

What can we learn from Scholarship on *The Concept of Our Great Power* (CG VI, 4)

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We often turn to secondary sources in order to learn something about a particular text and how it has been approached by other scholars. What I am proposing here is something a little different. Rather than look to articles and books to help develop a detailed analysis of *The Concept of Our Great Power* [CGP] or an extensive summary of the academic work done on it, I would like to explore how attempts to understand this text using standard interpretive categories and techniques raise warning flags about how we study early Christianity in general. In other words, my focus will be on the nature of scholarship on this particular text, and its implications for scholars of early Christianity.

Let me start, though, by introducing this lesser known text and the scholarly points of debate that have arisen around it over the last thirty years.

CGP is a relatively short document comprising 13.5 manuscript pages of Coptic text, or about 2200 words in English translation. It is the fourth essay in what is now called Book 6 of the Nag Hammadi library. What is the story line? The “Great Power” speaks throughout, allusively, poetically, explaining how the world came to be, what the high points of human history have been, and what will happen to people when the current state of affairs comes to an end. The insiders are admonished to remain morally righteous in order to reap the rewards that await them. They are also made to appreciate the broad scale of cosmic history in which they find themselves. Their side, so to speak, includes notables like Noah and Jesus, who, with others, have participated in a world marked by three periods, especially their dramatic ends: the first period left only Noah and a few others floating; the second concluded with a changed world after Jesus’s confrontation with the lesser powers; and the third will terminate with the destruction of the world as we know it. The final years of this third age will be

filled with turmoil and false teachers, but the dénouement will see the pure protected and the rest purified.

Like other Nag Hammadi documents, the scholarly attention *CGP* has received to date—actually very little compared to most other documents—has addressed both typical and idiosyncratic issues. As expected, there are now a few critical editions (Cherix 1982; Fischer 1973; Krause and Labib 1971; F. E. Williams 2001; Wisse and Williams 1979), translations (Lüdemann and Janßen 1997; Williams, Wisse and Parrott 1977, 1988), and encyclopedia articles (Bruns 1998; Goehring 1992; Howard 1990; Scopello 1991), expanding on the early narrative summaries (Berliner Arbeitskreis 1973; Colpe 1972). Also as expected, scholars have explored the nature of the Coptic text (Cherix 1993; Facsimile edition 1972; Funk 1995; Robinson 1979; Schenke 1985), *CGP*'s possible links with other Nag Hammadi documents (Poirier 1995b; M. A. Williams 1992, 1995), and its dependence on biblical literature in general (Bethge 1980; Evans, Webb and Wiebe 1993; Tuckett 1986). Many have also debated whether *CGP* is internally coherent, or should instead be seen as the slightly confused end product of a long process of redaction and translation.¹ Finally, given the narrative content, it is not surprising to see considerable attention devoted to situating *CGP* within a Christian apocalyptic trajectory (Attridge 2000; Collins 1979; Daley 1991, 1998; Fallon 1979; Irmscher 1995; Janssens 1985; Kippenberg 1983; Krause 1983; MacRae 1983; Rosenstiehl 1983; Rudolph 1983; Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; Scholten 1987; Wisse 1981).

In addition to these issues, three others have arisen that are more particular to the study of this document. The first concerns the meaning of the word *anhomoion*, which occurs in the following sentence: "Cease from the wicked lusts and desires, from these *anhomoion*, wicked opinions that have no basis" (40, 5–9). The scholarly debate here centres on whether *anhomoion* should be translated rather literally as "dissimilar/disparate things," or as "Anomoeans," a reference to the late fourth-century group of Arians who believed that the Son was completely unlike the Father (Gero 1986; Khosroyev 1995; Koschorke 1978; Mahé 1978, 1982; Pearson 1975; Poirier 1995a; Wisse 1971; Wisse and Williams 1979). The second distinctive issue concerns the appearance of the number 1468 in one place in the text (46,27–28) to designate the length of time during which the non-enlightened will be punished before they are purified. The presence of the same number

for a similar idea in Manichaean literature has led to speculations about possible links between *CGP* and Manichaeism (Colpe 1972; Khosroyev 1995).² The third issue concerns the possibility that *CGP* engages Simonian thought, even though Simon Magus himself is not mentioned explicitly anywhere in the text (Cherix 1982; Fisher 1973; Koschorke 1978; Rudolph 1983; Schenke 1987; F. E. Williams 2001).

