

Parallels among the Carpocratians and Ebionites and the Works of Sebastian Franck

Gerhard Lechner, PhD

lechnergerrhard@live.de

[Go directly to the text of the paper](#)

Abstract

Research on Sebastian Franck (1499 – 1543) has so far mainly focused on the topics “Sebastian Franck as a historian” or “Sebastian Franck as a critic of theology,” while Gnosticism in the philosophy of the radical reformer has received less attention. Since the beginning of the new millennium, the interest in a certain movement of Gnosticism, namely Hermeticism, has increased however. This paper examines the question of the parallels in content between Gnostic representatives such as the Carpocratians, the Ebionites, and Sebastian Franck. Irenaeus of Lyon is used as a source for the Carpocratians and the Ebionites. Substantial similarities can be found in the fragmentary reports of Irenaeus on the Carpocratians and Ebionites and the teachings of Franck. The parallels between the Carpocratians and Franck can be identified in the concept of the Divine, the tripartite nature of the soul, and the doctrine of salvation. Unlike orthodox Christianity, both Franck and the Carpocratians believed in the self-salvation of people from their sins. Through the discovery of their spirit, all people can access the abilities that Yeshua had in his incarnation. The rejection of both the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of grace is what Franck has in common with the Ebionites. However, the doctrine of grace would not make any sense for the Carpocratians either, as, according to their conviction, the soul is redeemed by the enlightenment of the spirit.

Keywords: Sebastian Franck, Ebionites, Carpocratians, Christ, Mind

Parallèles entre les Carpocratians, les Ébionites et les œuvres de Sébastien Franck

Gerhard Lechner, PhD

Résumé

Les recherches sur le théologien et mystique allemand Sébastien Franck (1499 – 1543) ont jusqu'à présent traité largement des sujets « Sebastian Franck en tant qu'historien » ou « Sebastian Franck en tant que critique de la théologie ». Moins d'attention, cependant, a été accordée au Gnosticisme dans la pensée du réformateur radical. Depuis le début du nouveau millénaire, il y a eu un intérêt plus prononcé pour un courant particulier du Gnosticisme, à savoir l'Hermétisme. Cet article examine les similitudes substantielles entre des représentants gnostiques tels que les Carpocratians, les Ébionites et Sebastian Franck. Irénée de Lyon est présenté comme source pour ces deux groupes gnostiques. Des similitudes substantielles peuvent être trouvées, dans les rapports fragmentaires d'Irénée sur les Carpocratians et les Ébionites, entre ceux-ci et les enseignements de Franck. Les parallèles entre les Carpocratians et Franck peuvent être identifiés dans le concept du Divin, la nature tripartite de l'âme et la doctrine du salut. Contrairement au Christianisme orthodoxe, Franck et les Carpocratians croient en l'auto-

rédemption des péchés: en accédant à la connaissance de son propre esprit, chacun est en mesure de développer les capacités que Jésus possédait dans son incarnation. Par-dessus tout, Franck a en commun avec les Ébionites le rejet de la doctrine du péché originel et de la grâce. Cependant, la doctrine de la grâce n'avait aucun sens pour les Carpocratians non plus, car, selon leur conception, l'âme également est rachetée par la connaissance de l'esprit.

Mots-clés: Sebastian Franck, Ebionites, Carpocratians, Esprit, Christ

Paralelos entre los Carpocratianos y Ebionitas y las obras de Sebastián Franck

Gerhard Lechner, PhD

Resumen

La investigación sobre Sebastián Franck (1499 - 1543) hasta ahora se ha enfocado principalmente en los temas “Sebastián Franck como historiador” o “Sebastián Franck como crítico de teología”, mientras que el gnosticismo en la filosofía del reformador radical ha recibido menos atención. Sin embargo, desde el comienzo del nuevo milenio, el interés por un cierto movimiento del Gnosticismo llamado Hermetismo ha aumentado. Este artículo examina la cuestión de los paralelismos de contenido entre representantes Gnósticos como los Carpocratianos, los Ebionitas y Sebastián Franck. Ireneo de Lyon se utiliza como fuente para los Carpocratianos y Ebionitas. Se pueden encontrar similitudes sustanciales en los informes fragmentarios de Ireneo sobre los Carpocratianos y Ebionitas y las enseñanzas de Franck. Los paralelos entre los Carpocratianos y Franck se pueden identificar en el concepto de lo Divino, la naturaleza tripartita del alma y la doctrina de la salvación. A diferencia del Cristianismo Ortodoxo, tanto Franck como los Carpocratianos creían en la auto salvación de las personas de sus pecados. A través del descubrimiento de su espíritu, todas las personas pueden acceder a las habilidades que Yeshua tuvo en su encarnación. El rechazo tanto de la doctrina del pecado original como de la doctrina de la gracia es lo que Franck tiene en común con los Ebionitas. Sin embargo, la doctrina de la gracia tampoco tendría ningún sentido para los Carpocratianos, ya que, según su convicción, el alma es redimida por la iluminación del espíritu.

