

# Reflections on Gnosticism

JANUARY 1, 2013 · POSTED IN [COMMENTARY](#)

**Han Solo** : *Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid.*

**Luke Skywalker**: *You don't believe in the Force, do you?*

## Leslie Evans

*Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature.* Birger A. Pearson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. 362 pp.

*The Gnostic Bible: Gnostic Texts of Mystical Wisdom from the Ancient and Medieval Worlds.* Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, eds. Boston and London: Shambhala, 2009. 880 pp.

*Voices of Gnosticism.* Miguel Conner. Dublin: Bardic Press, 2011. 225 pp.

*Forbidden Faith: The Gnostic Legacy, from the Gospels to the Da Vinci Code.* Richard Smoley. Harper San Francisco, 2006. 244 pp.



William Blake's "Elohim Creating Adam." Blake, a kind of Gnostic, believed that lower angels created the Earth, while the true God was very far away.

Gnosticism, the Hellenistic mystery religion centered in Alexandria, Egypt, predated and then merged with Christianity, only to be rejected as heresy and violently suppressed. Gnosis is merely the Greek for knowledge, and Gnosticism – more or less, the Knowers – was a coinage that dated only from commentary literature in English in the seventeenth century. The Gnostics, to begin with a single one of their characteristics, rejected the Christian idea that salvation could be achieved by faith, as well as the Greek ideas that grew into materialism. They instead claimed that there was a special secret knowledge that, if sought and learned, could allow the spirit to escape the physical body and return after death to a remote realm of nonphysical existence.

For two centuries, from roughly 100 to 300 CE, the founders of Christianity were locked in a fierce battle with the Gnostic current over who would define Christian doctrine. For those who believe in biblical inerrancy it should be recalled that there was no central accepted orthodoxy for centuries after the death of Jesus. The faction that became Catholicism confronted not only the Gnostics but endless other claimants within the Christian fold, and imposed their views only when Christianity became the Roman state religion after Emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325, and the tendency within Christianity that he endorsed gained the military power to physically crush their religious rivals. The twenty-seven documents composing the New Testament were not approved as canonical until long after that. They were first even proposed in a single list by St. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in 367 CE and finally approved by the Catholic church only in 1546.

That said, even the most Christianized Gnostics, apart from making a prominent place for Jesus in their pantheon, remained an essentially different religion, rejecting even the God that Christians believe created the earth and humanity. The victorious faction within Christianity burned the Gnostics' books and their churches, and sometimes the Gnostics themselves. Thereafter, in Europe, the Gnostic current went underground. Echoes of its mystical views have persisted to our own day as the Western Esoteric Tradition. Its French adherents, the Cathars, were the victims of an exterminating crusade in the thirteenth century. In the seventeenth century Rosicrucianism revived ideas of the ancient Gnostics mixed with support to the Protestant Reformation against Catholicism.

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## HONEY ON THE ROAD TO SAN FRANCISCO WITH SOME OF THE SPANISH EXPLORERS

### NOTES FROM ABOVE GROUND

By Honey van Blossom



(Honey is a Belgian Marxist former strip-tease artiste)



"Cities of the Golden Gate," Raymond Dabb Yelland, 1893. Most illustrations can be enlarged by clicking on them.

## PROLOGUE TO THE STORY OF THE SPANISH EXPLORATION AND SETTLEMENT OF CALIFORNIA

Seasonal migrations of animals now extinct in California probably created the roads the native people used before the Spanish land exploration of California. "The heyday of giant mammals in North America was the middle and late Pleistocene, an epoch that started 2.6 million years ago and ended 11,700 years ago, around the time the Earth was thawing out from the Ice Age. The gigantic beasts, which migrated from Asia across a now-vanished land bridge called Beringia, are known as RanchoLabrean megafauna, after the famous La Brea tar pits in downtown Los Angeles — the graveyard of thousands of saber-toothed tigers, giant bison and other extinct animals."<sup>[1]</sup>

The seasonal migrations of the large mammals may have created the substantial roads used by the indigenous people after their arrival.<sup>[2]</sup>

Paul S. Martin and Richard G. Klein argue that Paleoindian over-hunting led to the extinction of the megafauna.<sup>[3]</sup> Others argue that climate change was responsible for mammoth and mastodon extinctions. As the last major glaciation ended around 12,000 years ago, climate warmed too quickly for the megafauna to adapt.

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In the century beginning in 1850 an occult revival, led by figures such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society, explicitly looked back to Gnosticism as an alternative mystic world view to Christianity, adding elements from Buddhism. Since the end of World War II, and quickening from the 1960s, there has been a new revival of many forms of ancient mysticism. Within that ferment has been growing interest in Gnosticism, fueled by the discovery, at the village of Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, of the first large collection of Gnostic writings. These only became available to American readers with the publication of translations from the Coptic as *The Nag Hammadi Library* in 1978, popularized the following year by Elaine Pagels in her book *The Gnostic Gospels*.

For some eighteen hundred years all that was known of the Gnostics derived from the voluminous hostile polemics against them by the early Church Fathers, written mainly by Irenaeus (130-202), bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul (present day Lyons in France); Hippolytus of Rome (170-235); and Tertullian of Carthage in North Africa (160-225). The first actual document written by the Gnostics themselves to resurface in the West was the *Pistis Sophia*, discovered in 1773 in a Coptic translation from the original Greek. This was translated into Latin in 1856, into German in 1905, and the first English version, by Theosophist G.R.S. Mead, made from the Latin and German versions, was published only in 1921. Beyond this there were only two known original Gnostic documents, the Bruce Codex, which also sat ignored in the British Museum for centuries, from its acquisition in 1769 to its first English publication only in 1978. Lastly, there was the Berlin Codex, four short documents in Coptic, discovered in 1896 but not translated until 1955 and not widely circulated until the 1970s.

The subject was revolutionized by the Nag Hammadi collection. These took more than thirty years to translate and publish, and the work of analyzing them and trying to understand their meaning and historical context began really in the 1980s, with major revisions of our understanding emerging only in the last ten years. Birger A. Pearson's *Ancient Gnosticism* is one of the best summaries of our current knowledge about the Gnostics. William Barnstone and Marvin Meyer in *The Gnostic Bible* offer an exhaustive collection of the known Gnostic writings, grouped for the first time by the various Gnostic schools of thought, an essential aid in disentangling this difficult subject. Miguel Conner's *Voices of Gnosticism* is a transcript of a number of radio interviews with scholars in the field, a light chatty overview. Richard Smoley's contribution is a brief glimpse at the influence of Gnosticism on European esotericism down to our own day.

## MY ENCOUNTERS WITH GNOSTICISM

I first heard of Gnosticism at the age of sixteen back in 1958 in reading Hermann Hesse's novel *Demian*. As you can see from the above, little that was reliable was known about this set of beliefs even when I ran into them, much less when *Demian* was published, in German in 1919. In the story, shy schoolboy Emil Sinclair comes under the influence of Demian, a mysterious older schoolmate. When the story of Cain and Abel is recounted by a teacher, Demian tells Sinclair that Cain was the real hero and Abel was a weakling who deserved to die. Demian gives Sinclair a note telling him that the soul is like a bird whose aim is to fly away from the Earth to find a God named Abraxas. One of Sinclair's teachers tells him that Abraxas was, in antiquity, the name "of a godhead whose symbolic task is the uniting of godly and devilish elements." Demian ultimately reveals that he and his mother belong to an ancient secret religion that traces its lineage back to Cain and reveres the God Abraxas, who presides over both good and evil. A teacher says that people who believed this in ancient times were a sect called Cainites.

Sinclair by accident discovers Demian's secret church. There he is befriended by the organist, Pistorius. He tells Pistorius that he has dreams of flying. Pistorius replies that this is the first step in teaching his spirit how to fly beyond the Earth to reunite with Abraxas, that the secret of surviving death lies in special spiritual knowledge and training, which most people will not bother to undertake. To jump ahead to the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, some of these contain accounts of astral travel. For example, in *Zostrianos* the character of that name is visited by "the angel of knowledge" who takes him on a journey through the heavens. Birger Pearson comments:

"Zostrianos can be seen as a detailed description of the heavenly world, populated by beings we have already encountered in other Sethian texts, including the heavenly Seth, and many more besides." I will come later to who the Sethians were. *Marsanes* is another of the tractates focused on astral travel.