Now let me turn to my central point by exploring three of these scholarly topics, in order to develop some of the broader implications for the study of early Christianity.

Apocalypticism is the first topic. When it comes to the application of this topic to the Nag Hammadi documents, one scholarly practice has been to start with the five documents that describe themselves as apocalypses—the *Apocalypse of Paul* (V,2), the two apocalypses of James (V,3-4), the *Apocalypse of Adam* (V,5) and the *Apocalypse of Peter* (VII,3)—then see whether others in this collection show enough similarities to be included in this group. Irmscher (1995) and Rosenstiehl (1983), for instance, have approached *CGP* in this manner, in the end including it in the apocalyptic mix.

The more common practice, though, has been to start with a recognized model of what comprises an apocalyptic text, then see to what extent *CGP* accords with it. Collins (1979), Vielhauer (1964) and Carmignac (1979), as it turns out, have produced the most widely followed models. *CGP* typically gets considered in these discussions. Since the models differ, and since *CGP* does not contain all the features listed in the scholarly models, not all scholars agree on *CGP*'s degree of apocalyptic purity, so to speak. Fallon (1979, 125), for instance, places this text under a secondary, "related," group, while others consider it a full-fledged apocalypse (e.g., Janssens 1985; Krause 1983).

Two lessons emerge from these studies on the apocalyptic nature of *CGP*. The first concerns the dangers inherent in categorizing. Understanding, of course, often starts by categorizing, which itself is a comparative exercise. We try to make sense of something unknown by fitting it into a pre-established frame. "Apocalyptic" is an example of such a category, while *CGP* represents data to be included in it. But there are dangers. One concerns the validity of that comparative category itself, raising questions about how much attention we should devote to it. In this case, while it may be useful to appreciate how many texts in the ancient world share certain apocalyptic characteristics, it is not always clear how useful it is to group texts by this form when

they might otherwise have little to do with one another in thought, setting, or intent. Another danger is this: studies that touch on *CGP*'s apocalyptic links are far more interested in refining typologies than they are in making sense of the text itself. Not one of them, for instance, asks the obvious question: if *CGP* is in fact an apocalyptic text, how does that information help us make more sense of it? In other words, the main focus is placed on the external category, not the text at hand; put another way, the menu becomes the meal.

A second, related lesson to be learned from the way scholars have situated *CGP* within studies on apocalypticism is that scholarship often entails replacing insider with outsider terms. In this case, some self-described apocalypses, such as the first and second apocalypses of James, are not thought to be "real" apocalypses, while others that don't identify themselves as such are. The implication, here and elsewhere, is that self-designation is less important than scholarly designation when it comes to categorizing texts. Scholars know best. We do this all the time, of course, often for good reason; scholarship, after all, involves placing insider perspectives into a broader context. But the dangers in doing so ought not to be forgotten. The most obvious one is that, in the context of an ideal interpretive strategy in which questioning rises and falls with each category construction, the broader frame—in this case the literary construct "apocalyptic"—will begin to dictate how we understand new cases, making it difficult to see something new.

What, then, should we keep in mind concerning apocalypticism? It is the recognition that scholarship raises the spectre of interpreters placing themselves and their categories above the data they examine, or at best making the data accord with preestablished categories.

The second area to have caught the attention of scholars working on *CGP* is docetism. This interest is not surprising. We know that early Christian theologians devoted a lot of attention to Jesus. Was he fully divine, fully human, or mixed in nature? We also know the outcome—for most, Jesus came to be considered both fully human and fully divine—and some of the dissenting opinions, each of which existed in multiple forms. Docetism, for instance, stressed Jesus's divinity: he might have seemed to be human, the argument goes, but in fact he was essentially divine in nature; he never was *really* human, he never *really* suffered. Arianism, conversely, insisted that Jesus was not God by nature.

Another well-known piece of information is this: the heresiologists accused the gnostics of docetism, a view that receives at least partial support from some Nag Hammadi documents such as the *Treatise on the Resurrection* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. So it is not surprising that scholars should concern themselves with what *CGP* has to say about Jesus's nature.