Palabras claves: Sebastián Franck, Ebionitas, Carpocratianos, Cristo, Mente

Paralelos entre os Carpocracianos e Ebionitas e as Obras de Sebastian Franck

Gerhard Lechner, PhD

Resumo

A pesquisa sobre Sebastian Franck (1499 – 1543) até agora se concentrou principalmente nos tópicos “Sebastian Franck como historiador” ou “Sebastian Franck como crítico da teologia”, enquanto o gnosticismo na filosofia do reformador radical recebeu menos atenção. Desde o início do novo milênio, porém, o interesse por um certo movimento de gnosticismo, a saber, o hermetismo, aumentou. Este artigo examina a questão dos paralelos de conteúdo entre representantes gnósticos, como os Carpocracianos (ou Carpocratas) e os Ebionitas, e Sebastian

Franck. Irineu de Lyon é usado como fonte para os Carpocracianos e os Ebionitas. Semelhanças substanciais podem ser encontradas entre os relatos fragmentários de Irineu sobre os Carpocracianos e Ebionitas e os ensinamentos de Franck. Os paralelos entre os Carpocracianos e Franck podem ser identificados no conceito do Divino, na natureza tripartite da alma e na doutrina da salvação. Ao contrário do cristianismo ortodoxo, tanto Franck quanto os Carpocracianos acreditavam na auto-salvação humana dos pecados. Mediante a descoberta de seu espírito, todas as pessoas podem acessar as habilidades que Yeshua tinha em sua encarnação. A rejeição tanto da doutrina do pecado original quanto da doutrina da graça é o que Franck tem em comum com os Ebionitas. No entanto, a doutrina da graça também não faria sentido para os Carpocracianos, pois, de acordo com sua convicção, a alma é redimida pelo conhecimento do espírito.

Palavras-chave: Sebastian Franck; Ebionitas; Carpocracianos; Cristo; Mente

Karpokratianer und Ebioniten Bei Sebastian Franck

Gerhard Lechner, PhD

Zusammenfassung

Die Sebastian-Franck-Forschung hat sich bisher recht ausführlich mit den Themen „Sebastian Franck als Historiker“ oder „Sebastian Franck als Kritiker der Theologie“ beschäftigt. Weniger Aufmerksamkeit wurde indessen dem Gnostizismus im Denken des radikalen Reformers zuteil. Seit der Jahrtausendwende ist allerdings ein stärkeres Interesse an einer bestimmten Strömung des Gnostizismus zu erkennen, nämlich der Hermetik. Diese Abhandlung ergründet die Frage der inhaltlichen Parallelen zwischen gnostischen Strömungen wie den Karpokratianern und den Ebioniten und der Lehre von Sebastian Franck. Als Quelle für die die beiden gnostischen Gruppen wird Irenäus von Lyon herangezogen. Zwischen den fragmentarischen Berichten von Irenäus über die Karpokratianer und Ebioniten und den Lehren von Franck können wesentliche Übereinstimmungen festgestellt werden. Auffallend sind die Parallelen zwischen den Karpokratianern und Franck beim Gottesbegriff, bei der Dreiteilung der Seele und bei der Soteriologie. Im Unterschied zum orthodoxen Christentum glauben sowohl Franck als auch die Karpokratianer an die Selbsterlösung des Menschen von dessen Sünden. Die Fähigkeiten, die Jesus bei seiner Inkarnation hatte, kann jeder Mensch durch die Erkenntnis seines Geistes in sich finden. Mit den Ebioniten hat Franck vor allem die Ablehnung der Erbsünden- und Gnadenlehre gemeinsam. Die Gnadenlehre würde aber auch bei den Karpokratianern keinen Sinn ergeben, da diese die Ansicht vertreten, dass die Seele durch die Erkenntnis des Geistes erlöst wird.

Schlüsselwörter: Sebastian Franck, Karpokratianer, Ebioniten, Geist, Christus

Introduction

While the Carpocratians were the followers of Carpocrates, a second-century CE Christian Gnostic whose sect flourished in Alexandria, the Ebionites were a sect of Jewish Christians that started in and around Palestine in the first century CE. Sebastian Franck (1499 – 1543), the renowned German Protestant Reformer and theologian, converted from Roman Catholicism to

Lutheranism but did not share Martin Luther's views; instead, he emphasized a mystical attitude in place of dogmatic belief. He was considered one of the modern thinkers of the sixteenth century because of his unbiased search for the Divine in various cultures and historical traditions and his emphasis on nondogmatic and nonsectarian forms of religion.

Alfred Hegler¹ considered Sebastian Franck to be a spiritualist and the latter considered everything external as insignificant, such as the Bible, the sacraments, or the Church itself. The second coming of Christ, for example, is for Franck an "eternal allegory" that is always in progress and cannot be explained by the "dead" letter alone. In his dissertation, Meinulf Barbers² deals with "Tolerance in the Works of Sebastian Franck." The author comprehensively addresses the life of Franck and analyzes his philosophical and theological influences.

At the beginning of the second chapter of his dissertation, Barbers indicates Franck's basic religious beliefs. It begins with Gnosis,³ Cathars, Waldensians, and mysticism. On Gnosticism, Barbers did not write much, and he referred to the world's hostility towards Gnostics. For the Gnostics, the body was a dungeon for people and only through the divine spark in a person was it possible to attain salvation. Among the Cathars and Waldensians, Barbers emphasized their opposition to the official priests, sacraments or sermons, and prayer meetings. Among the mystics, Barbers emphasized the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart. Even more important for Franck was the influence of a disciple of Meister Eckhart, namely Johannes Tauler, the German mystic and Catholic theologian (ca. 1300 to 1361 CE). With him, Franck explicitly found the contrast between "external person – inner person."⁴ The fact that Franck does not explicitly count his own teaching as salient as Gnostic doctrine is due, on the one hand, to the fact that there are other influences, such as those from German mysticism and Hermetics, and on the other hand to the heretical character that this philosophy had in its time.⁵

