, particularly as they apply to the sapiential literature of the Hellenistic era, in order to understand better the ideas and methods that accompanied the formulation of gnostic wisdom in Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity. While it is important to take into account the width and breadth of wisdom literature in the ancient world and the broader background against which Paul and other early Christians wrote, the focus is on those aspects of gnostic wisdom that will best inform the investigation of Romans 12, as well as of the expectations that Paul's audience in Rome may have brought to their reading of the chapter. Qualifications of this sort are crucial since the form and function of gnostic sayings are to a large extent based upon material assumptions peculiar to the cultural and moral environment within which they are created and used. Every instance of gnostic wisdom presupposes both certain shared ethical concepts and experiences, as well as certain principles regarding the appropriate content, circumstances, and goals of the gnostic style. As critics, we must be aware of these presuppositions as they apply to a specific document, author, group, culture, language, or time. Consequently, the discussions that

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