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# Gnosis and Primitive Christianity: A Survey (1)

Abraham J. Malherbe

The phenomenon known as "Gnosticism" has enjoyed the attention of more researchers into the background and development of primitive Christianity than almost any other subject. Perhaps, when one notices the many prefabricated molds into which the material for the study has been made to fit, it will be more correct to say that Gnosticism has been at the mercy of a great host of investigators whose main contributions have not always been objectivity or lucidity. Gnosticism is such an important factor in the study of the New Testament and of the early church, that the serious student cannot afford not to come to grips with it. It is the purpose of this study to survey the field rapidly and to introduce the reader to the literature, problems, and theories pertaining to the study. A survey of this type can be of value only if it is made in the light of recent discussion. The main feature of this study will therefore be the continual references to contemporary discussions of Gnosticism. References to the older works will only be made if they stand as mileposts in the history of the investigation.

## Definition

A claim to be able to define Gnosticism and to give an account of its origin would be highly presumptuous at this stage of scholarly investigation. The terms "Gnosticism" and "Gnosis" are used in this paper to denote those Christian sects or individuals who were so violently opposed by the early church. This use of *gnosis* and *gnostikos* is a modern one and is not derived from the early church as denoting the large, ill-defined movement that we have in mind when we use them.<sup>1</sup> The term "Gnostic" is derived from the emphasis placed by these ancients themselves on *gnosis*, "knowledge."

The cardinal characteristic of Gnostic thought is its dualistic view of the universe and the divine power. The deity is supramundane and is in no way responsible for the universe, which came into existence through emanations from the divine being. The human soul, or according to the Gnostics, man's true, inner self, is part of the divine being, but, having been overpowered by demonic beings, now finds itself captured in the cosmos, over which the demons have dominion. The heavenly being sends his Son down to the cosmos to redeem those who really belong to him. By virtue of their true,

<sup>1</sup>See R. P. Casey, "The Study of Gnosticism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1935), pp. 45-60 for a discussion of *gnosis* and *gnostikos*.

spiritual nature, they recognize the Son and are illuminated, receiving knowledge, *gnosis*. This knowledge is revelatory, and thus of a religious nature, and not the rational cognition of philosophy. The reception of *gnosis* by the *pneumatikos*, the spiritual man makes him again a partaker of the divine nature. The redeeming Son now again ascends to the Father and in his ascent brings to nought the power of the demonic forces who try to restrain him.<sup>2</sup>

This basic outline posed certain problems for Christianity. One of these problems involved the question of Christology. If all matter is evil, as the Gnostics said, how does one reconcile this with the incarnation, that is, with the assumption of the material body by the Son? This problem was overcome either by Adoptionism or Docetism, that is, either by the statement that the divine Son was not really united with the human body, but that the Father only "adopted" the human Jesus and thus ascribed the value of sonship to him, or, that the Son only appeared or seemed (*dokein*, "to seem") to have a human body.

Another problem involved Christian ethics. If matter is evil and thus of no positive value, what effect does it have on one's moral conduct? Again, there were two possible views, quite different from each other, namely license and asceticism. Since not the body but only the spirit of the *pneumatikos* is important, one could be morally free and indulge all one's desires, since these acts could not possibly affect one's true self. On the other hand, since the body is so inferior, one could say that it was to be denied and was to be brought under subjection to the higher, spiritual entity.

It should be emphasized that this sketch, although basic to most of the Gnostic systems, does not represent everything called "Gnostic." Almost any one system will differ in some aspect from what has been said. The only way to obtain any familiarity with Gnosticism is to read Gnostic material. When this is done, it will be observed that one has to come in contact with the phenomenon in order to understand it, or at least, to know what it is. In this it is like existentialism, with which, according to some modern existentialists, it has much in common.<sup>3</sup> Of primary Gnostic material, the

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<sup>2</sup>For a sympathetic (!) description of what is basic to Gnosticism, see R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*, New York, 1956, p. 162ff.; Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, 1958, p. 31ff.