Since the turn of the millennium, detailed research about Hermeticism in the works of Sebastian Franck has come forward. Some authors⁶ count Hermetics as Gnostics, whereby Hermeticism is regarded as a very specific form of Gnosticism.⁷ Gnosticism is the name given to groups in the second century CE who were called Gnostics by their opponents at the time (for example Irenaeus of Lyon and Hippolytus of Rome). Hermeticism was essentially Gnosticism because the basic method for salvation was "inner enlightenment."⁸ The exact parallels and differences between Gnosticism and Hermeticism cannot be dealt with in detail here; a separate treatise would be necessary. The groups of Gnosticism included, for example, the Basilidians, the Valentinians, the Ebionites, and the Carpocratians.⁹

The first indications of a Hermetic influence in Franck's work are reported by Monika Neugebauer-Wök¹⁰ and Martin Mulrow,¹¹ who pointed to a handwritten translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* from 1542 in the Augsburg Library, which is most likely attributable to Franck. In the context of his history of Hermeticism, Florian Ebeling¹² dealt with Franck and his significance for Hermetics. Despite Franck's very positive judgments about Hermes, however, he concluded that Franck was "certainly not a hermetic"¹³ because, as a spiritualist, he could not appreciate any doctrine in the dogmatic sense. According to Ebeling, Franck believed in the thesis that Hermes was as much a sage for the Egyptians as Plato was for the Greeks.

The aim of this paper is to explore an aspect that has been missing from the literature on Franck, and it deals with the gnostic influence on his philosophy. Although it was pointed out by Barbers that there was a gnostic influence, it has never been investigated in detail. The philosophy of the Carpocratians and the Ebionites is compared in this paper with important metaphysical terms used by Sebastian Franck. These include the concepts of Divinity, the Neoplatonic three-part soul, the doctrine of transmigration, and the position of the Christ concept in Franck's philosophy.

Carpocratians and Ebionites

The teachings of the Carpocratians and Ebionites were explained by Irenaeus, who briefly described the teachings of the "heretics" in *Against Heresies*.¹⁴ Irenaeus wrote about the cosmogony of the Carpocratians in which angels who stand far below the unbegotten father have created the world. The Carpocratians believed that Yeshua remained strong and did not lose the memories of the unborn father. However, he was not different from other people.¹⁵ George Mead¹⁶ notes that the Carpocratians would not emphasize the differences between Yeshua and Christ, as is common with various other Gnostic groups, such as the Valentinians. But if one follows the words of Irenaeus, it makes no sense to make a distinction between Yeshua and Christ, because every person has the opportunity to assume the abilities of the Biblical Yeshua. Some Carpocratians claimed that one could become even more powerful than Yeshua. The decisive factor with Yeshua was that he overcame the passions common to people. In order to overcome them and to achieve the abilities of Yeshua, however, people have to despise the creators of the world (*contemnere mundi fabricatores*).¹⁷ Due to their developed powers, they were also capable of magic (witchcraft, dream spirits, ghost appearances, etc.).¹⁸ Irenaeus condemned the Carpocratians for their "claims," because they believed in magical powers that people draw from their spirit; otherwise, the miracles of Yeshua could not be explained. For them, Yeshua was a magician who developed these abilities by himself. The essence of Christ does not matter to the Carpocratians, but the concept of the Christ could be understood as synonymous with the human spirit. The fact that the Carpocratians believed in the Neoplatonic tripartite structure of the soul is evident from Irenaeus 25:1, where it is mentioned that people must overcome their passions to reach the Spirit. For the Carpocratians, the term soul consisted of the Neoplatonic tripartite division of spirit (*πνεούμα*)¹⁹, soul (*Ψυχή*), and the body (*Σώμα*). Human passions are part of the *Ψυχή* (soul). In the case of Yeshua, his soul has "remembered" the highest form, the Spirit. When the soul has reached this state, it no longer has to "transmigrate bodies."²⁰ However, there is a difference between the Carpocratian and Neoplatonic tripartite of the soul. In the Carpocratian tripartite, the *πνεούμα* (spirit) is part of the mundane person more than in Neoplatonism.²¹ Iamblicus, for example, assumes, in contrast to Plotinus and Porphyry, that the spirit does not remain with the Divine *Nous*, but "falls" with the soul into the body.²²

For many philosophers, the belief in transmigration (*μετεμψύχωσις*) of the soul is conceivable only because of the Neoplatonic tripartite of the soul. It is the same with the Carpocratians. In this respect, the term "transmigration" originally refers to reincarnation in human form (the latter term being introduced as a Hermetic concept centuries later). Irenaeus describes their teaching of transmigration as a little curious, as Mead²³ correctly observes. Irenaeus indicates that "their souls, having made trial of every kind of life, may, at their departure, not be wanting in any particular. It is necessary to insist upon this, lest, on account of some one thing being still

wanting to their deliverance, they should be compelled once more to become incarnate."²⁴ Irenaeus refers to an interpretation of Yeshua's words in this regard: "Whilst you are with your adversary in the way, give all diligence, that you may be delivered from him, lest he give you up to the judge, and the judge surrender you to the officer, and he casts you into prison. Verily, I say unto you, you shall not go out thence until you pay the very last farthing."²⁵