Coming from a family of spiritualists who believed in the Astral Plane and its many ethereal denizens, I was intrigued by this tale of the ultimate secret society that claimed to know the mystery of soul travel. I didn't much care for the notion of embracing evil on a par with good, or see anything admirable in Cain, but I did want to find out more. Only on reading Birger Pearson more than fifty years on did I discover that Hesse had been conned by the old Church Fathers. The Cainites never existed. They were the malicious concoction of an anonymous Church heresiologist known as Pseudo-Tertullian in the 220s. His invention was picked up and imaginatively amplified by Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, circa 310-403 CE.

Hesse, who had been born in Germany but raised in Switzerland, appears to have acquired

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his knowledge of Gnosticism from Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Hesse underwent psychotherapy with Jung's student Josef B. Lang in 1916-1917. He finished the manuscript of *Demian* in October 1917 (see Ralph Freedman's *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis*). Jung in 1916 had penned his own version of a Gnostic myth, *Seven Sermons to the Dead*, in which he wrote: "Abraxas begetteth truth and lying, good and evil, light and darkness, in the same word and in the same act. Wherefore is Abraxas terrible." This was first published privately only in 1920 and circulated only to friends, but Hesse may have seen it or had discussions with Lang about its contents, as its ideas are strongly present in *Demian*.

## THE CORE GNOSTIC MYTHOS

Around 1960 an older family friend with a large library gave me a copy of F. C. Burkitt's *Church and Gnosis*. This presented a wholly different vision from Hesse's Cainites, which I immediately abandoned. Burkitt, whose text was based on lectures given in 1931, was working with scant sources, mainly the Church heresiologists and the *Pistis Sophia*. This last was written later than most of the Gnostic texts found in 1945 and was consequently highly Christianized, claiming to recount eleven years that the resurrected Jesus spent with his disciples in Jerusalem after his crucifixion. Even from these limited materials it was plain that there were many varieties of Gnosticism.

According to the Church heresiologists, Gnosticism was founded by Simon Magus, a Samaritan contemporary of Jesus. The Samaritans are closely related to the Jews and lived in what is now southern Syria. There is a story about Simon in the New Testament book of Acts, where he is described as a wonder worker and prophet in Samaria. It claims that he was converted to Christianity by Philip on a mission there, but then was rebuffed by Peter on a later mission to Samaria, when Simon is said to have offered money to be given the gift of healing.

Birger Pearson accepts that Simon Magus was probably the first Gnostic teacher, but regards the story in Acts as an invention to magnify the importance of Peter and dismisses the idea that Simon had anything to do with Christianity as "obviously tendentious." He points to the fact that Christian apologist Justin Martyr (100- circa 165), himself a Samaritan, describes Simon as having moved to Rome, where he had a large following and preached his non-Christian theology.

According to this source, Simon Magus came from the village of Gitta, and had a companion named Helen, a former prostitute who Simon claimed was the reincarnation of Helen of Troy. Justin also states, mistakenly, that a statue in Rome was built in Simon's honor inscribed in Latin "to the holy god Simon." Birger Pearson tells us that the statue was found in 1574 and the inscription actually reads "to the faithful god Semo Sanco," a figure in the Roman religion associated with Jupiter.

Simon left no writings so it is impossible to know the details of his system. The element of the fallen Helen is similar to the Gnostic myth of the fall and redemption of Sophia. According to a fourth century writing by Clement of Rome, Simon was the favorite disciple of John the Baptist. And while John is revered by Christians as the herald of Jesus as the Messiah, he is also treated as a revered authority by the Mandaeans, the only surviving Gnostic sect, who reject Jesus as a false prophet.

The two major Gnostic figures of the second century and focus of the heretic hunters were Valentinus of Rome (circa 100-160) and Basilides of Alexandria (dates unknown but he taught circa 117-138 CE). Valentinus' doctrines had strongly Christian elements. He was narrowly defeated to be the Christian bishop of Rome. Very little was known about Basilides except that he was the main Gnostic proponent of Abraxas (more commonly spelled Abrasax, a name that by numerology came out to 365, the number of days in the year). On this slim foundation I formed a lifelong dislike of Valentinus as a place-seeker in the world of conventional religion, and a great fondness for Basilides.

The Gnostic congregations were highly decentralized. Their core belief was a strong dualism: that the world of matter was deadening and inferior to a remote nonphysical home, to which an interior divine spark in most humans aspired to return after death. This led them to an absorption with the Jewish creation myths in Genesis, which they obsessively reinterpreted to formulate allegorical explanations of how humans ended up trapped in the world of matter. And they loved myth-making, each prominent teacher embroidering and changing the creation myths in ways large and small.

The basic Gnostic story, which varied in details from teacher to teacher, was this. In the beginning there was an unknowable, immaterial, and invisible God, sometimes called the Father of All and sometimes by other names. "He" was neither male nor female, and was composed of an implicitly finite amount of a living nonphysical substance. Surrounding this God was a great empty region called the Pleroma (the fullness). Beyond the Pleroma lay empty space. The God acted to fill the Pleroma through a series of emanations, a squeezing off of small portions of his/its nonphysical energetic divine material.

In most accounts there are thirty emanations in fifteen complementary pairs, each getting

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slightly less of the divine material and therefore being slightly weaker. The emanations are called Aeons (eternities) and are mostly named personifications in Greek of abstract ideas. Like the God, they are nonphysical light beings. They are described as androgynous or bisexual. The Aeons in turn generate large numbers of simpler entities, sometimes called angels. The first of the great emanations, according to several Gnostic groups, is named Barbelo. This is a predominately female persona. A common stipulation is that only Barbelo is able to see or communicate with the invisible Father God. Even the other nonphysical dwellers in the Pleroma have no contact with this remote entity, sometimes called the Silent God. Often there is a central trinity of Father, Mother (Barbelo), and Son.

The common outcome of the myth rests on the thirtieth emanation or Aeon, Sophia. This is both the Greek word for Wisdom and also a woman's name. Sophia becomes jealous of the power of the Father of All to create. Without permission of her consort, the other of her matching pair, she gives birth or otherwise creates an offspring. It proves to be monstrous, with the head of a lion and the body of a serpent. She names him Yaldabaoth. He is also called Saklas (in Hebrew, the fool), and Samael (the blind God).

Ashamed of her progeny, Sophia takes Yaldabaoth outside of the Pleroma and hides him in a cloud. There he matures alone, having no knowledge of his origins. Imbued from birth with a portion of the divine material he inherited from his mother, Yaldabaoth, now given the title Demiurge (Greek: craftsman), creates a dozen Archons (Commanders), and then, in a mirror image of the great emanations of the Pleroma, hundreds of lesser angels. Yaldabaoth then creates the cosmos, understood to mean, not the entire universe as in modern usage, but the known planets. These were, in the order then understood: Moon, Venus, Mercury, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the zodiac of visible stars. According to the new Ptolemaic system of astronomy, all of the stars were thought to be attached to a single crystal sphere.

Yaldabaoth assigns seven of his Archons to rule over the seven planetary spheres, then creates the Earth and decides to populate it. He has his angels make Adam, each of 365 angels contributing a single part. But Yaldabaoth and his Archons find that their creature is lifeless, or at least unable to stand. By this time Sophia has discovered what her offspring has done and is horrified at the fate of the humans he is in process of creating, who will be encased in deadening matter as in mobile tombs. In one version she and her consort come down from the Pleroma and trick Yaldabaoth into breathing life into Adam and Eve, thereby giving them and their descendants greater spirit power than the Demiurge is able to retain. In another version Christ or another Illuminator comes to earth disguised by a magic helmet and imbues the near-lifeless human prototypes with tiny divine sparks.

Yaldabaoth then creates the Garden of Eden, not on Earth as in Genesis, but at the level of the stars. He cruelly tells his human captives not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In some versions, for example, in *The Hypostasis of the Archons* among the Nag Hammadi texts, the serpent is the agent of Sophia, urging Adam and Eve to disobey; in more Christianized accounts it is the Christ who comes to the garden to warn Adam and Eve of the Demiurge's plan to enslave them in deadening matter. As must be clear by now, Yaldabaoth is known by Jews and Christians as Jehovah, or just as God. The Gnostics frequently and ironically quote Yaldabaoth declaring that he is a jealous god, claiming in his ignorance that he is the only God.