<sup>3</sup>Thus especially Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spaetantiker Geist*, 2 vols.: I, Goettingen, 1933, 1954; II, Goettingen, 1954; and Heinrich Schlier, "Das Denken der fruehchristlichen Gnosis," in *Neutestamentlichen Studien fuer Rudolf Bultmann*, hgg. von W. Eltester, Berlin, 1954.

most accessible to readers of this journal are the "Hymn of the Pearl" in the *Acts of Thomas*,<sup>4</sup> and selections from the *Hermetica*.<sup>5</sup>

### Sources, Methodology, and Origin

Determining the origin of Gnosticism is as hazardous as defining it. We are primarily concerned with the adaptation of Christians to the above Gnostic base. However, the situations in which early Christians found themselves, and to which the apologists addressed themselves, will be immeasurably illuminated if it can be determined whether Gnosticism was of Greek or Oriental origin, or of both, and whether it was pre- or post-Christian in origin.<sup>6</sup>

The nature of the sources of early Gnosticism has been the chief obstacle in arriving at any consensus on these matters. The main sources have been secondary ones, namely the polemical writings of the Church Fathers against the Gnostics. Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Origen, and Epiphanius quote from some Gnostic writings and summarize some of the systems. When it is remembered that these writers were vehemently battling the views they preserved for us, it will be understood that great care should be exercised in forming opinions of the Gnostics from them. After all, one is not too likely to emphasize those elements in an opponent which are orthodox, or point out those characteristics worthy of emulation! Nevertheless, the skepticism of many writers regarding the veracity and the value of the Church Fathers as sources for early Gnosticism, is not justi-

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<sup>4</sup>Most accessible in English, in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1955, and in Greek, in Max Bonnet, *Acta Thomae*, Leipzig, 1883. Although the *Acts of Thomas*, except for this hymn, has been retouched by orthodox hands, it still represents a form of Gnosticism less gross than most other extant Gnostic writings.

<sup>5</sup>A good selection in English from the *Poimandres* is found in C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, New York, 1957, p. 80ff. The standard text to be used is that of A. D. Nock and A. J. Festugiere, *Hermes Trismegiste, Corpus Hermeticum*, 4 vols., Paris, 1945.

<sup>6</sup>An excellent survey of the study of Gnosticism, with a recent bibliography, is to be found in M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* II, Munich, 1950, p. 586ff. The most recent books in English are: Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, 1953, and R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, London, 1958. The latter although focusing attention on a small area, is probably the best introduction to the latest relevant literature.

fied. Some investigation into the reliability of these sources has been made with positive results.<sup>7</sup>

The best material, however, is still original Gnostic material. Some such material is embedded in some Fathers. These blocks of material have been subjected to close scrutiny and are still, despite the recent discoveries (see below), the best material for the non-expert to work with. Thus, in Clement of Alexandria, a sophisticated kindred spirit, there is a collection of excerpts from Theodotus, a member of the Valentinian school.<sup>8</sup> Epiphanius, in *Panarion* 33:3-7, contains a letter of Ptolemaeus, a "bud of the Valentinian school" (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I, 1, 1-8,4), to Flora.<sup>9</sup> In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Origen contains forty-eight fragments from the commentary on John by Heracleon, another disciple of Valentinus.<sup>10</sup> Finally, there is the newly discovered cache of Gnostic writings, for the most part Valentinian. These will be discussed in greater detail

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<sup>7</sup>For a general view of the sources, and for a suggestion of the different layers of material in them, see A. Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristliche Literatur bis Eusebius*. Although Harnack's work has been superseded in many respects, contemporary scholars would do well to note his suggestions, especially on the sources for Valentinus. For Iranaeus, see A. Hilgenfeld, *Ketzergeschichte des Urchristentums*, p. 52. For Hippolytus, see G. Salmon, the cross references in the *Philosophumena*, in *Hermathena* 5 (1885), pp. 389-402; H. Staehelin, *Die gnostische Quellen Hippolyts in seiner Hauptschrift gegen die Haeretiker (Texte und Untersuchungen 6, 3)*, Leipzig, 1890; and S. Schneider, *St. Hippolyt on the Greek Mysteries*, Rospr. Akademji 56 (1917), pp. 329-377.

