



Demons, Adversaries, Devils, Fishermen: The Asceticism of "Authoritative Teaching" (NHL, VI, 3) in the Context of Roman Asceticism

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Demons, Adversaries, Devils, Fishermen: The Asceticism of *Authoritative Teaching* (NHL, VI, 3) in the Context of Roman Asceticism*

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Roman asceticism, developed by such important philosophical and intellectual leaders as Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and the Cynics, comes to center stage in the first and second centuries C.E.¹ The particular varieties of Roman asceticism developed during the imperial period hold many things in common:² a typically Roman interest in what modern scholars would call lived religion,³ that is, a concern for the practice as well as the theory of ethical and philosophical living;⁴ an orientation toward the practice of virtue and the avoidance of vice; a problematizing of the dominant social and political society and a resistance to full participation in normative society; a use of a wide variety of literary and philosophical

*I dedicate this article to Fr. George MacRae, SJ., mentor, scholar, teacher, and friend with whom I studied at Episcopal Theological School/Weston School of Theology and then later at Harvard University.

¹ There is as yet no history of Roman asceticism. Some older preliminary studies exist. See Joseph Ward Swain, "The Hellenic Origins of Christian Asceticism" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1916); Hermigild Dressler, *The Usage of 'Ασκηω and Its Cognates in Greek Documents to 100 A.D.*, Catholic University of America Patristic Series no. 73 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947).

² The elements in this list are my own compilation based on a reading of original documents. My thinking has been particularly influenced by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé's *L'ascèse cynique: Un commentaire de Diogène Laërce VI 70–71*, *Histoire des doctrines de l'antiquité classique* no. 10 (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1986), and her "Le cynisme à l'époque impériale," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römische Welt II* 36, no. 4 (1990): 2720–2833. Although I do not fully endorse the perspectives and conclusions, I have also benefited from Pierre Hadot's, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

³ See Hadot, pp. 49–70.

⁴ See Musonius Rufus, "Discourse 5" on theory and practice; Epictetus, "Discourse 3.12," on asceticism.

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genres (such as diatribes,⁵ biographies,⁶ *chreiai*,⁷ epistles,⁸ and *gnomologia*⁹) to develop their ascetical systems; and a yoking of ascetical practice and education of youths (often both male and female). Immersed in Roman practicality and Greek philosophical traditions, Roman intellectual leaders of the imperial period energetically turned their minds to ascetical concerns.

The central role of asceticism in Roman religious and philosophical life has often been obscured by scholars of Western civilization who assume that asceticism is primarily a Christian phenomenon in the West. Long before the emergence of Christian asceticism, however, many Roman philosophers of a wide variety proposed sophisticated systems of ascetical formation. The ascetical agenda of the Cynics is well attested both in ancient and modern literature.¹⁰ But there were other systems as well. Musonius Rufus and Epictetus, his student, both present diatribes “concerning asceticism,” in which they lay out their own system of asceticism. James Francis’s study of the Roman ascetics of the second century shows the pervasive interest in matters ascetical among a wide variety of Romans, including the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius.¹¹ The later Roman philosophical ascetics Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus build on this long tradition of Roman ascetical theory and further develop systems of asceticism by blending Stoic and Cynic interests in neo-Platonic philosophical categories. These all attest to the emergence and development

⁵ Preminent are those of Musonius Rufus and Epictetus, among many others.

⁶ See, e.g., Porphyry’s “Life and Works of Plotinus,” Philostratus’s biography of Apollonius of Tyana, and Lucian’s biography of Peregrinus.

⁷ Diogenes Laertius’s compendium is replete with *chreiai*. For the sources, see Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O’Neil, ed. and trans. *The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric*, vol. 1, *The “Progymnasmata,”* Society for Biblical Literature Texts and Translations, no. 27, Graeco-Roman Religion Series no. 9 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

⁸ I am thinking especially of the Cynic epistles; see Harold W. Attridge, *First Century Cynicism in the Epistles of Heraclitus*, Harvard Theological Studies no. 29 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976); and Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles: A Study Edition*, Society for Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study no. 12 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1997).

⁹ See Henry Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus: A Contribution to the History of Early Christian Ethics*, Texts and Studies no. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), esp. pp. ix–xii, 97–106.

¹⁰ See Goulet-Cazé, *L’ascèse cynique* and “Le cynisme à l’époque impériale,” as well as the superb collection of essays in R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, eds., *The Cynics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), esp. pp. 1–27; Luis E. Navia, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study*, Contributions in Philosophy no. 58 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), pp. 145–92; the various essays in Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and Richard Goulet, eds., *Le cynisme ancien et ses prolongements: Actes du colloque international du CNRS (Paris, 22–25 juillet 1991)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993); Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the Sixth Century A.D.* (1937; reprint, New York: Gordon Press, 1974).

¹¹ James A. Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

of Roman ascetical systems long before the more thoroughly researched Late Antique Christian systems.

The Nag Hammadi treatise *Authoritative Teaching* is part of this Roman tradition of ascetical speculation. Although the treatise was discovered as part of a collection of texts probably produced in a Christian monastery, the *Authoritative Teaching* is not (as will be discussed) a Christian or even a Gnostic text. It is one of the few Nag Hammadi treatises of Roman philosophical and literary texts, which include a translation of a selection of Homer and a selection of the *Sentences of Sextus*. Because of its association with this so-called Gnostic library, the *Authoritative Teaching* has received scant recent study.¹² It has never been studied as part of the Roman ascetical tradition.