The text itself, as it turns out, does offer something of interest on this question, although the information is ambiguous. Jesus, for instance, is never named in *CGP*, but there are enough allusions to the canonical Jesus stories to recognize that he plays a key role in the narrative. That is to say, we encounter a figure who "knows the Great Power," speaks in parables, is betrayed by a follower, puts the ruler of Hades to shame, and shows himself victorious in the end (40,31–42,21). Running through this description is a docetic strand. For instance, the ruler of Hades, to his frustration, finds that the nature of Jesus's flesh "could not be seized" (41,32–42,2). In addition, the text notes that Jesus spoke to, perhaps through, Noah in a previous age (41,1–3); in other words, Jesus existed before—perhaps even in a different physical state.

Careful analysis of this Jesus figure, however, has not been the main interest of scholars. Rather, attention has been directed to the word *anhomoion*, and the possibility that *CGP* polemicizes against the Anomoeans. Scholarly opinion has been sharply divided on whether the word in fact can be taken to refer to this fourth century group; recent studies suggest that *anhomoion* is perhaps best translated simply as "disparate things" (Khosroyev 1995; Poirer 1995a; F. E. Williams 2001).³ What seems to have been forgotten, though, is this: even if it were possible to prove that *anhomoion* is a reference to the Anomoeans, that information would not do much to explain the text itself, including the nature of the putative polemic, or the date of the text since the reference could simply be a gloss.

What, then, can be learned from these scholarly concerns about docetism? One lesson is that outside interests again displace attempts to make sense of the text itself. We also see a very minor issue take on proportionately more coverage than it merits.⁴ The odd, the idiosyncratic, so often captures our interest, at the expense of the normal.⁵

The third scholarly topic concerns two interconnected issues. One is the text's internal coherence: does *CGP* make sense as it is, and if not, what might account for the disjunctions? The other is whether

allusions to Simon Magus can be found buried in the narrative as it now stands.

The first issue has been framed around the fact that, while most scholars have found certain sections of the narrative difficult to understand, the first close study of *CGP*, by Cherix in 1982, declared it to be “un exposé tout à fait cohérent” (4). Is it fully consistent, then, or not? Williams’s 2001 study, the outcome of 20 years of work by him on this text, answers this question in the negative, and posits a complex resolution. In his view, *CGP* is not coherent as it stands, but if we reconstruct the textual history it makes perfect sense. Williams’s reconstruction assumes three stages. Stage 1 is “a non-Christian *Grundschrift*, probably the work of Greek-speaking Samaritans or Jewish Gnostics” (xiii). This stage, he suggests, quotes from an earlier, oracular document, and “may be a late, revisionist product of the Simonian school” (xiv). Stage 2 adds two homilies by Gnostic Christians (40,24–43,2; 43,29–44,11; 44,31–45,27). Stage 3 includes glosses and other additions (43,13–29; 44,13–31). In other words, what we have on the part of Williams is coherence imposed on the text through stratification.

The second, related issue concerns *CGP*’s possible links with Simonian thought, especially as presented by Hippolytus (*Haer.* 6.9–18).⁶ Curiously, scholars have taken two positions here. Some have argued that *CGP* reflects a pro-Simonian stance. Cherix (1982, 5) forms one end of this discussion, Williams (2001, l–lviii) the other. On the other hand, a few have posited an anti-Simonian component to *CGP*, noting that the Antichrist-like figure who appears on page 44 sounds a lot like Hippolytus’s Simon Magus.⁷

What can we learn from these studies? Once again we see that more energy has been placed on following allusive leads than it has on discerning the text at hand. Indeed, from the 100-or-so-piece puzzle of the enigmatic Simon Magus come six or seven matching pieces in *CGP*—not even enough to decide whether the match is sufficient to fix a relationship, or whether the pieces support or denounce Simon Magus. Despite these problems, scholars keep returning to the issue, mainly because studies on Simon Magus (and the Antichrist) continue to be written, requiring new data. In other words, the focus typically is on Simon Magus studies, not on making more sense internally of *CGP*.

Note too how Williams includes Simon Magus in his reconstruction. What is his solution to making sense of a complex document? He assumes that the interpretive difficulties arise from a series of stages in which texts have been stitched together a bit roughly in spots. To be sure, Williams is not the only scholar of early Christianity to think in this manner. Can modern NT Gospel studies be imagined in any other way—including the stratification of Q, itself a hypothetical document?

What is the result? The stratification approach reduces the value of what is in front of us, giving priority instead to what we've constructed. It also tends to place more importance on earlier sources, considering the culmination as a less-than-perfect end product that hides important earlier information. Earlier is more interesting. In this case, possible links to Simon Magus drive the quest.