The sources have especially been worked over in order to determine the system of Valentinus. Cf. W. Foerster, *Von Valentin zu Herakleon*, Giessen, 1928; and C. Barth, *Die Interpretation des Neuen Testaments in der valentinianischen Gnosis (Texte und Untersuchungen 37)*, *passim*. The most helpful introduction to this aspect of the study is by G. Quispel, "The Original Doctrine of Valentine," *Vigiliae Christianae* 1 (1947), pp. 43-73.

<sup>8</sup>A beautiful example of the kind of work that is needed in the study of Gnosticism is that of R. P. Casey, *The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria (Studies and Documents)*, London, 1934.

<sup>9</sup>A. Harnack, *Der Brief des Ptolemaeus an die Flora: eine religiöse Kritik am Pentateuch im 2. Jahrhundert*, 1902, pp. 507-545; G. Quispel, "La Lettre de Ptolemee a Flora," *Vigiliae Christianae* 2 (1948), pp. 17-54, and his edition of the text, *Lettre a Flora*, Paris, 1949.

<sup>10</sup>W. Foerster, *op. cit.*, has discussed these fragments in their context in Origen, and has placed them in position in the development of second century Valentinianism.

in the survey. Of this material there have been published *The Gospel of Truth*,<sup>11</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*,<sup>12</sup> *The Gospel of Philip*,<sup>13</sup> and *The Apocryphon Johannis*.<sup>14</sup> These are really the only definitely second century primary Gnostic material at our disposal.<sup>15</sup>

In working with this material, which is difficult to handle and which represents a religious entity difficult to understand from the outside and almost two millennia removed, it is not surprising that different approaches have been made, and different results have been obtained.

The first great proponent of the Oriental origin of Gnosticism was W. Bousset, the real father of the *religionsgeschichtliche* method for the study of ancient religion.<sup>16</sup> The Oriental view is largely dependent on this method, and consequently those who hold to it, mostly German scholars,<sup>17</sup> stand or fall with it. The *religionsgeschichtliche* method, or the "history of religions" method, as it may be clumsily translated, approaches the study of a particular religion by studying it in its setting within surrounding religions and with the phenomenon of religion as the guiding principle.<sup>18</sup> Locale, source, and tem-

<sup>11</sup>M. Malinine, H.-C. Puech, G. Quispel, edd., *Evangelium Veritatis*, Zurich, 1956. (Fortunately for the impecunious student, future publication of these discoveries will be in two editions: The de luxe edition like this one, which contains a reproduction of the Coptic text, with translations in French, German and English, with elaborate notes in French, and an inexpensive edition on the order of the Bude texts.) The pages missing from this edition, having become available only after its appearance, appear in German translation by H.-M. Schenke in the *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 83(1958), cols. 597-500.

<sup>12</sup>A German translation by Johannes Leipoldt appears in the *Theologisches Literaturzeitung* 83(1958), cols. 481-496.

<sup>13</sup>A German translation by H.-M. Schenke appears in the *Theologisches Literaturzeitung* 84(1959), cols. 1-26.

<sup>14</sup>The text appears in W. Till, *Die gnostische Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502* (*Texte und Untersuchungen* 60), Berlin, 1955. The importance of the *Apocryphon Johannis* appears from the fact that it is found in three different recensions in the Nag Hammadi library.

<sup>15</sup>C. H. Dodd thinks that the first tractate of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is earlier than Valentinus, and thus not later than A.D. 125-130. Cf. *The Bible and the Greeks*, London, 1935, Pt. II, and *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 12, notes 1 and 2. This cannot be regarded as having been definitely established, however.

<sup>16</sup>First developed in his *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Goettingen, 1907. Bousset applied the method, developed in this ground-breaking work, to the study of Paul in *Kyrios Christos*, Goettingen, 1913, p. 222f. His views are accessible in English in his article on "Gnosis," in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition.

<sup>17</sup>These national classifications are very broad and loose. Harnack and Leisegang, for instance, would not fit into this grouping.

<sup>18</sup>Sir James Frazer's monumental, *The Golden Bough*, is the classic example of this method.

poral relationships are not assigned much value. The main emphasis is placed on the phenomenological elements. Certain motifs are traced, and interpretation takes place upon them as a basis. By using this method, Bousset found that Gnosticism was a mystic religion with an Oriental, dualistic basis. He thought that a type of Syrian Gnosis was at the bottom of it all.