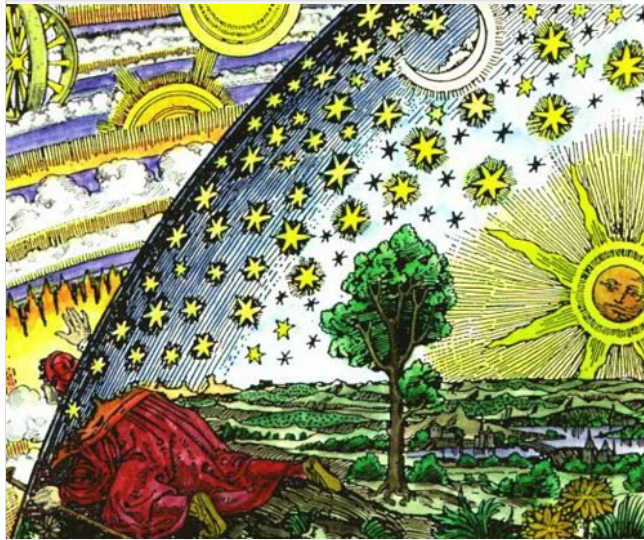
The Gnostics similarly offer counter versions of the accounts of God's destructiveness in Genesis, where the vindictive Demiurge sends flood and fire in a vain effort to wipe out humanity, of which he has become jealous. Noah's flood is an act of blind vengeance thwarted not by Noah's ark but by entities from the Pleroma hiding the children of Seth in a cloud. Sodom and Gomorrah were holy cities destroyed out of Yaldabaoth's cruelty. In the *Apocalypse of Adam*, Abrasax is one of three angels who come from the Pleroma to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this and several other Sethian texts, so called because of the importance given to Adam's third son, it is the incorporeal Seth who provides salvation, and is called, not a savior, but an "Illuminator of knowledge." Note that unlike the God and Jesus figures of Christianity, such saving acts are not offered to individuals and are not scheduled for masses at the end of the world but are extremely rare events directed to groups of the people of Seth threatened by the Demiurge and his Archons. There are other illuminators mentioned in Gnostic texts, so it seems that Seth is *primus inter pares*, not the unique God figure Jesus is imagined to be, and his role, like that of lesser illuminators, is mainly to awake susceptible humans to their inner spark and prepare them for their cosmic journey.

Finally, the role of a savior, even in the later documents when this is (mostly) Jesus, is not to die for people's sins. Sin has little to do with the Gnostic vision, particularly the peculiar Christian concept of original sin borne by every human. The savior figures in Gnosticism try to wake people up from the deadening effect of being encased in matter and prepare them for the arduous nonmaterial individual flight through the cosmos after death to try to reach the Pleroma and re-merge their divine spark with the main mass located there.

In the Gnostic cosmos each of the "planets" is ruled by one of the Archons and the spirit released from matter by death must persuade the Archon to allow it to pass through that "planet's" crystalline sphere.

Burkitt has an interesting discussion of this cosmology that I have not seen reprised in the recent works. Burkitt proposes that the planetary cosmology so central to the Gnostic mythos

was an effort by Jewish Christians to incorporate the latest science of their day into their belief system. It looks bizarre to us today only because the ancient science has been since discarded. The new science of the second century CE was the Ptolemaic model of the universe, the pride of Greek civilization of its day. This was the model in which the Earth was a sphere in the center of the universe. The Earth was thought to be surrounded by nested transparent crystal spheres, the "seven heavens" of proverb, one for each of the planet-type objects, which included the Sun and Moon. The eighth sphere, the ogdoad, contained all of the fixed stars. On the other side of this sphere of the zodiac were imagined various celestial locations, from Plato's realm of perfect ideas to the abode of gods, to the Christian heaven, to the Gnostic Pleroma.



Often seen on the Internet as a "Gnostic" image this is actually a depiction of the ancient Hebrew cosmology of the Old Testament with a flat earth and a single hard dome called the Firmament containing the sun and stars. This is an 1888 engraving by French astronomer Camille Flammarion illustrating a story of a medieval monk who claimed he came to the end of the Earth and found a hole in the hard dome and stuck his head out.

That this was a wrenching ideological change was because the Hebrew scriptures, today the Old Testament, embodied the view general among not only the Jews but virtually all the surrounding peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean except the Greeks, that the world was not only the center of the universe but was flat, covered with a single hard bowl called the firmament. For example, in the book of Job, Elihu asks Job, "Can you beat out [ raqa ] the vault of the skies, as he does, hard as a mirror of cast metal (Job 37:18)?" The Jewish Encyclopedia expands on this:

"The Hebrews regarded the earth as a plain or a hill figured like a hemisphere, swimming on water. Over this is arched the solid vault of heaven. To this vault are fastened the lights, the stars. So slight is this elevation that birds may rise to it and fly along its expanse."  
(<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4684-cosmogony#2736>)

For the ancient Jews the planets and stars were all stuck to a single hard surface over a nearly flat Earth, so close that birds could bump into the stars. One could stop here and ask our present day Evangelical believers in biblical inerrancy who are so numerous in the American Congress how the God of the universe could have been so ignorant.

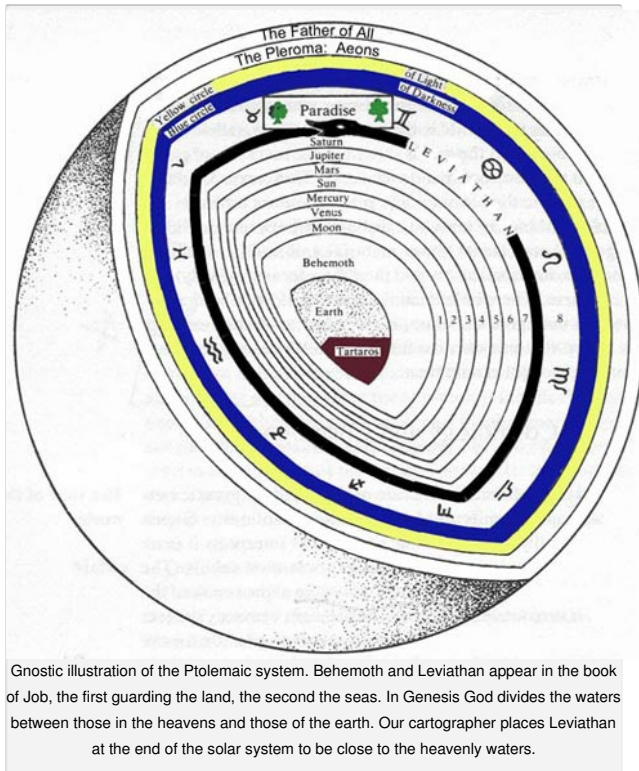
F. C. Burkitt points to the difficulty this bumptious cosmology posed for Jewish Christians living in cosmopolitan, Greek-dominated Alexandria:

"Towards the end of the first century of our era this new, scientific, 'Ptolemaic' view of the world had come to be held by most cultivated persons in much the same sort of way as most cultivated persons now believe in 'Evolution'."

In both systems the Earth was the center of a relatively tiny universe. The Hebrew cosmology with its one fixed dome could not explain the motion of the planets among the fixed stars. Ptolemy envisioned a set of nested transparent spheres, each of which could rotate independently of the others. This could explain the rising of the Sun, which in the Hebrew/Biblical cosmology simply hid behind a distant mountain every night, and the wanderings of the known planets.

Even a century after the heyday of ancient Gnosticism Catholic theologians were reluctant, on biblical grounds, to accept that the Earth was round, and still retained the old Jewish cosmology of a single solid sky. Saint Augustine (354–430) on the nature of the firmament wrote, "We may understand this name as given to indicate not it is motionless but that it is solid." He also ridiculed the idea that the Earth was round and people on the other side of the globe walked upside down: "But as to the fable that there are Antipodes, that is to say, men on the opposite side of the earth, where the sun rises when it sets to us, men who walk with their feet opposite ours that is on no ground credible."

The Gnostics, then, sought to remain current with the science of their day. But in the Ptolemaic system the planets had been promoted from mere moving points of light to the central points on gigantic crystal spheres far larger than the Earth. Many of the Greeks now thought of the planets as minor gods. For the Gnostics in particular this posed the problem of how the escaping spirits were supposed to get through each of the eight transparent spheres to reach the Pleroma. Hence their concern with inventing verbal formulas and supposed passwords for the voyaging spirits to declaim to each planetary Archon or its minions to gain passage.