This approach also seeks to understand by means of simplification. Although the reconstructions usually assume multiple stages and a great deal of literary complexity, scholars set out to bring clarity and order to this complexity. What formerly seemed chaotic has now been tamed. To what end? The messiness of texts, the messiness of life itself, gets cleaned up. But much is lost in the process, including our struggles to make sense of authors whose worldviews would likely have seemed coherent to them at least. Stratification, therefore, is fraught with difficulties. While it makes sense to assume that almost all the documents in the ancient world went through stages of development before they reached us, reconstructing these stages is an imaginative process of the highest order—one where the imagined product threatens to take on more life than the extant text itself, and where the reconstruction artificially simplifies each stratum in order to distinguish them effectively.

In conclusion, what then can we learn from scholarship on *The Concept of Our Great Power*? One thing is certain, and unsurprising: our academic interests play a large part in the questions we ask of a text and the answers we find. Since those interests have been shaped over time, through engagements with other scholars and day-to-day academic constraints, it is natural that when we are faced with a new text such as *CGP* we should bring some of those outside concerns to bear on the data. There's nothing wrong with this. One danger inherent in this normal hermeneutical process, though, is that we usually do not lay our interests on the table, pretending instead to have discovered *was*

eigentlich geschehen ist. Another is that we sometimes fail to appreciate the distinctive characteristics of what we are examining. To use a metaphor: we drag our nets in search of specific food to take home, rather than descending into the depths with scuba gear to explore.

What makes *CGP* so very compelling in that regard, at least when I immerse myself in it, is its exhortatory nature. This document is not primarily about apocalypticism, docetism, or prosaic coherence. Nor would we likely be much closer to understanding it if we could date it or mate it. Rather, the text encourages listeners to reflect deeply on the saving words of the Great Power, enticing us through metaphor, allegory and poetry to know her. A taste of that encouragement can be had by listening to its opening lines, provided here by Fred Wisse, whose translation of this text has guided the English-speaking world for the last quarter century (1988, 312):

He who will know our great Power will become invisible, and fire will not be able to consume him. But it will purge and destroy all of your possessions. For everyone in whom my form will appear will be saved, from (the age of) seven days up to one hundred and twenty years. (Those) whom I constrained to gather all that is fallen—and the writings of our great Power, in order that he may inscribe your name in our great light—and their thoughts and their works may be ended, that they may be purged, and be scattered and be destroyed, and be gathered in the place which no one in it sees. But you will see me, and you will prepare your dwelling places in our great Power.

Here, to be sure, is an invitation that expects a personal response from initiates and would-be initiates alike, while presenting others with significant interpretive challenges. *CGP* is not alone in that regard. Its opening words call to mind the introductory comment of the Gospel of Thomas: “Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death” (II,32, 13-14). Immortality and invisibility—grand aspirations, indeed, that continue to elude most scholars at least.

Notes

1. Two opposing positions are Cherix (1982), arguing for *CGP*’s coherence, and F. E. Williams (2001), positing layers of textual development.

2. For a Manichaean example, see *Kephalaia* 75,20–24, which F. E. Williams reproduces (2001, 179, n. 249): “[The f]ourth is the dissolution when they will dissolve the universe [th]ere, and all things are destroyed. Obliteration [reaches] them in that great fire, [which wi]ll burn them for fourteen [hundred] and sixty-eight years.”
3. Wisse, in an early publication (1971, 208), suggested using Anomaeans—to which he assumed *CGP* pointed—as a dating method for the entire Nag Hammadi corpus.
4. Another example is the number 1468, which only comes up once in our document but occurs in several studies because of its possible connections to Manichaeism. The number 120, however, comes up three times in *CGP*, with clear symbolic significance, but it generates almost no mention by reviewers.
5. Something Keith Hopkins (1990, 625) in another context has felicitously called the “Irish dwarf” syndrome, that is, “a tendency to report the exception” while overlooking the ordinary.
6. F. E. Williams (2001, 203–53) collects all the relevant sources in several appendices.
7. The first to note this is Fisher (1973, 173), who subtitles 44,10–29: “The Appearance of the Antichrist in the Image of Nero redivivus—and Simon Magus?” Fisher is quoted by Koschorke (1978, 164) and Schenke (1987, 12), who both leave the possibility dangling.

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