A summary of scholarly work on the *Authoritative Teaching* indicates how little this treatise has been incorporated into the religious and philosophical literature of the first three centuries C.E. George MacRae, to whose memory this article is dedicated, was the first scholar thoroughly to present this treatise to the academic world. He understood his work of establishing the text and rendering an initial translation as the foundation for future scholars' work in integrating this and other Nag Hammadi treatises into the intellectual and scholarly mainstream of early Christian and Late Antique religious studies. He himself began this integrative function by correlating his own research on the *Authoritative Teaching* to the literature on the soul that A. J. Festugière, the great scholar of the history of religions, outlined in his third volume of *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*.¹³ R. van den Broek continued this scholarly tradition in his important article about the connection of the *Authoritative Teaching* with Platonic thought.¹⁴ Jacques Ménard provided another critical edition and the first complete commentary on the treatise.¹⁵ All of these initial investigations attempted to understand the *Authoritative Teaching* by comparison with parallel literature of the Roman Hellenistic period.

This article builds on earlier scholarship and attempts to locate the *Authoritative Teaching* in the context of Roman ascetical theorizing. First, I

¹² The whole question of Gnosticism has been called into question by Michael Williams in *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹³ George W. MacRae, S.J., "A Nag Hammadi Tractate on the Soul," in *Ex orbe religionem: Studia Geo Widengren, Studies in the History of Religions, Supplements to Numen*, vols. 21–22 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 1:471–79; A. J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste: III Les doctrines de l'âme* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1983).

¹⁴ R. Van den Broek, "The Authentikos Logos: A New Document of Christian Platonism," *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979): 260–82.

¹⁵ Jacques Ménard, *L'authentikos logos: Texte établi et présenté*, Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi, textes, 2 (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1977).

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will develop the ascetical theorizing. First, I will develop the ascetical theology articulated in the treatise with general reference to the first recorded ascetical theorist, Musonius Rufus.¹⁶ This part simply provides an ascetical reading of the text with some reference to an earlier Roman ascetical theorist in order to establish general connections between the *Authoritative Teaching* and earlier ascetical traditions. Then I will develop a general scheme for the gradual development of Roman ascetical theory in the first three centuries C.E. and locate the *Authoritative Teaching* within that evolving ascetical theoretical discourse.

THE ASCETICAL THEOLOGY OF THE *AUTHORITATIVE TEACHING*

The ascetical theology of the *Authoritative Teaching* may be developed from three different perspectives: the structure of the treatise and the way that arguments have been located in sequence; the content of the treatise with its emphasis on the ascetical contest and the program of ascent of the mind; and the negative function, which describes the ascetical program from the perspective of impediments to progress. Each of these perspectives will be explored and then compared, where possible, with the ascetical theorizing of Musonius Rufus.

The content of the treatise, despite its seams, displays a coherent pattern. Overall, it moves from the question of the embodiment of the soul of righteousness, through the establishment by the Father of an ἀγών (contest), to a description of the state of the contestants, and it ends with a description of the fate of the successful contestant. In this broad overview, the ascetical dimension of the treatise seems obvious.

A closer look at the unfolding of the argument in the treatise confirms this observation. The treatise begins with a description of the embodiment of the soul of righteousness which presents a variety of themes such as the soul's root and family and the role of the vices and materiality to the soul. Here the *Authoritative Teaching* emphasizes that the materiality of the soul makes it subject to lust (ἐπιθυμία) and "the outsiders (ἄλλοτριάτοι)—for the possessions (χρῆμα) of the outsiders (ἄλλοτριάτοι) are proud passions (πάθος), the pleasures (ἡδονή) of life (βίος), hateful envies (ἔκρωσις)

¹⁶ Throughout this article, I use the text and translation of Musonius's corpus by Cora E. Lutz, *Musonius Rufus: "The Roman Socrates,"* Yale Classical Studies no. 10 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1947). The quotations, unless otherwise annotated, are taken from "Discourse VI" (ΠΕΡΙ ΑΣΚΗΣΕΩΣ), "On Training," pp. 52–57 (this is an enface edition with the Greek text on the even pages. Henceforth, location information will be provided in parentheses in the text.) Since we have nothing from Musonius's own pen, Lutz's edition and translation brings together all of the discourses of Musonius summarized by Lucius, as well as the fragments preserved in Epictetus, Plutarch, Aulus Gellius, and Aelius Aristides. "Discourse 6" is part of the collection written down by Lucius and preserved in Stobaeus's *Anthology*, bk. 3, secs. 29, 78.

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ἥμοστε), vainglorious things (πέρπερος), nonsensical things (φλύαρος), accusations (κατηγορία)” (22:8–23:34). A lacuna in the text ends the list of vices. Musonius also takes up the question of embodiment, arguing that “the human being is not soul alone, nor body alone, but a kind of synthesis of the two” (Lutz VI, pp. 53, 55, 54 [lines 2–3]) with the proviso that the ascetic must attend to both. His virtues, however, come from the philosophical tradition: the ascetic must practice to be temperate (σώφρων), just (δίκαιος), courageous (ἀνδρείος), and prudent (φρόνιμος). Both of these ascetical systems revolve about the attainment of specific and articulated virtues through physical training, a training made necessary by the human condition of embodiment.