The Gnostics also differed from the Christians on how the material world would end. For the Christians it would come with the rise of the Anti-Christ, the battle of Armageddon, and the second coming of Jesus to hold the Last Judgment in which all of the dead would be raised at once in their physical bodies. For the Gnostics there was no general resurrection, only the departure of individual spirits, and never with their physical bodies, which the spirit was eager to escape. The material world would fade away as more and more of the divine sparks departed to rejoin the Pleroma, and would finally simply collapse when all of the divine material was gone. Humans whose spark was missing or too weak, or who lacked any consciousness of their true state and therefore made no effort to reach the Pleroma would simply be extinguished.

Insofar as Jesus is grafted onto this very different world view, the radical distinction the Gnostics made between matter and the nonphysical world made it impossible for them to accept the idea that any entity from the Pleroma was ever actually a human being, much less that any human being could possibly be a God. Their various groups found different solutions for this, all of which fall under the doctrine called Docetism, the belief that Jesus was never human and appeared on Earth as a kind of phantom. One version of this has the ghostly Jesus watching from a nearby hillside as some poor human is crucified in his place. In another the spirit of Seth "puts on" the body of Jesus like a costume or a case of spirit possession and leaves it before the crucifixion, making Jesus something of an animated puppet. In a related and nominally more Christian version the Christ of the Pleroma is the entity that enters and possesses the body of the mere human Jesus, usually at the time of Jesus' baptism, leaving it again just before the crucifixion.

In my youth I absorbed this mythos with fascination. I never took it literally, in part because the contrarian retellings of Genesis seemed so intentionally allegorical, and because of the obvious limitations of the science of the second century. I was always interested, if not quite a believer, in the possibility of realms of nonphysical entities and some kind of afterlife. I did not on that account ever become so world denying as the Gnostics. Reduced to its most minimal essentials, I read Gnosticism as resting on a few simple propositions:

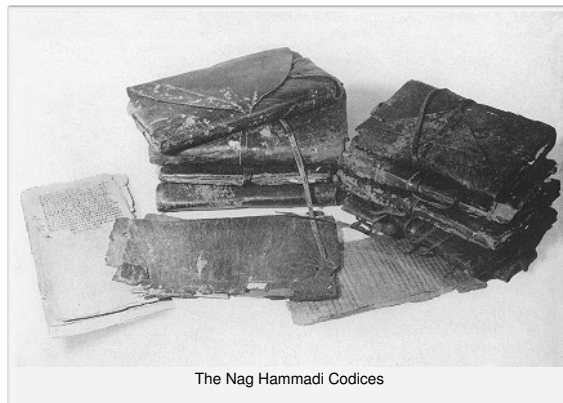
- There is no God or savior figure that answers any kind of personal prayers. The Christian conceit that they can ring up God or Jesus for an uplifting chat on that huge switchboard that can handle millions of simultaneous very personal calls, or get results by praying to improve the health of their ailing uncle, win for them the coveted promotion at work, or improve their love life, is utterly absent from the Gnostic vision.

- Insofar as there is any survival of human personalities after death this is not guaranteed and cannot be secured by personal declarations of loyalty to any supernatural entity as Christianity maintains. But it may happen and this depends on a combination of one's innate nature, which

is not changeable, modified by knowledge and concentration on that end.

- Insofar as anyone survives death, contrary to the Christian version, they do not take their body with them, and are not instantly transported to a post-death destination such as heaven. Instead, as an incorporeal shade, they must make their way by their own wits across the visible universe to a place beyond the stars where they would become part of the plane of nonphysical, bisexual energy beings.
- Life in one's physical body exaggerates the separation of subject and object, and even in one's most alert states of consciousness is like sleep compared to existence as a disembodied spirit.
- There are many kinds of nonphysical entity of the types the Greeks called daimons, as on Earth there are all kinds of people with many and complex motives. This differs from the Christian hard division of all supernatural entities into wholly good or wholly evil, angels or devils, although the Gnostics did pose an opposition between the entities from the Pleroma and those of the Demiurge, mainly on their different attitudes toward physical matter.

## THE Gnostic CANON TODAY



Birger A. Pearson, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at UC Santa Barbara, is a distinguished scholar of Gnosticism and one of the translators of the Nag Hammadi Codices. (A codice is something between a scroll and a book. They are leather bound sheets of handwritten text.) The Nag Hammadi discovery was of fourth-century translations into Coptic of older Greek originals. There were twelve codices or volumes, containing forty-four separate documents, called tractates, plus eight duplicates. The best guess on their origin is that they were part of the library of a Christian monastery and were buried by monks who sought to protect them from destruction during an intolerant purge by their superiors. There are by now numerous editions in English. The earlier ones simply present the whole collection. Recent scholarship has shown that the texts, as one would expect from a library collection, are from different sources, not all Gnostic, and among the Gnostic documents, from different schools. This is easier to follow in the most recent collection, *The Gnostic Bible*, compiled by Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, which includes materials from other sources beyond Nag Hammadi.

Barnstone and Meyer break the texts, which appear in full, down into seven categories: Early Wisdom Gospels, in particular *The Gospel of Thomas*, which was long thought to be a Gnostic work but in fact is a version of Christian mysticism; the Literature of Gnostic Wisdom, which is Gnosticism proper, which they divide into four types; Hermetic Literature, the second century Egyptian writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a staple of Renaissance mysticism and marked by strong Gnostic elements; and then on to independent Gnostic religions further removed from its Syrian-Egyptian origins: Iranian Manichaeism; Mandaeanism, the only surviving Gnostic sect, among the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq; Islamic mysticism; and the medieval French Cathars.

Birger Pearson provides a detailed survey of all of these sources with the exception of the Islamic and the Cathars. He critiques, summarizes, and quotes from all of the major documents. It is best to read *Ancient Gnosticism* with a copy of Barnstone and Meyer or one of the earlier Nag Hammadi collections at hand to look more closely at the full text of some of the core documents. Be aware, however, that the Barnstone and Meyer translations are much smoother and more polished than the earlier editions.

Now that the mass of writings has had time to be assimilated, a number of revisions in the Gnostic landscape emerge. First, none of the Gnostic teachers described by the Church heresiologists are mentioned. None of the tractates list an author or provide any history of the teachers or groups that produced them. At best it has been possible to distinguish Valentinian from other unnamed schools by a comparison of quotations in Irenaeus and Hippolytus to otherwise anonymous papyri. In the process a new category has emerged. These are the adherents of Seth. Barnstone and Meyer identify twelve tractates as Sethian, including the more recent separate discovery of *The Gospel of Judas*. Pearson classes thirteen of the Nag Hammadi scriptures as Sethian, which he also calls Classic Gnosticism, the school that was least Christianized and most clearly professed the Sofia myth. Nine of the others have been

identified as Valentinian. Nothing of Basilides has survived except scattered fragments. And these, to my dismay, Pearson tells us, show him to have been even more militantly Christian, in the Gnostic manner, than Valentinus.

The most important of the Sethian documents is *The Apocryphon (secret book) of John*. It begins nominally with the resurrected Christ descending to Earth to instruct the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee. But the story he tells is of the invisible unknowable entity, the One. This invisible and incomprehensible entity's "thought became a reality, and she who appeared in the presence of the father in shining light came forth." This is Barbelo, "the mother-father." Barbelo asks the invisible great spirit for several qualities: foreknowledge, incorruptibility, eternal life, and truth. These all appear as separate creatures and stand beside her. She then becomes pregnant by the invisible One and bears a child, who in turn asks the invisible One to create more creature-attributes. Thence comes Mind, who in turn asks to have Will created, and then Word. The child is now referred to as the "self-created god." Four luminaries "derive" from the child-god. These are named Harmozel, Oroiael, Daveithai, and Eleleth.

Next come spirit versions of the later early mythical humans: Geradamas, the spirit of Adam, and his son, the spirit Seth.

The last of the great aeons is Sophia, "who is the wisdom of afterthought and who constitutes an eternal realm." She gives birth without the consent of her consort. "Something came out of her that was imperfect and different in appearance from her." Her progeny "changed into the figure of a snake with the face of a lion." This is Yaldabaoth, who Sophia casts outside the Pleroma and hides in a cloud. In this version, Yaldabaoth produces out of the power of his mother that is within him twelve authorities or Archons. Seven of these he stations at the seven planetary bodies, "one for each sphere of heaven." The remaining five "reign over the depth of the abyss." The twelve powers in turn create between them 365 angels.