According to Irenaeus, the Carpocratians still hold an important lesson for this paper, namely that there is no good and evil by nature.²⁶ In other words, good and evil were not created by the Divine or the creators of the world, but by human thought and action. Therefore, the Carpocratians can be added to the representatives of antinomism, meaning that only through human law did the concept of sin arise. Originally, equality and commonality had to prevail, so there is no possession without human law ("everything belongs to all").²⁷

The question is whether the Carpocratian Gnosis can still be called Christian Gnosis after what has been said so far. Herbert Liboron²⁸ answered "yes," because Yeshua plays a very important role in their teaching, although he did not have the function of savior; this point, however, can be disputed to some extent. One has to agree with Liboron that the Carpocratians are by no means Christians of a great church, bearing in mind that there are also completely essential teachings of Christianity missing. Yeshua is not the "Son of the Divine" and therefore has no special role. Every human being is able to follow the example of Yeshua. We are not told by Irenaeus and the the Early Church Writers what the Carpocratians think about central teachings of Christianity like the resurrection, but their doctrine also contradicts orthodox Christianity fundamentally on important issues.

Irenaeus addressed the Ebionites in 26:2 very briefly. The text reads as follows:

Those who are called Ebionites agree that the world was made by the Divine; but their opinions with respect to the Lord are similar to those of Cerinthus and Carpocrates. They use the Gospel according to Matthew only, and repudiate the Apostle Paul, maintaining that he was an apostate from the law. As to the prophetic writings, they endeavor to expound them in a somewhat singular manner: they practice circumcision, persevere in the observance of those customs which are enjoined by the law, and are so Judaic in their style of life, that they even adore Jerusalem as if it were the house of the Divine.²⁹

Compared to the Carpocratians, the Ebionites represented a different cosmogony, where the Divine is the creator of the visible world. The baptism at the Jordan is also different, where Yeshua becomes a prophet symbolically among the Ebionites through the white dove, but the Ebionites also did not differentiate between Yeshua and Christ. The fact that the Ebionites only accepted the Gospel of Matthew is probably due to the fact that they did not accept Paul's theology of justification. They passed on the teaching of Yeshua orally, believed Yeshua to be a prophet, denied his virgin birth, and rejected the doctrine of original sin.³⁰ For them, Yeshua was a person like everyone else up to the baptism at the Jordan, and with the baptism he became a prophet, because the Divine spirit entered Yeshua symbolically in the form of a dove at the baptism. Every prophet who fulfilled the law in the way that Yeshua did received this spirit, according to the teaching of the Ebionites. For the Ebionites, Yeshua was not the Divine and

human at the same time, insofar as this teaching was "Gnostic heresy," and one can speak of a non-Christian Gnosticism. They also rejected the sacrifice and priesthood.³¹

The Doctrine of the Carpocratians and Ebionites Compared with Sebastian Franck

Franck quotes the Ebionites in the *Paradoxa*³² (Figure 1). In Paradox 46 he expressed himself very positively about the teachings of Pelagius and Ebion: "The Pelagius and Ebion's heresy never went off plan and will be the daily bread of the world until the end."³³ Pelagius, in a dispute with Augustine, refused to accept the doctrine of original sin and the grace doctrine of Augustine, insisting that human freedom can never be corrupted by sin. There are further indications in *Paradoxa* that hardly allow any other conclusion than that Franck also rejected the doctrine of original sin and grace. These notes will now be elaborated in more detail.

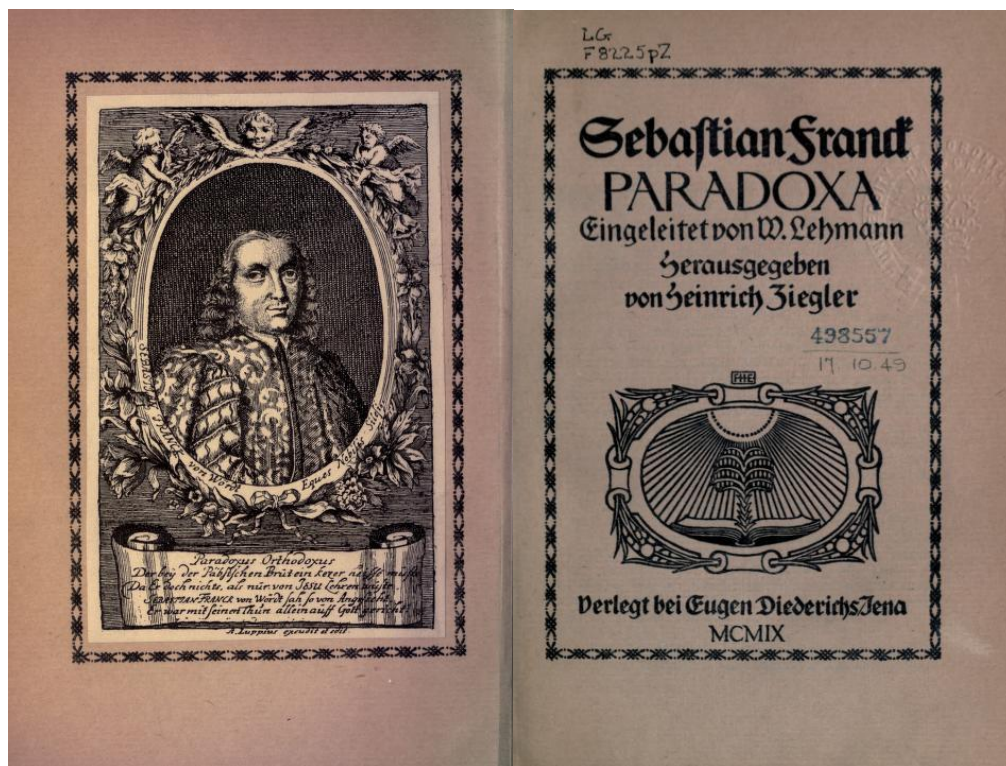


Figure 1. *Paradoxa*, Sebastian Franck, 1534. Reprinted 1909.
<https://archive.org/details/paradoxa00franuoft/page/n5/mode/2up>