The second section of the *Authoritative Teaching* describes the contamination of the soul (24:6–25:6a) through a variety of different metaphors, such as being placed in a brothel (ψαυωονε[ς ἡμνο]ἄρ ἐπιπορνιον [πορνεῖον]), falling into drunken debauchery (ἡ οὐμῆτσαγ αα ἡρηι ἡ οὐμῆτωνα), falling into bestiality (ααωωπε ἡ οὐμῆττῆνη), and the mixing of wheat and chaff, a curious metaphor for the contamination of good with evil. Musonius Rufus also describes the contamination of the human being that comes through evil socialization. Musonius speaks of “the depravity which has become implanted in us straight from childhood because of the evil habits engendered by this depravity” (Lutz VI, pp. 53, 52 [lines 28–32]). He argues, as well, that the philosopher in particular needs to retrain the self from this depravity: “men who enter the other professions [i.e., medicine and music] have not had their souls corrupted beforehand and have not learned the opposite of what they are going to be taught, but the ones who start out to study philosophy have been born and reared in an environment filled with corruption and evil.”¹⁷ Again, both these systems postulate a depraved human condition that forms the basis for ascetical activity.

The third section (25:26b–26:19) of the *Authoritative Teaching*, for which the first two sections carefully prepare, describes the appearance of the Father and his setting up of a contest, an ἀγών, for the people.¹⁸ The contestants are required to progress beyond existent things and advance toward the Inscrutable One (αγια τῆρετῆ). This section, which will be discussed in more detail later, sets the stage for the ascetical effort of those established as contestants. Although Musonius does not develop a system based on a theology of the work of the Creator of the universe, as do many later neo-Platonists, he nevertheless puts a contest at the center of his ascetical system. Musonius’s contest revolves about the destruction of

¹⁷ On Musonius’s doctrine of moral illness, see Lutz, pp. 27–28.

¹⁸ This section begins at what appears to be a seam in the text; see MacRae, “A Nag Hammadi Tractate,” p. 473.

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evil habits to which the ascetic has been socialized from his youth and to the acquiring of habits consistent with his virtuous goals. He recognizes the role of bodily training, on the model of training for an athletic exercise, as a suitable means of ascetical formation: "For obviously the philosopher's body should be well prepared for physical activity, because often the virtues makes use of this as a necessary instrument for the affairs of life" (Lutz VI, pp. 55, 54 [lines 7–8]). Both these systems have their foundation in a personal contest, and both promulgate systems for understanding both the theory or theology of the contest and the practices necessary to succeed in it.

The rest of the treatise deals with the contestants from a variety of perspectives. Section 4 (26:19–27:29) describes the state of the contestants' knowledge, their relationship to the world, their shame, their response to hostility, and their desire for permanence. Musonius also discusses similar subjects in the course of his teaching: that enduring hardship for the sake of the good is valuable ("Discourse 7"), that exile is not evil because philosophers are citizens of the City of God (Discourse 9), and that human transformation is both desirable and possible ("Fragment 42"). Musonius's philosophical teaching does not, however, include a high valuation of permanence. Although there are differences of perspective on these subjects between Musonius and the *Authoritative Teaching*, similar topics are addressed in each of these philosophical and ascetical systems.

The fifth section (27:30–29:2) specifically addresses the state of the contestants' soul with the description of the anointing of the eyes with *logos* to see better and to enable the contestants to contend effectively. The sixth section (29:3–31:24) explicates the vigilance necessary for the contestants through an elaborate allegory of the fishnet, which entraps and ultimately destroys the fish, and the fisherman, who baits the contestant with a small desirable item that leads to their capture and death. The seventh section (31:24–33:3) describes the work of the successful contestant. The last section (34:4–35:18) contrasts the fate of the ignorant who do not seek God (33:4–34:31) with the fate of the rational soul (34:32–35:18). These sections take up material unique to the *Authoritative Teaching* and do not have parallels in earlier Roman ascetical theory. They represent the particular and significant contribution of the *Authoritative Teaching* to ascetical theory.

The structure of the argument of the treatise, gathered as it probably is from a number of different sources and environments, points to a sophisticated ascetical agenda.¹⁹ That structure begins with the state of em-

¹⁹ Again, see the commentary in Ménard, *Lauthentikos logos*, pp. 45–62.

bodiment of the soul and its potential for contamination, then it sets up the contest that enables the soul to contend with vices and temptations, and it ends with a description of the rewards granted to the successful contender. Such a description of content, however, does not replicate the sophistication and subtlety of the treatise. The *Authoritative Teaching* uses metaphor extensively to give depth and substance to the argument. The treatise aligns metaphoric structures from a variety of sources within the structure of the ascetical argument in order precisely to create a unified ascetical theology. It is exactly this extensive use of metaphor that distinguishes the *Authoritative Teaching* from the work of earlier ascetical theorists, not only Musonius Rufus, but also Epictetus and the Cynics.