Sophia repents her actions, which have dimmed her own powers by the share imbued in Yaldabaoth. The beings of the Pleroma have pity on her and she is restored some of her power but not allowed to return to the Pleroma, instead placed in the ninth heaven, just above the realm controlled by her son the Demiurge.

In the Gnostic cosmology there are three levels of being: matter, soul, and spirit. Soul is something intermediate between the spirit beings that inhabit the Pleroma and the physical creatures of the Earth. In later Western mysticism this is the astral body, different from the Christian idea which does not distinguish between soul and spirit. When Yaldabaoth and his Archons decide to create Adam they first make a soul body, what Barnstone and Meyer call a "psychical man with a psychical body." The 365 angels each make a part to compose the psychical Adam. The text names each of the angels and the part each was responsible for. Taphreo, for example, made the backbone while Boabel made the toes. When this psychical body is completed it remains lifeless.

In the *Apocryphon of John* it is five "luminaries" who are sent by Barbelo who trick Yaldabaoth into breathing into his inert creation. "He breathed his spirit into Adam. The spirit is the power of his mother, but he did not realize this, because he lives in ignorance. The mother's power went out of Yaldabaoth and into the psychical body that had been made to be like the one who is from the beginning." Yaldabaoth and his minions soon realize that Adam has become superior to themselves through the infusion of light energy so they throw Adam "into the lowest part of the whole material realm."

Barbelo takes pity on the divine material within Adam and sends a spirit-being to help him. This entity hides within Adam to advise him. In the earlier translations, such as the 1988 edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library*, such beings are identified by their Greek names, this one called Epinoia, which Pearson renders "reflection." Barnstone and Meyer choose to render all of the traditional Greek terms into simple English, so the Pleroma becomes just "the fullness." In some ways this makes the text more easily understood, but it tends to obscure the personifications conveyed by the Greek designations, as the texts treat these as both abstract ideas and actual beings. In Barnstone and Meyer the creature who hides inside Adam is just "afterthought."

Now the Archons mix up a batch of matter from the then-known elements – earth, air, fire, and water – and imprison Adam in a physical body, "the fetter of forgetfulness." Thus "Adam became a mortal being, the first to descend and the first to become estranged." The encased Adam is banished to "paradise," where the tree of life's branches are death and the "dwelling place of those who taste of it is the underworld." In this text it is Jesus, not the serpent, who tells Adam to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which Yaldabaoth wanted to withhold from his creation.

The tale goes on, with Yaldabaoth creating, then raping Eve and throwing the primal couple out of paradise. Yaldabaoth, not Adam, is said to be the father of Cain and Abel. Seth, the third son, is the only true child of Adam and Eve. The consequences of Yaldabaoth's actions were to introduce sexual intercourse into the world and to make the humans forget their origins in the realm of light.

After relating this creation myth, Jesus and John discuss life after death. Jesus proposes that



the spirits of light and darkness compete for influence over each soul. In those humans where the spirit of light predominates they will "be taken up to eternal rest." Those who do not know where they belong, that is who do not have the knowledge of the origins of their divine spark, will be imprisoned by the Archons until they awaken from their forgetfulness. Some "will be made to follow another in whom the spirit of life dwells, and she is saved through that one. Then she will not be thrust into flesh again." This seems to point to the idea of reincarnation. Those who reject the light entirely will suffer eternal punishment.

The document concludes with Jesus telling John the story of Noah's flood, in which Noah is warned by the emissary of the light, but not only his family but many other of the descendants of Seth were hidden in a cloud and survived the flood. Thereafter Yaldabaoth's angels disguised themselves as women's husbands and slept with them to produce humans in whom the spirit of light was very diluted and these descendants remain in ignorance to the present day. This seems to be derived from Genesis 6:4 in which the Nephilim, described as "sons of God," have sex with Earth women and produce a race of giants, though in Genesis this takes place before the flood rather than after.

What to make of all this? Birger Pearson points out that despite the incorporation of Jesus into the frame story, "the basic myth contained in it has no Christian feature in it at all." In fact, a shorter version of this text exists in which Jesus does not appear, strongly suggesting that it has pre-Christian origins and the Jesus element was "interpolated into the text by a Christian editor." His best estimate is that the first version dates from late first century, contemporary with the drafting of the Christian gospels. Most of the other Gnostic texts are from fifty to eighty years later, and by the time one gets to the third century and the *Pistis Sophia* they are heavily Christianized, but that generally means appropriating Jesus as a spokesman for the Gnostic mythos.

Pearson points to two other Nag Hammadi tractates that display the same pattern, *Eugnostos the Blessed* and *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. Of the fourteen known Sethian texts, six incorporate no Christian element. Pearson lists these as: *Apocalypse of Adam*, *Thought of Norea*, *Three Steles of Seth*, *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, and *Marsanes*. The first is strongly Jewish, the last four influenced by Middle Platonism. The remaining eight have been Christianized, but to various degrees. For example, in *The Gospel of the Egyptians* it is the spirit-being Seth who "puts on" the young Jesus to manipulate his body to carry out Seth's mission of illumination.

## WHO WERE THE GNOSTICS?

Despite the wealth of original documentary material now available, none of it contains any account of the Gnostic groups or teachers. Any deductions about their origins, apart from the limited and not always reliable writings of their enemies, depends on contextual analysis. This is leaning away from the traditional view that they were simply Christian heretics or, more generously, one of the many varieties of early Christians. Their central focus on the Hebrew creation myths and the extensive use of Hebraic names for many of the entities that are not Greek abstractions strongly suggests a Jewish origin, despite their hostile interpretation of the God of the Torah.

Pearson suggests that the Gnostic current arose either prior to Christianity or at least parallel to it. None of the existent texts appear to date earlier than around 90 CE and most are mid to late second century. This is after the Roman war on the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the start of the Jewish Diaspora, followed by Rome's crushing of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136 CE). These events must have been more shattering for ancient Judaism than the Holocaust of the twentieth century. The evidence then, as now, that people are on their own in face of an unpredictable and commonly hostile world was infinitely greater than the claim that a personal God is concerned with the fate of every sparrow.

One place of exile was the cosmopolitan Greek-dominated city of Alexandria, which developed a large Jewish community. There the exiled Jews would have come in contact with Plato's ideas as well as the Ptolemaic astronomy so marked in the Gnostic scriptures. Platonism is strongly evident in the concept of the Pleroma, as well as the description of its denizens as the embodiment of Greek abstractions about mental processes. Plato was a metaphysical dualist, dividing reality into a nonmaterial realm of ideal unchanging perfect forms and the lower material world of imperfect, changeable, and mortal copies. Plato in fact coined the usage of calling the creator of the material world the Demiurge ("craftsman"), often applied to Yaldabaoth, without the attendant mythology the Gnostics built onto this terminology.

Pearson concludes:

"Gnosticism is clearly dependent upon aspects of Platonist philosophy. It is also clearly dependent upon aspects of Jewish religion, most notably apocalyptically oriented Judaism. The most plausible way of explaining these dependencies is to posit a Jewish origin for Gnosticism, involving Jews who had imbibed a good deal of Greek philosophy."

While the Gnostics were disappointed in and rejecting of the Jewish God, they nevertheless based their speculations on Jewish writings and traditions. Pearson comments:

"The main difference between Gnostic eschatology [the part of the theology concerned with death, judgment, and an afterlife] and biblical-Jewish eschatology is that the former is focused on the return of the individual soul to its divine origins."

Pearson regards as outmoded the view of scholars from before the Nag Hammadi publications who saw the Gnostics as anti-Jewish Christians who had incorporated Hellenistic ideas while rejecting the Jewish God and the Old Testament. Instead, Pearson maintains that the Gnostics were engaged in an extreme form of Jewish religious speculation. The obvious problem being confronted in separating the Earth and its creation from the transcendent God is the explanation for evil. Jews previously had explained it by demonic forces. And who created the demons? In Jewish literature these were angels who rebelled against God. Pearson takes the issue back one step: Why would God create angels who would rebel against him? The Gnostics conclude the speculation by surmising that the problem is not a handful of evil angels but that the creator of the world was an inferior being while the true God was too remote to pay attention.