Sebastian Franck's concept of the Divine corresponds to that of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism: "We cannot say or know what the Divine is. Because the Divine is only known to [Itself as It] is.... The Divine is neither this nor that and none of the things that one can talk about, show, write, hear and understand, show, see, do with the senses or can pronounce."³⁴ Accordingly, Paradox 1 is also called: *Deus quid sit, nescitur*. Franck's concept of the Divine corresponds to the "ungenerated father" among the Carpocratians.

In the cosmogony of the *Guldin Arch* (Figure 2), Franck differentiates between the "good" angels who are the Divine's helpers and the "evil spirits" who want to torment people and

Christ.³⁵ Franck quotes the following on the subject of human death: "Death was not created by the Divine / but came into the world out of the devil's envy."³⁶ This statement is isolated, because Franck leaves out the beginning from the Book of Wisdom 2:23. These evil spirits are reminiscent of the world creators of the Carpocratians, who must despise the human soul in order to achieve enlightenment. The evil spirits are not opponents of the Divine, because in the *Guldin Arch* Franck says: "All evil spirits are also created by the Divine / that is why they are prisoners of him."³⁷



Figure 2: *Die Guldin Arch (L'Arca d'Oro)*, Sebastian Franck, 1538.
<http://www.fulltable.com/vts/mn/05.jpg>

In Paradox 2, Franck treats the concept of sin and rules out that the Divine could be sin. This means that the Divine receives a non-quality: "The Divine is everything in everyone, and if sin were also something and not nothing, then It would also be sin in people. But because sin is nothingness, it is never created by the Divine, but comes from the vain nothingness out of which a person is created, the Divine cannot be or cause sin in us."³⁸ This statement is insofar paradoxical because on the one hand: "all things are from the Divine and in the Divine." On the other hand, sin is "created out of vain nothingness," that is, not by the Divine. Franck never explicitly said whether people were created by the Divine or not. Franck could be interpreted in his cosmogony in such a way that people were created by the Divine, but the devil (an evil angel) "created death out of envy." In Paradox 2, Franck confirms the Carpocratian Gnosis by separating the Divine from "evil" or sin. People have the Divine within themselves, but at the same time people have succumbed to sin, and sin was not created by the Divine. Compare Paradox 2 by Franck with the statement of the Carpocratians, "that good and evil arise according to the judgment of the people and are not given by nature."

In Paradox 9, Franck discusses the question of whether the Divine must forgive humankind's sin. He uses the Bible as a justification: "And sin is only against us and actually not against the Divine, but our own burden and repentance, as Job shows. If you sin at once, what harm will you do to It? Your wickedness will be only against you and your kind, and your piety will be only for you."³⁹ This statement shows that Franck rejects the doctrine of original sin, just like the Ebionites and Carpocratians. Paradox 275 demonstrates that Franck is not a representative of the doctrine of grace:

We have heard elsewhere (the paradox of sin) that sin is nothing. Because it is not created out of or by the Divine, but has developed itself against the Divine out of our property and is nothing but a useless attempt and undertaking of a thing that one can never accomplish and therefore has to suffocate in desires and hang out of unalignment. Because nobody can do anything against the Divine. That is why sin remains and is nothingness, out of nothingness, from nothingness and goes back into its nothingness, also makes us to nothing and does not have to become nothingness again.⁴⁰

The soul, which does not break away from sin, is the servant of sin (Paradox 276). The key to how people can free themselves from sin lies in the heart of humanity itself (the Christ in us): "Where a person's treasure is, there is the heart; where a person's heart is, there is Divinity."⁴¹ These passages show the parallels between Franck's doctrine and the Ebionites and the Carpocratians who reject the doctrine of grace. The soul can only free itself from sins by recognizing the Divine within the person. The Divine within can be identified with the spirit, which incarnates with the soul in the body. According to Franck, people return to the Divine or they become more divine, because only the Divine is good (*Deus solus bonus*): "The more we pass over from ourselves into the Divine, the more we have the Divine within and the more abandoned we are in the Divine, the more piety, wisdom, truth, etc. we have."⁴²

The main problem for Franck remains that people admire the external Christ and not the internal Christ: "Nobody wants to follow Christ"⁴³; people only worship the external Christ. Every person can find the Christ in themselves: "Live blissfully in this world / ... Then belief is in us / so is Christ and the Holy Spirit in us / then belief is in us / ... / that Christ may win in our hearts through faith / Therefore your faith is in Christ / Christ in your heart / and disbelief means falling away from the heart and from the Divine / ... / and everything that is not the Divine / ..."⁴⁴ For Franck the following notion is significant: When a person finds Christ within one's heart, then there is a symbolic baptism. It is not explicitly clear from this statement whether Franck saw Yeshua as a prophet who "received Christ" when he was baptized at the Jordan. However, Franck tends to represent the position of the Carpocratians, according to which Yeshua was a special person who recognized the spirit (Christ) in himself, because every person can achieve what Yeshua achieved.