The structure of the treatise, pointing as it does toward asceticism, is the first perspective from which to articulate the ascetical agenda in the *Authoritative Teaching*.²⁰ The content of the treatise itself provides the second. Here we find a number of elements that together make up a complete ascetical system. The content of the treatise centers on the description of a contest established by the Father:²¹ “He, then, the Father, wishing to reveal his [wealth] and his glory, brought about this great contest (ἀγών) in this world (κόσμος), wishing to make the contestants (ἀγωνιστής) appear, and make all those who contend leave behind the things that had come into being, and despise (καταφρονεῖν) them with a lofty, incomprehensible knowledge, and flee to the one who exists” (26:8–20). The embodiment of the soul in materiality (22:13–16 and 23:12–20) and its potential contamination by its embodiment occasions this contest. Ascetical systems commonly describe ascetical efforts under two correlative metaphors that are not mutually exclusive: a contest (ἀγών) or endurance of hardship (πόνος), both of which metaphorize the efforts of an athlete to prepare the body for engagement in sporting event. Both metaphors present the overall scheme of ascetical effort: the *Authoritative Teaching* presents the metaphor of the contest, while Musonius Rufus prefers the metaphor of enduring hardships.²²

The *Authoritative Teaching* develops a number of subordinate metaphors to describe the potential contamination that form the center of the ascetical contest: the mixing of wheat and chaff (25:12–23), a falling into besti-

²⁰ The text and translation used throughout is that of George MacRae (“Authoritative Teaching VI,” 3:22, 1–35, 24) in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott, Nag Hammadi Studies no. 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), pp. 257–89. I have included some of the Greek loan words from the Coptic text. See also, Ménard, *Lauthentikos logos*, pp. 7–35, for another edition and French translation; and the evaluation of that edition by Wolf-Peter Funk, “Der verlorene Anfang des *authentikos logos*,” *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 28 (1982): 59–65.

²¹ Ménard acknowledges the ascetical nature of the combat and the ascetical dimension to the anointing of the eyes with *logos* for the combat: Ménard, *Lauthentikos logos*, p. 2.

²² This is found in “Discourse 7,” immediately following the discourse on asceticism.

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ality (24:20–26), entering into prostitution (24:7), the contamination of a virgin (παρθένος) man by lust (25:6–9), the contamination that the secure storehouse prevents (25:24–26), and the general contamination brought on by desires (30:28–31:24). In light of her embodied state and potential for contamination, the soul must contend, and she must pursue the goal that will result in the achievement of a number of goals: her fruitful search and knowledge of the Inscrutable One, her reclining in the Bridal Chamber and partaking of the immortal food of the banquet, her rest from her labors, and her dwelling in unending light (34:32–35:18). As will be demonstrated more fully below, the negative functions in the ascetical system express a positive goal: to have the mind ascend to the One, to which end *logos* is applied to the eyes to enable them to see and to assist their knowledge so that the mind may ascend to the One. These subordinate metaphors do not have parallels in Musonius’s corpus; they represent the particular ascetical perspective of the *Authoritative Teaching*.

The *Authoritative Teaching* presents the positive goal of ascetical effort in this way:

But the soul (ψυχή)—she who has tasted these things—realized that sweet passions (πάθος) are transitory. She had learned about evil (κακία); she went away from them and she entered into a new conduct (πολιτεία). Afterwards she despises (καταφρονεῖν) this life (βίος) because it is transitory. And she looks for those foods (τροφή) that will take her into life, and leaves behind her those deceitful foods (τροφή). And she learns about her light, as she goes about stripping off this world (κόσμος), while her true garment clothes her within, (and) her bridal clothing is placed upon her in beauty of mind, not in pride of flesh (σάρξ). And she learns about her depth (βάθος) and runs into her fold (αὐλή), while her shepherd (ποιμήν) stands at the door. In return for all the shame and scorn, then, that she received in this world (κόσμος), she receives ten thousand times the grace (χάρις) and glory. (31:24–32:16)

The *Authoritative Teaching* does not simply present the ascetical goal, the ascent of the mind, but it also describes the specific activities that enable the soul to achieve her goal. Those activities, enumerated in the preceding quotation, include tasting the passions and recognizing their impermanence, changing her way of life from evil to something good, despising the world, searching for life-giving food, stripping off this world, and putting on a bridal garment. These activities establish for the soul a sophisticated ascetical system, articulated not only in the positive activities but also through the careful and nuanced description of the negative functions.

Some of these themes in the Nag Hammadi treatise reflect ascetical issues explored by Musonius. At the heart of the Musonian ascetical system stands a project of redefining what is good and evil: the asceticism that pertains to the soul only revolves about “seeing that the proofs per-

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taining to apparent goods . . . and likewise those pertaining to apparent evils as not being real evils, and in learning to recognize the things which are truly good and in becoming accustomed to distinguish them from what are not truly good” (“Discourse 6,” Lutz VI, pp. 55, 54 [lines 17–22]). Eating (“Discourse 18 A and B”), clothing (“Discourse 19”), and shelter (“Discourse 20”) all are arenas in which the ascetic discerns true and false good and exercises moderation. Musonius also emphasizes the importance of new conduct according to virtue in his discourse on asceticism (“Discourse 6”), especially as it manifests the ascetic’s citizenship in a more noble city. “Discourse 9,” on the subject of exile, specifies that the ascetic is a citizen of the city of God (πολίτης τῆς τοῦ Δίους πόλεως), which means that the ascetic may embrace political exile, with the scorn, hardship, and shame that it brings, as an apparent evil and not as a real one.