I had always taken the Sophia myth as inspired by the Greeks or by a non-Jewish eastern Mediterranean mystery religion. In fact, as Pearson documents, it has a Jewish origin, which runs through the book of Proverbs. Here in Proverbs 3:18: "The Lord by wisdom [Sophia] founded the earth." And then Sophia (wisdom) is personified and speaks (8:22-31):

"The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of long ago.  
Ages ago I was set up,  
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.  
When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs  
abounding with water.

Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth –  
when he had not yet made earth and fields,  
or the world's first bits of soil.

When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the foundations of the deep,  
when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not  
transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him, like a master  
worker [demiurge];  
and I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race."

(New Revised Standard Version. Note also that the skies were made "firm" and the earth had "foundations." And here in the Old Testament Sophia herself is the demiurge.)

This is clearly the material for a creation story differing from Genesis, and on which the Gnostic myths were built.

Similarly Pearson cites ambiguities in the original Hebrew of the account of Cain's birth in Genesis, where the conventional translation has Eve saying she bore Cain with the aid of YHWH but could be read "I have gotten a man, namely Yahweh." The Gnostics held that Cain's original name was Yahweh. This traces back to Rabbinic commentary where one school of Jewish thought held that Cain was fathered not by Adam but by Samael, the Angel of Death, a name the Gnostics applied to the Demiurge along with Yaldabaoth and Saklas. Here we have another Hebraic origin of their mythological speculations.

The schools of Gnosticism are today divided into three broad categories, the Syrian-Egyptian, which we have been following, marked by the Sophia myth and including Sethians, Valentinians, and Basilidians; Hermetic, around the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus; and the Iranian, which encompasses Manichaeism and Mandaeanism, these last two beyond the scope of this survey. The followers of the prophet Mani were centered in Iran and powerful throughout the Roman Empire and its successor region until the seventh century. They retained many believers in south China until the seventeenth century. As a variant of the Gnostics, they professed a cosmology divided between a distant world of light and the realm of material darkness. The Mandaeans were not so widespread but are the only continually surviving Gnostic movement, limited today to southern Iraq.

Pearson ultimately views Gnosticism as a particular Jewish response to a flowering of individualism that began throughout the region in the first century BCE and ran through the third century CE, which combined both pessimism about the external world with a breaking away from communal orthodoxies and ties and a search for individual self-realization. For the Gnostics this was not only looking forward to their soul journey to the Pleroma on death but looking inward to discover the divine spark that gave them hope that such a journey was a possibility.

## MIGUEL CONNER'S INTERVIEWS

Radio interviews by their brevity and absence of source material have their limitations, but this is an informative collection in adding some informal insights from specialists. Conner hosted a long-running radio show that specialized, improbably, in commentaries on Gnosticism, initially titled *Coffee, Cigarettes & Gnosis*. He captures the Gnostic ethos nicely in his introduction when he describes it as "a dualistic theme of existentialist despair yet ultimate, ecstatic liberation."

Stevan Davies, professor of Religious Studies at Misericordia College, Pennsylvania, comments on why the Gnostics were so focused on the creation story in Genesis:

"When you understand how the problem arose, of the spirit being trapped in the human body in the world, then you can reverse the process. That seems to be the reason why they're so obsessed with creation mythologies. It's not for its own sake, speculating about how the world came into being, it's the idea that you would want to reverse the process and send the world back into God where it came from." Davies himself is a nondenominational Christian and views Gnosticism from that perspective. He agrees with Birger Pearson that the *Apocryphon of John* was a work of Jewish speculation before it was Christianized, not an anti-Jewish polemic, as some scholars have concluded from its hostile attitude toward the Jewish God:

"I think that the only people in the world who really had a serious concern for the Jewish Torah were the Jewish people. So I don't envision a bunch of pagan people, or any non-Jewish people, suddenly getting obsessed with revising the Jewish scriptures. I think Jewish people worked with the Jewish scriptures."

There is a nice interview with the ever-readable Bart Ehrman on the large number of variants in the surviving manuscripts that make up the Christian New Testament, of which no copies of any of the documents can be dated earlier than the year 200, some 150 years of hand copying after they were written, and some texts survived only in copies of considerably later date. In addition, many of the ultimately rejected gospels were considered canonical by Christians as late as 400 CE. He points out that there have been found more than 200,000 variations in the surviving manuscripts of the Gospels. In one case, the story in John of the adulteress about to be stoned where Jesus says "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," is entirely missing from the earliest version of this document and was added by some scribe only centuries later. When the Bible was translated into English they did not have access to what are now known to be the earliest versions. These facts convinced Ehrman, who began as an Evangelical fundamentalist, that the New Testament could not possibly be the inerrant word of God.

Birger Pearson, who we have already spent some time with, makes an appearance, where he takes up the cudgels against present day scholars such as Karen King who deny that Gnosticism was a separate religion but see it as simply a Christian heresy. He comments:

"This was the standard view until the nineteenth century when historians of religion were interested in the comparative study of near-eastern and middle-eastern and Indian and other traditions [and] began to look at the bigger picture and could see that what was described at that time by the early Christian fathers as Gnosticism looked an awful lot like some of the stuff they were uncovering in ancient Babylonia or ancient Iran or ancient India."

He does say clearly in response to a question from Conner that he believes the Gnostics regarded their versions of stories about the events in Genesis as allegorical and never intended them to be taken literally.

John D. Turner, professor of Religious Studies and Classics at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, is another specialist in Sethian Gnosticism. He affirms that Sethianism is pretty certainly the earliest form of Gnosticism and that "we have no figure that we can identify as the founder of this movement." He believes it began among dissenting Jewish priests as early as the second century BCE. He suggests that they left Jerusalem in disgust at the corrupt Temple leadership and developed in exile their radical re-interpretation of the Old Testament.

Turner complicates the picture by proposing that the *Apocryphon of John* is a fusion of the views of two distinct early Gnostic groups. The Sethian theology, he says, is marked by a dominant trinity of the Invisible God, his consort Barbelo, and the self-generated child, and in their writings it is Barbelo who acts to rectify the damage done by Sophia. A different group, the Ophites, from the word for serpent, whose writings see the serpent in paradise as a positive figure, have a pantheon of five figures rather than three, and have Sophia herself arrange to have the divine spark instilled into the original humans.

Turner is more interesting when he turns to why the Gnostics settled on the obscure Seth as their central figure, about whom little beyond his birth and list of descendants is mentioned in the Torah. He proposes that they are confronting the favorable account in the Pentateuch of

the creation by the God they now regard as ignorant and inferior and responsible for the deadening world of matter. The Pentateuch is credited to Moses, and Turner comments, "Moses was never in Paradise. Who was in paradise? Adam was in paradise." And his son Seth long predated Moses.

Turner elaborates this more fully in his "The Gnostic Seth" in Stone and Bergren's *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible*. Here he cites ancient Jewish sources of biblical commentary that regard Seth as the only biological child of Adam and Eve. The *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* held that Samael, the angel of death, was the father of Cain and Abel. The *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* held that Cain and Abel were sons of the devil. Genesis lists two genealogies, the descendants of Cain and those of Seth. The sources Turner quotes regard the descendants of Seth as the righteous and those of Cain as a wicked people. This view imbues the Gnostic Sethian writings where they regularly refer to themselves as "the seed of Seth." Turner adds that the Gnostic centrality of Seth seems to be because Seth is never credited with praising Jehovah or having any special relations with him, unlike his father Adam or figures like Moses.

Einar Thomassen, a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Bergen in Norway, was interviewed about the Valentinians. Thomassen says that it is a mistake to imagine that there was a central strong Catholic Church combating numerous small heretical Christian sects. "There wasn't really one Christian community, but a lot of Christian communities, all over the capitol [Rome], and they were all teaching their own adaptations of Christianity." Valentinus and his Gnostic variant was just one more. He sees the Valentinians as a compromise between Christianity and classic Gnosticism in that they did not think the material world all bad, believed that the remote God had some influence on the creation of the material sphere, and that there was a limited redemption possible for Yaldabaoth. He does not see a continuity between the old Gnostic trinity and the one that came to be central to Catholicism:

"I think that the trinity is actually an idea that was created in its present form in the fourth century when you have the various church councils, and so on, who have defined metaphysically the idea of a trinity. I don't think you have anything like that anywhere in the second century."

Thomassen is asked what finally happened to the Valentinians. He replies:

"You know, the last we hear of the Valentinians is very precisely dated. It's August 1, 388 C.E., where there was an incident in a village in upper Mesopotamia or eastern Syria where some of these fanatical monks – there were a lot of those in that time – were burning down the church of some Valentinians in that place. And this we know only because Bishop Ambrose tells us of the incident. He tries to persuade the emperor not to punish those monks who, in his opinion, acted quite righteously."