The problem of sin and the enlightenment of the soul also occur in Franck's theory of the soul. On the question of the immortality of the soul, he expresses himself very clearly: "What the soul is / it should be enough / that we believe and know that it is / and is a not deadly wind and mind."⁴⁵ Tauler's teaching on the soul is also described very precisely: "The soul emanates from the Divine /."⁴⁶ Tauler, also says: "The Divine created the soul so heavenly /."⁴⁷ With Augustine the soul is created from the Divine and is therefore not pre-existent, in contrast to Plato and the

Platonists, where the soul flows from the Divine and is not created by the Divine as something separate. In contrast to Augustine, the Platonists assume the pre-existence of the soul. It is nowhere apparent from Irenaeus' remarks that the soul is not pre-existent among the Carpocratians and Ebionites. The human spirit in particular was not "generated" as a "divine spark," but is pre-existent.

Franck is undecided about the transmigration of the soul. He first commented on the philosophy of Plato and Pythagoras: "Plato and Pythagoras believe/ the soul will leave [the] body/.... The pagans almost all/ believe that the soul is immortal/ and will return to [the] body according to the deeds in the past life/ it could be that the soul has to change to a body of an animal.... But Iamblichus and Trismegistus disagreed/ they say/ a man cannot return to an animal/ the soul of an animal returns to an animal/ the soul of a man returns in a man."⁴⁸ The soul can "liberate itself from the dungeon" with these philosophers, while in the genuine Christian doctrine (Augustine) the soul can only be saved by the grace of its Creator. As already shown, it is clear from the *Paradoxa* that Franck is opposed to the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of grace. It has already been quoted from *Paradoxa* that sin comes exclusively from people and not from the Divine. Theoretically, Franck is very close to the Carpocratians when it comes to the question of the transmigration of the soul; however, he never did say explicitly that he believes in transmigration. We know nothing about the Ebionites and their view of the doctrine of transmigration, although this doctrine would fit into their basic concept (no doctrine of grace, no original sin).

The fact that Franck is a proponent of the tripartite nature of the soul in "spirit, soul, and body" follows from chapter LXXXI of the *Guldin Arch*. The hierarchy of this tripartite follows that of the Neoplatonists and the Carpocratians: "Mind, body, and soul are three parts/ but in a person/ mind dictates/ the soul appears / the body follows them/."⁴⁹ Similar to the Carpocratians, Franck believes that few people are able to ascend to the "pneumatic person": "A person by nature in divine things is foolish/ ignorant/ and a fool/ and their wisdom is foolishness."⁵⁰ That is why, Franck believes, most people do not recognize the historical and "inner" Christ, because they do not recognize their own pneumatic nature: "He was in the world/ the world is made by him/ the world has not recognized him."⁵¹ This quotation again expresses the ambiguity of Franck's cosmogony, on the one hand the devil (an evil angel) created death and on the other hand "the world was created by Christ."

Conclusion

Significant parallels can be found between the Carpocratians, the Ebionites, and Sebastian Franck. The Carpocratians and Franck believed in the ungenerated Father (the Divine), about whom people cannot say much. The Carpocratians call the Divine the unbegotten father, and Franck comes very close to negative theology. Both the Carpocratians and Sebastian Franck assume the Neoplatonic tripartite of the soul. A complete knowledge of the Mind (Christ) liberates a person from passions and sins. This spirit is inside people. In this respect, there is no difference between the Carpocratians and Franck. Yeshua recognized this spirit in himself and was able to overcome the passions. Franck agrees with the Carpocratians on this point too; he repeatedly urged people to follow Christ and seek the inner Christ. He criticized the fact that people worship too much the outer Christ. However, nowhere is there a hint that man must despise the creators of the world in order to be able fully to recognize the spirit. Cosmogony is

different between the Carpocratians and Franck, because Franck emphasizes that the world was created by Christ, but the devil created death out of envy. The last argument could be interpreted in the sense of the Carpocratians. The dogma is similar in the "creation of sins by people." For Franck and the Carpocratians, sin is not inherent, but was created by people. In the case of the Carpocratians, people can escape the "dungeon" only by compensating for their sins over several lives. Franck does not express himself explicitly in this regard, but he considers the transmigration of the soul possible. It could be that he does not express himself clearly because this philosophy was problematic in the Renaissance.

Franck agrees with the Ebionites in the rejection of original sin and the doctrine of grace. The rejection of external teachings such as the priesthood and the sacraments are also a commonality between Franck and the Ebionites. The fact that Yeshua became a prophet at the baptism at the Jordan by John is not explicitly apparent from Franck's teachings. We also do not know from the fragmentary references of Irenaeus how the Ebionites stand on the concept of the tripartite nature of the soul and its transmigration. The rejection of the doctrine of grace suggests that the "Jewish-Gnostic" sect believed in it. Another similarity between Franck, the Ebionites, and the Carpocratians is their non-Christian philosophy, because they contradict fundamental Christian dogmas.