THE NEGATIVE FUNCTION WITHIN THE CONTEST

Within most ascetical systems, the articulated positive goals call forth a correlative description of the hindrances to their achievement. This is certainly the case in Musonius Rufus’s system, where the impediments of social habituation and philosophical delusion play a central role in the ascetical process. Ascetical systems depend for the most part on the exercises and activities in overcoming those impediments in order to work toward the mastery necessary for the attainment of the goal.²³ In this way, the negative function, often metaphorized as contest with demons, defines the asceticism.²⁴

‘ This ascetical system of the *Authoritative Teaching* addresses a basic problem: the mind of the senseless person has been so affected by the negative function that it cannot rise to a proper knowledge of God. This concluding section of the treatise describes the problem succinctly: “But (δέ) to this senseless (ἀνόητος) man the word (λόγος) has been preached, teaching him: ‘Seek and inquire about the ways you should go, since there is nothing else that is as good as this thing.’ The result is that the substance (οὐσία) of hardness of heart strikes a blow upon his mind (νοῦς), along with the force (ἐνέργεια) of ignorance and the demon (δαμόνιον) of error (πλάνη). They do not allow his mind (νοῦς) to rise up, because he was wearying himself in seeking that he might learn about his hope (ἐλπίς)” (34:18–32). These ignorant people do not seek God, nor do they seek

²³ See Richard Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 775–821.

²⁴ Richard Valantasis, “Daemons and the Perfecting of the Monk’s Body: Monastic Anthropology, Daemonology, and Asceticism,” *Semeia* 58 (1992): 47–79.

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their resting place, and their lives are determined by their own hardness of heart. Notice that the mind is distracted from seeking and finding the true good by a kind of intellectual confusion, which stands at the center of Musonius's system as well, confounded with ignorance and demonic delusion. The negative function within the ascetical system points to what prevents them from achieving their goals.

The treatise characterizes this demonic function with a number of different descriptors. As just quoted above, the negative function is a "hardness of heart," a "force of ignorance and the demon of error" (34:24–28). It is also a beguiling devil set on ensnaring the eager ascetic: "Now these are the foods (τροφή) with which the devil (διάβολος) lies in wait for us. First he injects a pain (λύπη) into your heart until you have heartache on account of a small thing of this life (βίος), and he seizes <you> with his poisons. And afterwards [he injects] the desire (ἐπιθυμία) of a tunic so that you will pride yourself in it, and love of money, pride, vanity, envy that rivals another envy, beauty of body (σῶμα), fraudulence. The greatest of all these are ignorance and ease" (30:26–31:7). This analysis of the negative function develops a psychology of socially constructed desire habituated to a series of vices (e.g., pride, vanity, envy), and it describes the debilitating hold that such desire exercises on the ascetic. The process describes psychologically what Musonius treats philosophically on these same topics of food, clothing, and shelter.²⁵

The *Authoritative Teaching* also characterizes the demonic function as an adversary (ἀντικείμενος) to the soul. In the section immediately following the description of the work of the devil, the treatise describes the adversary's effect on the soul: "Now all such things the adversary (ἀντικείμενος) prepares beautifully (καλῶς) and spreads out before the body (σῶμα), wishing to make the mind of the soul (ψυχή) incline toward one of them and overwhelm her, like a hook drawing her by force (βία) in ignorance, deceiving (ἀπατᾶν) her until she conceives evil (κακόν) and bears fruit (καρπός) of matter (ὑλη) and conducts herself (πολιτεύεσθαι) in uncleanness, pursuing many desires (ἐπιθυμία), covetousnesses, while fleshly (σαρκικόν) pleasure draws her in ignorance" (31:8–24). This adversary is one among the other adversaries in the Father's contest who are "those who contend with us, being adversaries (ἀντικείμενος, Coptic plural ἸΑΝΤΙΚΕΙΜΕΝΟΣ) who contend against us" (26:20–22). The adversarial role psychologizes the negative function of desire, while simultaneously personifying it and relating it to the evil effect of vices (specifically covetousness and pleasure). Again, the *Authoritative Teaching* seems to pre-

²⁵ See Musonius's discourses 18–21.

sent the psychological perspective to issues developed philosophically by Musonius.