## THE GNOSTIC LEGACY

Except for the Mandaeans in Iraq there is no proof that any Gnostic group survived continuously down to our own day. There are strong continuities mediated through Iranian Manichaeism that re-penetrate Eastern and Western Europe over the millennium after the original Jewish-centered originators are gone. After that the connections with successive occult movements become more attenuated.

There is a substantial literature that seeks to trace Gnostic influence in Europe over the centuries. Richard Smoley's *Forbidden Faith: The Gnostic Legacy* is just one example, a brief survey that skims the surface of a large and complex topic and is not always as specific as could be desired. Smoley is not a learned scholar with command of the ancient languages but was the long-time editor of the journal *Gnosis*, which focused on Western spiritual traditions. I will skip his summary of the original Gnostics as we have covered that ground. And Manichaeism is further afield than I care to go. The dualist doctrine of the remote god of light and the nearby one of evil who controls the world of matter returns to Europe with the Paulicians of Armenia, followers of the New Testament St. Paul, but with a Gnostic interpretation of the two rival Gods. The Paulicians flourished between 650 and 872, when Armenia was split between Persia and the Byzantine Empire.

Little is known of their doctrine except that they rejected the Old Testament, viewed the God of Earth as evil, and looked toward a good God in an afterlife. They saw Christ as a spirit being rather than a human and so did not venerate Mary.

A larger and more influential sect, the Bogomils, arose in Bulgaria around 900 CE and spread among the Balkan Slavs, remaining powerful into the early 1300s. Again, they believed in a dualism between good and evil gods. Like the original Gnostics they professed Docetism, claiming Christ was a spirit entity only. The Byzantine Empire tried to suppress them, and in the twelfth century the Orthodox Serbs drove them into Bosnia. The Bogomils won power in Bosnia in the fourteenth century. After the Muslim conquest by the Ottoman Turks in the 1450s, however, most of them converted to Islam. Smoley does not touch on this, but part of the reason for Islam's success in the Eastern Mediterranean was the widespread rejection by heterodox Christians such as the Bogomils of the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Among the

Gnostic-like sects the Christ was distinguished from the human Jesus, and even the Christ was viewed at most as a powerful angelic figure, not as God, while the human Jesus was mostly seen as a vessel for spirit possession.

Next in line were the Cathars, also called Albigensians, ultimately centered in Provence in southeastern France, the region whose capital is Marseille. Said to have been founded through conversions by Bogomil preachers, the Cathars first appeared in Cologne in Germany in 1143. Catholic officials had the archbishop of Cologne and his unrepentant followers, branded as Cathars, burned to death. This Gnostic Christian doctrine then took root in southern France, where it generated two somewhat different schools of thought, one that later scholars describe as "mitigated dualists," who followed the original Gnostic doctrine that the evil God had been produced from elements around the good God, and another school now called "absolute dualists" who believed good and evil principles existed separately from the beginning of eternity, which implied that the powers of the good God were limited. The two groups remained on good terms. The Cathars were also known for producing the romantic troubadours and the ideas of courtly love of the late Middle Ages.

Also informative on the Cathars are the few of their original documents to survive, reprinted in Barnstone and Meyer's *The Gnostic Bible*, as well as Willis Barnstone's introduction to that section of the anthology.

The pope declared a crusade against the Cathars in 1209, which raged for twenty years of brutal savagery. The Inquisition burned large numbers of the Cathar elite alive. The Cathars were destroyed in France with the long siege of their last fortress, at Montsegur at the edge of the Pyrenees. In March 1244 more than two hundred of the leading figures from the fortress were burned alive. A small remnant fled to Italy where they survived into the fourteenth century.

## THE RENAISSANCE AND AFTER

Gnosticism revives again in Europe after the Turks captured Constantinople in 1453 and many Greek scholars fled to Italy, bringing copies of ancient manuscripts with them. At the request of Cosimo de Medici, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), best known for translating the whole of Plato's works into Latin, made a Latin translation of the documents known as the Corpus Hermeticum. These made a huge impact, not as a religious movement but among Renaissance intellectuals. These documents carried the authority they did because they were mistakenly attributed to an ancient Egyptian sage, thrice-great Hermes, or Hermes Trismegistus, who was identified with the Egyptian ibis-headed god Thoth and believed to date back to the time of Moses. This was a non-Jewish, Egyptian source, actually written in the second century CE.

The first of the Hermetic texts is the *Poimandres*, the title taken from the name of the narrator, a being whose name signifies a personified attribute of God as *Nous* (intellect or intuition). Poimandres tells a disciple a creation story. As in Classic Gnosticism, " *Nous*, God, being male and female, beginning as life and light, gave birth, by the Word, to another *Nous*, the Creator of the world." ( *The Way of Hermes*, p. 19). This second god, while not a negative creature like Yaldabaoth, is of a lower order. This bisexual entity creates the world of matter. And as in the Gnostic eschatology, humans contain an immaterial spark that must, after death of the body, transcend the eight spheres surrounding the Earth and make its way back to the realm of the higher God. The Hermetic writings do not include the mythology about multiple emanations and Sophia, but the general outline is very similar.

The Hermetic texts held their high position for a bit more than a century, until in 1614 the Swiss Calvinist Casaubon proved that they could be dated no earlier than the beginning of the Christian era. The use of the Ptolemaic system should have been a dead giveaway. Gilles Quispel, emeritus professor at Utrecht and Harvard, in his introduction to the text quoted above notes that two Hermetic texts were included among the Nag Hammadi tractates and one of these suggests the Hermetic writings in some form may have long predated the documents translated by Marsilio Ficino after all, though certainly not back to the eighth century BCE, which is the earliest mention of Moses.

The Corpus Hermeticum also contained materials about alchemy and astrology that prompted interests that contributed to the modern sciences of astronomy and chemistry, which in the sixteenth century were just emerging from their magical beginnings.

In the same period Jewish Kabbalah, which had absorbed Gnostic elements, attracted the interest of European intellectuals, particularly under the influence of the German scholar Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), who championed the teaching of Hebrew in German universities to gain access to these documents and to the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament.

The century following the publication of the Hermetic texts is a period of occult ferment in Europe. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) called for a revival of what he thought of as the ancient Egyptian religion. He was also an early advocate of Copernicus's heliocentric theory of the solar system and, remarkably for his age, went beyond Copernicus by claiming that the Sun was just a star like all the others, drifting in an infinitely large universe filled with many other

worlds. He was burned at the stake for these ideas on the order of Pope Clement VIII.

A contemporary in England was John Dee (1527-1608), Queen Elizabeth's court astrologer. Dee was a leading mathematician of his time and a prominent expert in navigation. He was influential in laying the groundwork for the British empire, but was most famous for his long experiments in communications with spirits and angels. Dee also made an expedition to Poland and to Prague, then the capital of Bohemia, where he met with rulers deeply interested in alchemy and communication with spirit beings. His interests have led scholars of today to regard him as an important predecessor to the Rosicrucian mysticism that emerged just a few years after his death. (See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, "The Rosicrucian Prelude: John Dee's Mission in Central Europe," in Matthews, et al., *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment Revisited*.)

A wonderful fictional account of both Bruno and Dee is contained in John Crowley's *Ægypt* series of novels: *The Solitudes* (originally titled *Ægypt*), *Love & Sleep*, *Dæmonomania*, and *Endless Things*. The distinguished literary and religious critic Harold Bloom includes the first two of this series in his expanded list of The Western Canon, several hundred European and American works beginning with Gilgamesh and extending up to its compilation in 1994. Bloom considers himself a Gnostic and develops his somewhat idiosyncratic views on this in *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*. Crowley's series also shows a strong influence of Gnostic themes.



The Rosicrucian Temple of the Rosy Cross, 1618

In the seventeenth century we come to the great Rosicrucian furor, begun with the publication, in 1614 and 1615 in Germany, of two anonymous manifestoes claiming to speak for a secret occult society said to have been founded by Christian Rosenkreutz, who was supposed to have been born in 1378 and died in 1484. The manifestoes, published almost a century into the Reformation, affirm a strong anti-Catholic Protestantism merged with Hermeticism.