This paper contains certain methodological and content restrictions. First of all, the influence of the Carpocratians cannot be explicitly demonstrated in Franck, because he did not mention them explicitly anywhere in his writings. It is therefore not certain whether he really knew the Carpocratians from the writings of Irenaeus. But the knowledge of the church writer Irenaeus was relatively common during the Reformation period. The parallels in antinomism between Franck and the Carpocratians are very striking, and thus it is likely that he did know this (heretical) doctrine of the Carpocratians. That he was familiar with the Ebionites and other Gnostic groups such as the Valentinians and the Basilidians is evident from his writings. However, Franck would have made himself even less popular with the Catholic Church if he had clearly pointed out the influence of the Gnostics on his philosophical and religious thought. Secondly, of course, Franck lived in a completely different historical context than the Carpocratians and Ebionites. At the time of early Christianity, the latter were freer to articulate their teachings than Franck in the dogmatic and Catholic times of the Reformation and the Renaissance. Like other philosophers in the Renaissance, Franck came under suspicion of heresy and was imprisoned for a year. Thirdly, one can also argue that the main influence in Franck came from German mysticism (Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler) and not from the Gnostics.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Bibliography

- Barbers, Meinulf. *Toleranz bei Sebastian Franck*. Bonn: Ludwig Röhrscheid Verlag, 1964.
- Ebeling, Florian. *Das Geheimnis des Hermes Trismegistos. Geschichte des Hermetismus*. 2. Auflage. München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2009.
- Franck, Sebastian. *Paradoxa*. 2. Auflage. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995.
- Franck, Sebastian. *Die Guldin Arch, darein der Kern unnd die besten Hauptsprüch der Heyligen schrift ... eingeleibt sind*. Bern, 1557.
- Gilly, Carlos. "Das Bekenntnis zur Gnosis von Paracelsus bis auf die Schüler Jakob Böhmes." In *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, edited by Broek van den, Roelof & Heertum van, Cis, 385-424. Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2000.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. "Gnosis." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, edited by Magee, Glenn Alexander, 381-392. Cambridge: University Press, 2016.
- Hegler, Alfred. *Geist und Schrift bei Sebastian Franck. Eine Studie zur Geschichte des Spiritualismus in der Reformationszeit*. Freiburg, 1892.
- Irenäus von Lyon. *Adversus haereses: libri quinque*. Forzani et Socii, 1907.
- Irenäus von Lyon. *Gegen die Häresien (Contra Haereses.) Des heiligen Irenäus fünf Bücher gegen die Häresien*. Bibliothek der Kirchenväter, 1. Reihe, Band 3. München, 1912.
- Jonas, Hans. *Gnosis. Die Botschaft des fremden Gottes*. Frankfurt: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2008.
- Liboron, Herbert. *Die karpokratianische Gnosis. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Anschauungswelt eines spätgnostischen Systems*. Leipzig: C & E Vogel, 1938.
- Markschies, Christoph. *Die Gnosis*. München: Beck, 2001.
- Mead, George R. S. *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten Truth*. London: Jazzybee Verlag, 1900.
- Mulsow, Martin. "Ideologien des Anciennität, philologische Kritik und die Rolle der 'neuen' Naturphilosophie." In Mulsow, Martin (Hrsg.). *Das Ende des Hermetismus. Historische Kritik und neue Naturphilosophie in der Spätrenaissance. Dokumentation und Analyse der Debatten um die Datierung der hermetischen Schriften von Genebrand bis Casaubon (1580-1614)*. Edited by Mulsow, Martin, 1-17. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002.
- Neugebauer-Wölk, Monika. "Denn dis ist müglich, lieber Sohn! Zur esoterischen Übersetzungstradition des Corpus Hermeticum in der frühen Neuzeit". In *Esotérisme, gnoses & imaginaire symbolique: mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*. Edited by Caron, Richard, 131-144. Leuven: Peeters, 2001.
- Pfeffer, Friedrich. *Studien zur Mantik in der Philosophie der Antike*. Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1976.
- Rudolph, Kurt. *Die Gnosis. Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978.
- Smith, Andre Philip. *The Secret History of the Gnostics. Their Scriptures, Beliefs and Traditions*. London: Watkins Media, 2015 [1893].

Endnotes

¹ Alfred Hegler, *Geist und Schrift bei Sebastian Franck. Eine Studie zur Geschichte des Spiritualismus in der Reformationszeit* (Freiburg, 1892).