In addition to the characterization as a demon, a devil, and an adversary, the *Authoritative Teaching* adds the dramatic description of the demonic function as a body merchandiser:²⁶ “She [the soul] gave the body (σῶμα) to those who had given it to her, and they were ashamed, while the dealers (πραγματευτής) in bodies (σῶμα) sat down and wept because they were not able to do any business (πραγματεύεσθαι) with that body (σῶμα), nor (οὔτε) did they find an (other) merchandise except it. They endured great labors until they had shaped (πλασσεῖν) the body (σῶμα) of this soul (ψυχῆ), wishing to strike down the invisible (ἀόρατος) soul (ψυχῆ). They were therefore ashamed of their work; they suffered the loss of one for whom they had endured labors” (32:16–30). This characterization as a body merchandiser is unique to this treatise. The image mirrors the positive ascetical reformation of the body to conform to the soul, but it develops the opposite and negative function, namely, a body that is formed in order to thwart the soul. The image, metaphorically and somewhat allegorically presented here, seems to reflect a similar concern found in Musonius Rufus where he discusses the need for asceticism among those training for philosophy: “the ones who start out to study philosophy have been born and reared in an environment filled with corruption and evil” (Lutz VI, pp. 53, 52 [lines 31–32]), which is “the depravity which has become implanted in us straight from childhood” (Lutz VI, pp. 55, 54 [lines 35–37]) that engender evil habits.

These diverse characterizations of the negative function in the ascetical system do not build on one another in a progression, because the characterizations do not relate to a coordinated and logical field of metaphors. No logical connection exists between the various characterizations as hardness of heart, force of ignorance, demon of error, devil, contesting adversary, and body merchandiser. No overarching conceptual frame links them. Rather they develop particular aspects of the negative dimension of the ascetical program in tandem in a kind of piling of images.

This piling of images creates the depth of the negative function in the ascetical system. Each one of the longer descriptions develops an aspect of the system. The hook of desire, planted by the devil through a small pain in this life, drags the ascetic into the morass of debilitating worldly desires. This characterization of the negative function explores the impact and negative effect of desire. The beauty of somatic things, set forth by the adversary through the presentation of beautiful bodies, draws the

²⁶ See MacRae, “A Nag Hammadi Tractate” (n. 13 above), pp. 475–76.

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soul away from the higher things to pursue more and more of the lesser, somatic graces of the world. This characterization explains the seduction of bodily senses and their entrapment of the soul. The destructive formation of the soul, conducted by the body merchandisers through their effort to fashion the body into a commodity, thwarts the soul's desire to attain higher things. This characterization of the negative function explores the objectification of the soul through worldly engagement. Each of these characterizations adds depth to the understanding of the ascetical program by investigating various dimensions of the negative function within the ascetical system. By placing these various investigations side by side, they are associated with one another as elements of one single and comprehensive ascetical system.

In addition to these aligned characterizations of the demonic function, two other images presented in the treatise and unique to it add depth to the ascetical system by sustained metaphorization: the metaphor of the fishing net and the metaphor of the fisherman.²⁷ These metaphors explain the impact of the negative function on the ascetic seeker.

The metaphor of the net describes a process of drowning:

For this reason, then, we do not sleep, nor do we forget [the] nets that are spread out in hiding, lying in wait for us to catch us. For if we are caught in a single net, it will suck us down into its mouth, while the water flows over us, striking our face. And we will be taken down into the dragnet, and we will not be able to come up from it because the waters are high over us, flowing from above downward, submerging our heart down in the filthy mud. And we will not be able to escape from them (29:3–17).

The negative function within the ascetical system is like a dragnet that submerges the soul, pulling it down under water until it sticks in the mud and dies. It is a troubling metaphor, graphic in its description and frightening in its effect. The metaphor articulates dramatically the impact of the negative functions on the soul.

That dragnet metaphor introduces the next metaphor of a man-eating fisherman:

For man-eaters will seize us and swallow us, rejoicing like a fisherman (άλιεύς) casting a hook into the water. For he casts many kinds of food (τροφή) into the water because each one of the fish has his own food (τροφή). He smells it and pursues its odor. But when he eats it, the hook hidden within the food (τροφή) seizes him and brings him up by force (βία) out of the deep waters. No man is able, then, to catch that fish down in the deep waters, except for the trap that the

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 473–74. MacRae provides parallel literature in which the fisherman is instead a sinister character from Hab 1:13–17 and from *Hodayoth*, 3.26 and 4.7–8, but he concludes “the metaphor in *Authoritative Teaching* is virtually unique in that the adversary fishes in his own interest” (p. 474).

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fisherman (άλιεύς) sets. By the ruse of food (τροφή), he brought the fish up on the hook. In this very way we exist in this world (κόσμος) like fish. (29:18–30:6)

Here the image of fishing supplants the image of being drowned in the dragnet, but it has the same impact. The dragnet emphasized the overwhelming helplessness of the soul enmeshed in the world, while the image of the fisherman describes the process whereby the world overwhelms and captures the soul. The work of the fisherman transforms this metaphor into an allegory of the fate of the soul and the manner of its capture. The man-eating fisherman baits a hook with food particular to the kind of person he desires to catch. The particularity of the bait suggests that not all ascetics will be captured by the same bait, but that each ascetic's capture differs according to the ascetic's temperament and tastes.²⁸ Once the bait has been thrown before the ascetic, temptation and desire take hold, and the ascetic is captured. This allegory defines the way ascetics live in the world, constantly tempted by food and other desires that have been baited by the various demonic functions. Both of these metaphors describe in psychological terms the social debilitation and habituation, which Musonius Rufus describes and for which he promulgates his system of moral reformation. The attitude toward the overwhelming decadence and destructive effect of the world on the person remains similar, while the way of describing these influences diverge.

