

1 John 1:8 in Light of the “Confession of No Sin” in Gnostic Literature

The crisis or schism that prompted the Johannine Letters is often thought to have involved a controversy similar to what churches in succeeding centuries would face with regard to gnosticism.

The author of 1 John insists, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1:8). It is interesting, then, to note that a gnostic document from the third century CE contains a litany in which a variety of errors are listed and respondents confess that they are innocent of these and have not sinned. Some of the specifics regarding the errors or offenses are obscure, but the litany appears to turn a traditional “Confession of Sin” used in many Christian liturgies on its head, transforming it into a “Confession of No Sin (or of Righteousness).”

Note that the anti-Jewish character typical of gnosticism is also evident here.

Leader: For Adam was a laughingstock, since he was made a counterfeit type of man by the Hebdomad, as if he had become stronger than I and my brothers.

Congregation: We are innocent with respect to him, since we have not sinned.

Leader: And Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were a laughingstock, since they, the counterfeit fathers, were given a name by the Hebdomad, as if he had become stronger than I and my brothers.

Congregation: We are innocent with respect to him, since we have not sinned.

Leader: David was a laughingstock in that his son was named the Son of Man, having been influenced by the Hebdomad, as if he had become stronger than I and the fellow members of my race.

Congregation: But we are innocent with respect to him; we have not sinned.¹

1. *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (Nag Hammadi codices VII.62.27–63.26).