- ² Meinulf Barbers, *Toleranz bei Sebastian Franck* (Bonn: Ludwig Röhrscheid Verlag, 1964).
- ³ Barbers uses the collective term “Gnosis” for Gnostic philosophy. Hanegraaff distinguishes between the terms Gnosis and Gnosticism. For him, Gnosis means “inner knowledge” or “inner enlightenment” (Wouter Hanegraaff. “Gnosis” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn Alexander Magee [Cambridge: University Press, 2016], 381-392).
- ⁴ Barbers, *Toleranz bei Sebastian Franck*, 17-19.
- ⁵ Carlos Gilly, “Das Bekenntnis zur Gnosis von Paracelsus bis auf die Schüler Jakob Böhmes,” in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Cis van Heertum (ed.) (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2000), 387-388.
- ⁶ For example: Kurt Rudolph, *Die Gnosis. Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1978.
- ⁷ Kurt Rudolph, *Die Gnosis*, as well as: Hans Jonas, *Gnosis. Die Botschaft des fremden Gottes*. 2. Auflage (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 2008).
- ⁸ Christoph Marksches, *Die Gnosis*, (München: Beck, 2001), 22-23. Marksches defines Gnosticism as follows: “knowledge about divine secrets, which are reserved for an elite” (Marksches, *Die Gnosis*, 23). Concerning the definition of Gnosticism see also: Wouter Hanegraaff, “Gnosis.”
- ⁹ With these examples the list of gnostic groups is of course not complete.
- ¹⁰ Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, “Denn dis ist möglich, lieber Sohn! Zur esoterischen Übersetzungstradition des Corpus Hermeticum in der frühen Neuzeit,” in *Esotérisme, gnosés & imaginaire symbolique: mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, ed. Richard Caron (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2001), 131-144.
- ¹¹ Martin Mulsow, “Ideologien des Anciennität, philologische Kritik und die Rolle der neuen ‘Naturphilosophie,’” in *Das Ende des Hermetismus. Historische Kritik und neue Naturphilosophie in der Spätrenaissance. Dokumentation und Analyse der Debatten um die Datierung der hermetischen Schriften von Genebrand bis Casaubon (1580-1614)*, ed. Martin Mulsow (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 7.
- ¹² Florian Ebeling, *Das Geheimnis des Hermes Trismegistos, Geschichte des Hermetismus*. 2. Auflage (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2009).
- ¹³ Ebeling, *Das Geheimnis des Hermes Trismegistos*, 116.
- ¹⁴ Irenäus von Lyon, *Gegen die Häresien (Contra Haereses. Des heiligen Irenäus fünf Bücher gegen die Häresien, aus dem Griechischen übersetzt von E. Klebba)*. Bibliothek der Kirchenväter, 1. Reihe, Band 3 (München, 1912).
- ¹⁵ Irenäus von Lyon, *Gegen die Häresien*, 25,1.
- ¹⁶ George” R. S. Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten Truth* (London: Jazzybee Verlag, 1900), 232.
- ¹⁷ Irenäus von Lyon, *Gegen die Häresien*, 25,1 und 25,2. Vergleiche auch: Herbert Liboron, *Die karpokratianische Gnosis. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Anschauungswelt eines spätgnostischen Systems* (Leipzig: C & E Vogel, 1938), 41.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25,3.
- ¹⁹ Mead uses the term “illumination” (Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten Truth*, 232).
- ²⁰ Liboron, *Die karpokratianische Gnosis*, 41.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ²² Friedrich Pfeffer, *Studien zur Mantik in der Philosophie der Antike* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1976), 132.
- ²³ Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten Truth*, 232.
- ²⁴ Irenäus von Lyon, *Gegen die Häresien*, 25,4.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*; see also: Luke 12:58 (KJV) Smith refers to Epiphanius who said about Carpocrates: “[he] taught his followers to perform every obscenity and every sinful act. And unless one proceeds through all of them, he said, and fulfils the will of all demons and angels, be cannot mount to the highest heaven or get by the principalities and authorities.” (Andrew Phillip Smith, *The Secret History of the Gnostics. Their Scriptures, Beliefs and Traditions*, [London: Watkins Media, 2015 (1893)]).
- ²⁶ In Latin the original text in Irenäus reads as follows: “*reliqua vero, indifferentia quum sint, secundum opinionem hominum quaedam quidem bona, quaedam autem mala vocari, quum nihil natura malum sit*” (Irenäus von Lyon, *Adversus Haereses: Libri Qinqve* [Forzani et Socii, 1907], 25,5).

²⁷ Liboron, *Die karpokratianische Gnosis*, 28-29.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Irenäus, *Gegen die Häresien*, 26, 2. In Latin the original text reads as follows: „*Quae est Ebionitarum doctrika. Qui autem dicuntur Ebionaei, consentiunt quidem mundum a Deo factum: ea autem quae sunt erga Dominum, (non) similiter ut Cerinthus et Carpocrates opinantur. Solo autem eo quod est secundum Matthaeum Evangelio utuntur, et apostolum Paulum recusant, apostatam eum Legis dicentes. Quae autem sunt prophetica, curiosius exponere nituntur; et circumciduntur ac perseverant in his consuetudinibus, quae sunt secundum Legem, et Iudaico caractere vitae, uti et Hierosolymam adorent, quasi domus sit Dei.*” (Irenäus von Lyon, *Adversus Haereses: Libri Quinque*, 26, 2).

³⁰ Sebastian Franck, *Paradoxa*, 2. Auflage (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 86. The Editor of the second edition Siegfried Wollgast mentions the argument of the rejection of original sin of the Ebionites in a footnote.

³¹ Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten Truth*, 128-129.

³² Franck, *Paradoxa*, 86-87.

³³ Ibid., 86.

³⁴ Franck, *Paradoxa*, 17. Quoted from *Paradoxon I*.

³⁵ Sebastian Franck, *Guldin Arch*, LXXI-LXXII.

³⁶ Ibid., LXXII.

³⁷ Ibid., LXXIII.

³⁸ Franck, *Paradoxa*, 22.

³⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 425.

⁴¹ Ibid., 426.

⁴² Ibid., 25.

⁴³ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁴ Franck, *Guldin Arch*, XLIV.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., XLIV and LXXX.

⁴⁹ Ibid., LXXXI.

⁵⁰ Ibid., LXXXVIII; Franck quotes Psalm IX and further passages of the Bible to show his skepticism against humankind.

⁵¹ Ibid., XCII. See also: John 1:10. Concerning this question Franck very often cites the Gospel of John which is very important for Gnostic philosophy. For example: *The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that its works are evil.*” (Franck, *Guldin Arch*, XCII and John 7:7).