

RBL 07/2003



**Funk, Wolf-Peter, Paul-Hubert Poirier, and John D. Turner**

*Marsanès (NH X)*

Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi Section  
«Textes» 27

Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval; Leuven:  
Peeters; 2000. Pp. xvi + 500. Paper. CAN \$50.00; EUR  
95,00. ISBN 9042908556.

Timothy Pettipiece

Université Laval Québec  
Canada, G1K 7P4

*Marsanès* constitutes the twenty-seventh volume in the «Textes» section of the long-running francophone initiative, la Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi (BCNH), currently directed by Wolf-Peter Funk, Louis Painchaud, and Paul-Hubert Poirier of Université Laval in Quebec City, Canada. Like many texts from the Nag Hammadi Codices, this one, due to its poor state of preservation as well as its significance for the history of gnostic literature, requires a collaborative effort. It is the product of three key members of the BCNH team: Wolf-Peter Funk, who established the Coptic text and indices; Paul-Hubert Poirier, who produced a French translation and commentary; and John D. Turner of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who contributed an extensive introduction in English.

The BCNH edition of *Marsanès* has provided a much needed update of Pearson's (Nag Hammadi Studies 15, 1981) edition of the same text. At the core of this new edition is an improved Coptic text, established by the renowned Coptologist Wolf-Peter Funk. The degree to which Funk's readings make the text more comprehensible is obvious from the first page. As is typical of the BCNH, the Coptic text is presented in a format that respects the integrity of each papyrus page (including lacunae), thereby more accurately representing the manuscript

(see 249). This format is also aided by the fact that, unlike Pearson's edition, which provides a running commentary at the bottom of each page, here the commentary is placed separately in a section. Thus, the *apparatus criticus* is allowed to complement the Coptic text, and a generous amount of space is allotted for a fuller commentary. In addition, Funk has provided a more complete set of indices registering all Graeco-Coptic, Coptic, proper names, and grammatical elements, including conjugation and *PTN* forms. In this way, the BCNH edition is of equal value to philologists and scholars of Gnosticism.

Paul-Hubert Poirier's translation and commentary are a strong contribution to this volume. The French translation is clear and readable, making full use of the improved readings provided by Funk, while the line-by-line commentary displays Poirier's typically erudite analysis. Poirier's comments are rich with comparisons between gnostic, Platonic, and patristic sources and are supported by a deep and up-to-date knowledge of the scholarly literature. As a result, many of the most obscure aspects of *Marsanes* are greatly illuminated.

The third element of this collaborative work is a lengthy introduction provided by John Turner, who explores in great detail numerous aspects of this "Sethian" text. Ever since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC) in 1945 there has been much attention given to the delineation of their "Sethian corpus." Influential articles by Hans-Martin Schenke and others have produced the hypothesis that *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III, 1; IV,1; BG 8502,2), *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4), *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III,2; IV,2), *The Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V,5), *The Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII,5), *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII,1), *Melchizedek* (NHC IX,1), *The Thought of Norea* (NHC IX,2), *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3), *The Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1), and *Marsanes* (NHC X,1; see 155–56) constitute a set of writings produced by a group known as the "seed of Seth" or Sethians. Following the lead of Schenke, Turner situates *Marsanes* within the context of this Sethian literature (155). In particular, Turner classifies *Marsanes* among the "Platonizing" Sethian treatises such as *Allogenes* and *Zostrianos* (169).

According to Turner, *Marsanes* is a revelatory treatise expressing the doctrines of a certain Syrian prophet named Marsanes. While Birger Pearson considered its genre an "apocalypse," Turner's detailed analysis (23–39) suggests it ought to be considered a "revelatory discourse," since it lacks a "genuine cosmic apocalyptic eschatology" (38). For Turner, the basic function of the treatise is a type of "spiritual *paideia* culminating in enlightenment and therefore salvation" (38). In addition to the study of the genre and the "Dramatis Personae" (1–12), Turner

provides a "Summary of Content" (12–23) and erudite treatments of "Mythology and Ritual Practice" (39–81), "The Divine and Cosmic Hierarchy" (81–133), "The Structure of the Visionary Ascent" (134–54), "The Sethian Context" (155–74), "The Platonic Context" (175–230), and "Significance and Originality" (230–48) as related to *Marsanes*. With his lengthy introduction, Turner surrounds this elusive and lacunous text with an intricate discussions of various currents from contemporaneous gnostic and Platonic subcultures, in the hope that a clearer shape of this "Platonizing" Sethian treatise will emerge. Comparisons are made with other Nag Hammadi writings such as *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*, as well as with Platonists such as Moderatus of Gades, Theodore of Asine, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus.

Turner's detailed comparative analysis, however, does not always lead to definitive conclusions. For instance, the chart offered by Turner that compares the "systems" of *Marsanes*, Iamblichus, and Theodore of Asine (230) intends to display the parallel structures of these three "systems," yet it is not exactly clear where such parallels are actually found. Turner even states that while "the correspondences between ontological levels in *Marsanes*, Theodore, and to a lesser extent in Iamblichus, are not exact and exhibit clear terminological differences, there is enough structural resemblance to consider *Marsanes* as a product of the same conceptual climate in which these two professional Platonists constructed their systems" (229). Yet if the proposed parallels constitute only "structural resemblance," can we confidently say they result from anything more than the intellectual atmosphere of the time? If not, then the utility of such detailed comparison of systems could be called into question. In fact, Turner himself concludes that "the author of *Marsanes* was certainly no direct pupil of either [Theodore or Iamblichus]," but "nevertheless may well have possessed a *general impression* of their doctrines by way of *popular discussion* and the study of *various sources*" (229, emphasis added). Perhaps it is useful to keep in mind the fact that, according to Porphyry, those Christians who promoted the revelations of Zostrianos and Allogenes among the circle of Plotinus are said to have "abandoned the old philosophy" and to have believed that Plato "failed to penetrate into the depth of Intellectual Being" (*Life of Plotinus* 16). Indeed, Porphyry seems to portray these individuals more as agitators than disciples. Should we really, then, attempt to read a Platonism into these treatises that results from more than the adaptation of common themes and structures that would have been available to anyone educated in philosophy?

As for the length and structure of Turner's introduction, I would have preferred a somewhat streamlined version, consisting of "I. Introduction" (1–12), "II.

Summary of Content" (12–23), "III. Genre" (23–39), "VI. The Structure of the Visionary Ascent" (134–54), and "IX. Significance and Originality" (230–38), with sections V, VII, and VIII omitted or assimilated into the footnotes. For instance, the highly technical discussion of "Theurgical Tendencies" in section IV.C (54–81) could have been footnoted into the more concise discussion of "Sethian Theurgy" in IX.A (231–34). The same could be said for section V, "The Divine and Cosmic Hierarchy" (81–133), since it is more clearly reprieved later in section IX.B, "Modifications of the Divine Hierarchy" (234–43). In this way, the length of the introduction could have been reduced from 248 to around 100 pages.

As it stands, Turner's introduction would perhaps work better as a companion volume to the critical edition of the Coptic text. Such a division or abbreviation would have been desirable since, in my view, one of the most admirable aspects of the BCNH series has always been its relative accessibility. Few volumes in the «Textes» series cost more than \$20 or \$30 CAN, which enables them to be easily procured not only by specialists in the field but by students and anyone interested in Gnosticism or Coptic literature. It should go without saying that quality editions of Coptic texts need to be made more readily available. All in all, the BCNH edition of *Marsanès* provides a diverse and balanced approach to a very difficult text and ought to find a place on the shelf of anyone interested in gnostic literature and the Nag Hammadi Codices.