The treatise further develops this metaphor and its allegory by connecting it to many of the themes presented in the ascetical system:

The adversary (ἀντικείμενος) spies on us, lying in wait for us like a fisherman (άλιεύς), wishing to seize us, rejoicing that he might swallow us. For [he places] many foods (τροφή) before our eyes, [things] which belong to this world (κόσμος). He wishes to make us desire (ἐπιθυμῆν) one of them and to taste only a little, so that he may seize us with his hidden poison and bring us out of freedom (-ἐλεύθερος) and take us into slavery. For whenever he catches us with a single food (τροφή), it is indeed necessary (ἀνάγκη) for [us] to desire (ἐπιθυμῆν) the rest. Finally, then, such things become the food (τροφή) of death. Now these are the foods (τροφή) with which the devil (διάβολος) lies in wait for us. (30:6–27)

The linking here of desire, food, slavery, death, entrapment, and the work of the devil displays the intricate interconnection of elements in the ascetical system. The negative function characterized in a variety of ways and placed side by side explicates carefully the entire ascetical movement in the treatise.

The negative function in the ascetical system described in the *Authoritative Teaching* articulates a number of different perspectives on the impedi-

²⁸ In "Discourse 1" and "Discourse 2," Musonius also differentiates levels of learning for different people.

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ments to the achievement of the ascetical goal. Although each of the various perspectives differ from one another and could stand on its own, the treatise makes them cohere by associating them with the other elements in the ascetical system. All the characterizations of the negative function—as a hardened heart, and an ignorant force, and a demon of error, and a variety of adversaries, and a body merchandiser, combined with the more allegorical descriptions of fish caught in a dragnet and fish caught by bait—create a systematic and thoroughly explained set of impediments to the soul's life and well-being. The piling of these images identify them with the others in order to add depth to the ascetical process.

THE AUTHORITY IN ITS ROMAN CONTEXT

The *Authoritative Teaching* presents a fully articulated ascetical system. The soul's embodiment and its potential for contamination provide the occasion for the explanation of the system. The negative function within the system, that is, the demonic ascetical function, gathers various metaphors, unrelated by any inherent system or logic, to dramatize and to explain in great detail and with rich nuance the ascetical contest. This ascetical system resonates with psychological insight and understanding. A significant contribution of this treatise to the literature of asceticism lay precisely in its mode of piling metaphors as a means at once of combining elements from a variety of religious and philosophical circles and simultaneously adding depth and richness to the ascetical system it promulgates. The *Authoritative Teaching* takes an interest in the development of virtues and the avoidance of vices, complementary in conception to the earlier ascetical system of Musonius Rufus, while at the same time developing a richly textured psychology of ascetical formation, also resonant with the philosophical theory of social dishabituation found in Musonius Rufus. The independent parts and metaphors relate to an overarching plan to which each part becomes an elaboration and explanation. The system developed here emerges from the constellation of images, metaphors, and concepts juxtaposed to one another in an orderly ascetical system.

The *Authoritative Teaching* is significant to ascetical literature because it represents as well a serious effort at systematizing and syncretizing philosophical and religious ascetical practice.²⁹ Stoic ethics, Platonic doctrines, Jewish and Christian scriptural references and images, and Hermetic doctrines combine in a system not identified with any one religious or philosophical tradition, but with a depth that could speak to any one of

²⁹ Ménard, *Lauthentikos logos* (n. 15 above), p. 3.

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them. This is to say that the more generic ascetical system of the *Authoritative Teaching* emerges from many traditions and potentially may address any number of them in turn without prejudice.

The comparison with the asceticism of Musonius Rufus establishes the *Authoritative Teaching* as a treatise recognizably in the tradition of earlier Roman ascetical theorizing. It is possible now in very broad strokes to trace the history of Roman asceticism from the second century until the fourth century C.E. through the significant work of a number of scholars in order to situate the *Authoritative Teaching* more precisely.

The first century witnessed a development of the earliest traditions of ascetical writing, first with Musonius, then in Epictetus, Musonius's influential student and successor. And, of course, the first century includes the Cynic epistles and the letters of Heraclitus. Although Cynicism did not develop the same sort of theoretical base as did the Stoics Musonius and Epictetus, nonetheless their literary output in the first century witnessed to the central role of critical Cynicism in the philosophical scene. The question of the living out of a morally responsible life was firmly established in practice and in theory in the first century C.E.

For the second century, James Francis provides a thorough analysis of Roman asceticism, beginning with the Stoic asceticism of Musonius Rufus and Epictetus and ending with Celsus's criticism of Christian practice.³⁰ Francis begins with the interior asceticism of Marcus Aurelius, which constitutes a direct inheritance from the ascetical teaching of Epictetus. Pierre Hadot explicates the ascetical tradition embodied in the work of Epictetus taken up by the emperor Marcus Aurelius.³¹ Marcus Aurelius does indeed follow the tradition of Musonius Rufus and Epictetus in developing a mode of action, of asceticism, that molds and forms the intellectual, social, religious, and political aspects of the individual's life. This early stream of Roman asceticism represents an intellectual and moral asceticism of comprehensive dimensions.