For a long time the Rosicrucian documents were dismissed by scholars as an irrelevant hoax. No one has ever established that the secret order of the Rosy Cross existed in fact. But historian Frances Yates in her *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* established beyond doubt that there was a lively experimentation with occult matters linked to Rosicrucianism. A key center of this was the court of Frederick V, Elector Palatine (1596-1636), the young ruler of the German principality of the Palatinate. He strongly supported occult studies and Hermetic scholars at his court at Heidelberg. A number of Rosicrucian and Hermetic treatises were published at places in the Palatinate. Invited to become king of Bohemia, which was launching a Protestant revolt against the Catholic Holy Roman Empire, Frederick and his English bride accepted. He was crowned in Prague in August 1619. This touched off the Thirty Years War. Frederick was defeated and driven into exile in November 1620, the brevity of his reign earning him the nickname "The Winter King." His exile led to the dispersal of the mystical scholars who had gathered at his courts.

Smoley continues with figures and movements that, independently of the old Gnostics, adopted views that in part echoed theirs. He includes the German mystic Jacob Boehme, the original Freemasons, the Bavarian Illuminati of Adam Weishaupt, proclaimed in 1776, and the Swedish Christian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. From there he moves on to stock characters of occult speculation such as the adventurers the Comte de St.-Germain and

One of the major moderns to declare for Gnosticism was the poet and artist William Blake (1757-1827), a founder of Romanticism. Subject throughout his life to visions of angels, Blake considered himself a Christian but repudiated the official churches. He maintained that each human contained a portion of godlike material, which he interpreted to mean that God was not a separate and superior being. He also, in the full Gnostic spirit, claimed that the Earth was not created by the highest God but by Elohim, a lower angel, seemingly equivalent to the Gnostic demiurge.

Smoley comes finally to the Gnostic revival in the late nineteenth century, which begins with Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891) and her Theosophical Society and is carried on by her acolyte, the indefatigable independent scholar G. R. S. Mead. Blavatsky, dismissed by mainstream academics as a crank, had an influence on the twentieth century almost as great as that of Sigmund Freud. She was the principal initiator of Western interest in Eastern religions, mainly Theravada Buddhism, and the occult revival. She paved the way for major esoteric figures of the early twentieth century such as Rudolph Steiner, George Gurdjieff, Peter Ouspensky, and Krishnamurti, and ultimately the currents that coalesced as advocates of New Age spirituality.

The New Age covers a very diverse assortment of people and movements that have broken with conventional religion, particularly Christianity, but find scientific materialism inadequate, or incomplete, either on moral or ontological grounds. They have more than their share of insipid mauling about crystals and auras that makes it hard to take them seriously, but the countercultural spiritual movement also contains people seriously concerned with alternate states of consciousness, lucid dreaming, and, further afield, new efforts with the kind of research done a century earlier by the Society for Psychical Research. This and the preference within the New Age to rank personal empirical spiritual experience higher than received doctrine, knowledge ahead of faith, mark them as kindred to the old Gnostics. They have been unsatisfied with scriptural authority while feeling a need to explore expanded states of consciousness to see where these may lead.



Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky with her close associate Henry Steel Olcott. Olcott was a colonel in the Civil War and served on the investigating committee into Abraham Lincoln's murder. He lived in India from 1879 until his death in 1907, and is still honored in Sri Lanka for his support to Buddhism.

Blavatsky taught a doctrine with a strong affinity for Gnosticism, depicting a cosmos whose higher levels were nonphysical consciousness and grading downward ending in its densest realm of physical matter. Individual human souls were said to be a spark that sought to unite with a remote "over-soul" in the nonphysical realm. She claimed that Gnosticism was the heart of a traditional ancient wisdom and that Christianity was "the usurper and assassin of the great master's doctrine." Smoley cites a key statement on this from Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* :

"It requires a *lower order of creative angelsto* 'create' inhabited globes – especially ours – or to deal with matter on this earthly plane. The philosophical Gnostics were the first to think so, in the historical period, and to invent various systems upon this theory. Therefore in their schemes of Creation, one always finds their *Creators* occupying a place at the very foot of the ladder of spiritual Being. With them, those who created our earth and its mortals were placed on the very limit of *mayavi* [illusory] matter, and their followers were taught to think – to the great disgust of the Church Fathers – that for the creation of those wretched races, in a spiritual and moral sense, no high divinity could be made responsible, but only angels of a *low hierarchy* , to which class they relegated the Jewish God, Jehovah." (From *The Secret Doctrine* , 1888, her emphasis.)

I was never attracted to Blavatsky, because of her pseudo histories of humanity, which posit multiple sequential racial groups from the mythical continents of Atlantis and Lemuria. Also because it was one thing for people of the second century to think in terms of what we today call Creationism, however non-Christian, but it would seem that this would need a little

distancing when writing about world origins in recent decades. I had a discussion of this last spring with John Michael Greer at a conference on peak oil in Pennsylvania. Greer writes widely on the threat posed to industrial civilization by the depletion of oil and other essential minerals, but he is also Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America and one of the country's most prominent occultists. He insisted that Blavatsky intended her pseudo histories to be allegorical and figurative.

Which brings us down to the present. Science charts the history of the known universe from the Big Bang through the origin of life on this planet, and across the vast space of time it has taken for organic evolution to produce, pretty plainly by accident within the general framework of the rules of natural selection, we humans, who have been here for hardly a few moments of the geological timeline and seem unlikely to last a great deal longer the way we are heading. The dinosaurs lasted 165 million years. The earliest modern human appeared 43,000 years ago and agriculture goes back only 10,000 years. It is pretty difficult to have the chutzpah to claim that the Earth, much less the universe, was created by some supernatural spirit just for us.

We could add to that the effects on human personality of disease or injury to the organic brain as an obstacle to the idea that there is a personality independent of the physical body.

The Gnostics were prototypical rootless cosmopolitan Jews, eerily similar to the emancipated Jews in the late nineteenth century who, when freed from the stett and allowed out of the Pale of Settlement, or offered citizenship in Germany, exploded in creative speculation beyond the bounds of rabbinic commentary. In their way the Jewish Gnostics were experimenters who relied on personal experience and refused to accept either faith or reason as the ultimate arbiters of truth. Many of their writings look foolish or bizarre because they are bound up with a long-outmoded science and they chose to try to explain their ideas by making allegorical use of Jewish creation myths that all but the most extreme Evangelical Protestants and Islamic and Jewish conservatives now see as fairy stories. If they had known modern science would they have given the whole thing up? That is, is there a loophole in the evidence that makes a place like the Pleroma conceivable?

Physics today is in another period of transition as consequential as the adoption of the Ptolemaic system, confronted by numerous rival theories of the underlying reality behind our perceptions of the physical world. Some of those theories, such as proposing the actuality to be a great hologram or the universe as an information system analogous to a computer program, begin to see the universe as physically immaterial, its physicality an artifact of the informational construct, like the images on your computer screen. Does this leave an opening for the Buddhist belief that the world is an illusion, or the Gnostic reversal of the priority of matter and energy? Were these not just foolish fantasies but intuitions drawn from the immersion of the brain in the holographic or information matrix? There are even a few scientists who think so.

Religions are as powerful as ever despite the Enlightenment, and at least some of the certainties of nineteenth century materialism look narrow and dogmatic. Is the persistence of religion just a sign of incorrigible human wishful thinking, perhaps hard-wired into the brain as an inability to fully conceive personal annihilation? Or is there some possibility that buried under the ossification of doctrine, religion survives because some transcendent experience occurs often enough to enough people to keep alive a belief that there are other planes of existence? If so, the Gnostic approach seems more likely to uncover it, while the faith-based scriptural dogmas of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism mostly reinforce earthly political and ethnic prejudices.

In the end, Han Solo is probably right, that a good blaster is more useful than the Force. But, just maybe, Skywalker has it right.

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**Tags:** no tags

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## COMMENTS

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Comments are closed.

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□ Gnosticism, the Hellenistic mystery religion centered in Alexandria, Egypt, predated and then merged with Christianity, only to be rejected as heresy and violently suppressed. Gnosis is merely the Greek for knowledge, and Gnosticism - more or less, the Knowers - was a coinage that dated only from commentary literature in English in the seventeenth century. A Reflection on the Gnosticism of our Times. There is a line in the first letter of John (read on the Monday of this week), a line that proves of critical important to many difficulties today with heresy, unbelief and moral decay. The line says: Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.