W. Anz arrived at basically the same view, except that for him a Babylonian background was more probable. He saw the emphasis as being not so much on dualism *per se*, as on the ascension of the soul through the heavenly constellations which are ruled by evil spirits.<sup>19</sup>

The best known modern theologian who depends on this approach is Rudolf Bultmann. Present-day German New Testament scholarship is heavily indebted to him for its general view and many of its presuppositions. Bultmann's methodology is faulty, and in the light of this it is surprising that he has exerted so much influence. Somewhat like Bousset, he joins all the elements of different Gnostic systems together and constructs a pan-Gnostic system, which certainly did not exist. Especially important for him is the Mandaean literature. This body of literature dates from about A.D. 700, however, so "for any history of the Mandaeans and their beliefs before 700 we are dependent solely on inference and speculation."<sup>20</sup> Bultmann thinks that the traditions on which the Mandaean literature is based can be traced to the beginning of the Christian era, however, and it is upon this ground that he posits the theory that John's Gospel is a Christian revision of the Mandaean myth. A recent statement by Alan Richardson is very much to the point here.

It will be noted that when scholars like Bultmann describe a Gnostic doctrine they take their first-century 'evidence' from the New Testament itself. But this is a question-begging proceeding, since the New Testament is susceptible of a very different interpretation; if there is no real evidence for a developed 'Gnosticism' in the first century outside the New Testament, then the New Testament can hardly be used as evidence for its existence.<sup>21</sup>

It has been seen then that the *religionsgeschichtliche* method is embarrassed by the paucity and the late date of the sources. It is historically inaccurate in its phenomenological approach, and it is therefore fluid enough for one to be able to find whatever he is looking for, wherever he wants to find it, whenever he wants to find

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<sup>19</sup>*Ursprung des Gnostizismus (Texte und Untersuchungen 15)*, 1897.

<sup>20</sup>C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1953, p. 115.

<sup>21</sup>Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, London, 1958, p. 41f.



it. Proponents of this method usually read the late evidence back into the New Testament, and then they conclude the Gnosticism existed earlier than Christianity and that it materially affected it as early as the writing of the New Testament.

Proponents of the view of Oriental origin build their study mainly on the myth of the redeemer, who overcomes the problem posed by dualism. The mythological element thus predominates. Those who hold to a Greek origin, on the other hand, see the rationalistic aspect of Gnosticism reflected in Greek philosophical thought. For them dualism is the basis on which the study is to be conducted. Harvey, in the introduction to his edition of Irenaeus,<sup>22</sup> discusses the Greek background and reveals clearly the emphasis placed on dualism.

Harnack described Gnosticism as the "acute Hellenising of Christianity."<sup>23</sup> According to him, the Gnostics were essentially Christian philosophers. He sees the allegorization and spiritualizing of the Old Testament as due to the influence of Greek philosophy. The hidden meanings thus obtained gave readers of the Old Testament a strange interest which was carried over into Christianity. This preoccupation with that which is hidden developed under Greek influence into Gnosticism. Harnack regarded the Oriental characteristics that he could discern in Gnosticism as representing a lower type of Gnosticism.

Hans Leisegang,<sup>24</sup> like Paul Wendland,<sup>25</sup> think that Greek philosophy played an important part in the formation of the Gnostic systems. They regard the Oriental motifs as the constituent parts of a mosaic, with Greek philosophy being the cement that holds it together.

De Faye<sup>26</sup> belongs to this general view rather than to the pronounced Oriental school. He is more conscious of the need to develop a sound methodology and has tried to work one out. De Faye does not think that one can speak of "Gnosticism" proper until about A. D. 120. From a close study of the second and third century sources, he concludes that there are three stages of development of Gnosticism, corresponding roughly to the first half of the second century, the second half of the second century, and the third century. In the

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<sup>22</sup>W. W. Harvey, *Sancti Irenaei ep. Lugdunensis libros quinque adversus haereses*, Cambridge, 1875. Cf. also C. Baumker, *Das Problem der Materie in der griechischen Philosophie*, 1890; S. Petrement, *Le dualisme chez Platon, les gnostiques et les manicheens*, 1947; W. Theiler, *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus*, 1930.