After Marcus Aurelius, however, Francis explores the largely literary productions of second-century asceticism. The modality of ascetical exploration moves from ethical ascetical theory (as in Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius) to biography. Later second-century writers explore ascetical issues through literary biography, such as Lucian's Peregrinus,³² which represents Cynic asceticism, and Flavius Philostratus's Apollonius of Tyana,³³ which represents a more thaumaturgic and

³⁰ See, esp., Francis (n. 11 above), pp. 181–89.

³¹ Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The "Meditations of Marcus Aurelius,"* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 54–100.

³² Francis, pp. 53–81.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 83–129.

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charismatic ascetical figure. These biographies explore asceticism in the lives of these personages. Biography enables Lucian and Philostratus to explore the manifold dimensions of asceticism (e.g., wonderworking, ascetical practice, magic, psychological orientation, and social implications) and their social reception by Roman audiences.

This biographical tradition of ascetical exploration reaches new heights in the work of Diogenes Laertius. Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé has devoted special attention to Diogenes Laertius's compendium of the doctrines and teachings of Cynic philosophers.³⁴ Diogenes combines an interest in both biographical detail and doctrine in his work to the point that Goulet-Cazé believes that she can extract historical information about the life and teaching of the historical Diogenes, the reputed founder of Cynicism.³⁵ What is of significance in this context is the combination of ascetical theory and biographical detail as an incremental development in Roman asceticism.

Roman asceticism takes a different turn in other more philosophical circles. Here the work of Anthony Meredith comes to the fore.³⁶ Meredith studied the relationship of Christian and Roman asceticism in the later third and early fourth centuries C.E. primarily in philosophical and theological categories. Meredith relates the philosophical asceticism of Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus to the Christian ascetical masters Athanasius, Basil, and Gregory of Nyssa. He concludes that there exists "a common tradition of popular morality, to which many similarities owe their existence," and there are philosophical agreements, while he notes that there are also significant differences.³⁷ The common moral tradition to which Meredith refers presumably reaches back to the ethical asceticism of Musonius and Epictetus and their ethical successors. The philosophical system gathers up elements from "platonized Stoicism,"³⁸ neo-Platonism, and later Cynicism.

In broadest strokes, Roman asceticism in the first four centuries C.E. begins with the theory and practice of Stoic and Cynic moral virtue.³⁹ While this moral tradition continues to develop, as witnessed by Marcus Aurelius, ascetical systems find articulation in literary biography in which the moral and religious dimensions of religious practice are both displayed and debated. By the third century, asceticism had developed also

³⁴ See Goulet-Cazé, "Le cynisme à l'époque impériale" (n. 2 above) and *L'ascèse cynique* (n. 2 above).

³⁵ Goulet-Cazé, *L'ascèse cynique*, pp. 11–14.

³⁶ Anthony Meredith, "Asceticism—Christian and Greek," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 27 (1976): 313–32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 331; Francis, pp. 1–19.

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in neo-Platonist and later Stoic traditions into fully articulated theological and philosophical systems that crossed over into most every religious environment (Roman philosophy, Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, among others). These articulated systems also continue to explore ascetical aspects of personal development and personal sanctity, as witnessed in Porphyry's "Life and Works of Plotinus" and in the many biographies of the saints that begin to emerge in Christian circles. Roman asceticism was both highly developed and widely attested.

Within the spectrum of asceticism just outlined, the *Authoritative Teaching* seems best to fit as a point of transition between the pure ethical systems of the moralists of the first century and the neo-Platonist philosophical and theological traditions of the early third century. The *Authoritative Teaching* displays an interest in the way that passions and embodiment affect the individual, in other words, there are biographical interests, but these are explained through psychological, moral, and intellectual concepts. The use of metaphors bridges the moral and philosophical interests of the early moral ascetical theorists and the literary structure of the biography of later writers. From the asceticism of *Authoritative Teaching*, asceticism may be seen to develop more intensely into biography (as in Peregrinus, Apollonius, and even the Christian Antony of Egypt) and into the great ascetical systems of the later third and early fourth centuries (Iamblichus, Proclus, and the Christian Cappadocian fathers). The ascetical tradition found in the *Authoritative Teaching* suggests that it was composed sometime between Lucian and Diogenes Laertius, that is, sometime between 150 C.E. and 250 C.E., during a shift in interest from ethical and philosophical theory to the role and function of asceticism in personal psychology and formation.

This study had two goals: first, to explain the ascetical system of the Nag Hammadi treatise; and, second, to locate this treatise within the context of Roman asceticism. Roman asceticism, eclipsed as it has been in the West by Christian asceticism, has a long and vital history that promotes practices of theological and philosophical values and virtues. By the end of the Roman period, this asceticism has had wide influence in every religious system. The *Authoritative Teaching* is an example of an author who engages with the Roman ascetical tradition and who begins to analyze the psychological and social implications of earlier writers. It is perhaps this experimentation with the psychology of living in the habituated and deadening social environment that attracted the Christian ascetics to this treatise: the Roman ascetical psychology resonated with the Christian monastic experience of the world. So the monks preserved the *Authoritative Teaching* as part of their secular literature that furthered their ascetical agenda.