<sup>23</sup>A. Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, 1896-1900, I, p. 227.

<sup>24</sup>Hans Leisegang, *Die Gnosis*, Leipzig, 1924, p. 3ff.

<sup>25</sup>Paul Wendland, *Hellenistische-roemische Kultur*, Tuebingen, 1912, p. 163ff.

<sup>26</sup>E. de Faye, *Gnostiques et Gnosticisme*, 2nd edition, Paris, 1925.

first period the Gnostics applied a philosophic exegetic method, while in the last there is an overwhelming sacramental outlook. This development in Gnosticism would parallel that in Neoplatonism. While de Faye's work is encouraging, the details of his conclusion will not stand up in the light of the Nag Hammadi discoveries.

Finally, with regard to the Greek background, attention should be drawn to the work of Torhoudt.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps because of the fact that this stimulating work is written in Dutch, it has not received much scholarly attention. Torhoudt isolated a Gnostic system in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, which represents to him in rough outline the system of Valentinus. He suggests a common source for Plutarch and Valentinus. Plutarch does mention Plato's dualism in his discussion of the mysteries. Harvey<sup>28</sup> has pointed to Valentinus' possible dependence upon the Greek philosophers. If Torhoudt's thesis is valid and is developed, the whole question of the relationship between Gnosticism and the mysteries would be opened up.<sup>29</sup>

A third theory of the origin of Gnosticism which is constantly gaining in popularity, is one which relates to the rise of Judaism and Christianity.<sup>30</sup> Just as the New Testament has been viewed through glasses tinted with preoccupation with eschatology in the last fifty years, so now Gnosticism is related to apocalypticism.

Burkitt<sup>31</sup> thinks that Gnosticism was an expression of ordinary Christianity in terms and categories which suited the science and philosophy of the day. He tells that if we can make our way through the unfamiliar imagery to the ideas that they attempt to express, some of these forms will appear really thoughtful to us and will show kinship with some modern philosophical and psychological conceptions. To him Gnosticism was a Christian product, an attempt to fill the void left by the failure of apocalypticism and the eschatological hope. Robert Grant has taken up the task from Burkitt.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Albert Torhoudt, *Een Onbekend Gnostisch Systeem in Plutarchus' De Iside et Osiride*, (*Studia Hellenistica*), 1942. Cf. also L. Cerfaux, "Un theme de mythologie gnostique dans le *De Iside et Osiride* de Plutarque," *Chronique d' Egypte* 11 (1936).

<sup>28</sup>*Op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup>See R. Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistische Mysterienreligionen*, 3rd edition, Leipzig, 1927; and Bruce M. Metzger, "Considerations of Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity," *Harvard Theological Review* 48 (1955), pp. 1-20.

<sup>30</sup>See especially H.-J. Schoeps, *Urgemeinde-Judenchristentum-Gnosis*, Tuebingen, 1956, and R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, London, 1958.

<sup>31</sup>F. C. Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis*, Cambridge, 1932.

<sup>32</sup>These views, presented in lectures delivered at Harvard Divinity School on November 5th and 6th, 1957, are to be elaborated in a book *Gnosticism*, to be published late in 1959.

Probably the most important new direction is that which looks to heterodox Judaism. Quispel<sup>33</sup> and his Utrecht colleague, van Unnick, are the main advocates of this view. They think that certain motifs existed in heterodox Judaism out of which Gnosticism developed, after these motifs were brought over to Christianity. Their evidence at this point is still somewhat tenuous. They do, however, realize the need for remaining with the sources.

In summary, then, it has been seen that the nature and scarcity of the sources prevent absolute certainty on these introductory matters. Nevertheless, it does seem likely that Gnosticism blossomed forth in the early generations of Christianity, nurtured in a Judaeo-Christian milieu and obtaining its sustenance from an atmosphere heavy with the motifs of dualism and redemption.

Lexington, Massachusetts

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<sup>33</sup>G. Quispel, "Het Johannesevangelie en de Gnosis," *Nederlandsche Theologische Tijdschrift* 11(1957), pp. 173-203.