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Jim McPeters

Fort Hays State University, james.mcpeters33@gmail.com

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THE DEMIURGE AND THE PRIMEVAL SERPENT MOTIF WITHIN CLASSICAL
THOUGHT AND ITS CULMINATION WITHIN GNOSTICISM
AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of Fort Hays State University in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts

by

James McPeters

Date 07/26/2012

Approved David L. Bunde

Major Professor

Approved James McPeters

Dean of the Graduate School

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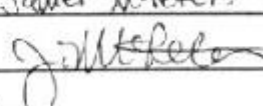
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Thesis: The Demurge and the Primeval Serpent Motif within Classical
Author: James McPeter Thought and its Culmination
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ABSTRACT

Dragons or great serpents associated with creation stories have been well documented within ancient Near Eastern myths, Classical religion, and Judaism. The motif involved monstrous and hostile supernatural figures emblematic of disorder that were subdued by a benevolent deity. The sect known as the Gnostics that emerged in the first and second centuries AD drew upon these ancient creation narratives and creatively mixed them with the idea put forward by Plato of a Demiurge, or craftsman who ordered the material universe. Because they held that the material cosmos was inherently evil, the Gnostics endowed their Demiurge with the characteristics of the chimeric serpentine monsters of the mythology they borrowed. Therefore, according to the Gnostics the universe had been brought into its present state by a monster, rather than by the defeat of one as the older cosmogonies had claimed. The Gnostics held that this had also been the creator of the Old Testament. In contrast with this transgressive creation narrative, early Christian treatments of the topic demonstrated a relatively high degree of familiarity with past uses of the motif. Early Christian scholars finding the Gnostic narrative untenable observed that this interpretation of the Demiurge was not only inconsistent with Plato's original meaning, which had more in common with their *Logos* or Word, but also with their own usage of the sea monster Leviathan from Jewish and Christian scripture which hewed more closely to older traditions in which a great dragon or serpent was subdued by the deity, initiating a state of order. Therefore, the thesis of this paper is that doctrinally orthodox early Christian scholarship held a view closer to the older creation narratives than the Gnostics.

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INTRODUCTION

The motif of a primeval serpent, a dragon-like figure associated with the creation story, has been well attested within ancient Near Eastern myths and religion, as well as Classical religion. A similar primordial serpent had a demonstrable relevance to Jewish cosmology. A figure called the Demiurge, the δημιουργός, craftsman or builder was proposed by Plato and served as the organizer of the material universe. The sect known as Gnostics creatively mixed the monstrous mythological creation elements with the idea of the Demiurge during the first centuries of the Church. Christian scholars confronted the Gnostic usage of the Demiurge and related serpent or dragon motifs. They not only refuted their symbolic meaning in relation to how Gnostics viewed creation, but also demonstrated an awareness of past uses of the motif. The handling of primordial serpent figures within early Christian scholarship and literature therefore preserved a window into these past views.

Early Christian treatments of the primordial serpent demonstrated a high degree of familiarity, and a robust cognizance of past uses of the motif. They demonstrated an awareness of connections between Near Eastern and Greek mythic traditions that have only begun to be revisited in recent scholarship. Therefore, this suggests the possibility of a renewed importance to early Christian examinations of these topics, and perhaps to Christian historiography as a valuable resource for understanding the history of ideas in general.

The sect loosely known as Gnostics held unorthodox beliefs which provoked responses from some of the strongest minds of their day. Their positions on the creation of the cosmos, the nature of mankind, and Christianity's relationship to Judaism served as a catalyst for early Christian scholars to use their knowledge of pagan religion, Greek philosophy, and Judaism to raise a cogent argument against Gnosticism. Additionally, much of what is presently known

about Gnostic belief was illuminated by the discovery of Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi in 1945 which added context to what Christian scholars had written about the Gnostics.

The literature surrounding the topic has established the root of the Demiurge of the Gnostics within Neoplatonic thought and occasionally its mixture with Jewish writings such as the Tanakh and Second Temple era Enoch traditions. For instance, scholar of religion John D. Turner concurred with the consensus assessment that the Sethian Gnostics to whom much of the Nag Hammadi collection belonged, sought to creatively merge Plato's *Timaeus* with the Genesis account.¹ However, despite some scholarly examinations of Jewish beliefs, Gnostic and Greek philosophical traditions, little connection has been explored regarding these links and potential correlates within Orphism, a mystic Greek cultic religion which recent scholarship suggests was influenced by Near Eastern traditions. This is significant because the relationship between Near Eastern and Greek mythological traditions has been explored in recent decades but connections to broader cosmology, especially into the Christian era, were not explored.

Additionally, historian and translator Marvin W. Meyer did work in the area of mystery religions and Gnostic Christian material and was involved in the translation of the *Nag Hammadi Scriptures* for the Harper One edition in 2007. He edited *The Ancient Mysteries* in which he introduced many concepts related to mystery cults, but the primordial serpent imagery connecting these traditions was not explicitly addressed in those works. In contrast, historian A.L. Frothingham closely examined serpent imagery and asserted it was extremely important to Hellenistic mystery religions.² However, he did not explore a connection with that imagery and

¹ John Turner, "The Gnostic Sethians and Middle Platonism: Interpretations of the *Timaeus* and Parmenides," *Vigiliae Christianae* 60, (Spring 2006): 10.

² Frothingham, "Babylonian Origin of Hermes the Snake-God, and of the Caduceus," *American Journal of Archaeology* 20, no, 2 (April 1916): 137.

Gnosticism, or early Christianity. Perhaps counterintuitively, early Christian scholars may have come closest to handling the association between the Demiurge and ancient idea of the primordial serpent in a cohesive way.

Analysis of Mesopotamian and Babylonian texts, Greek Orphic texts, Plato, Second Temple Jewish writings, Jewish scripture, the Nag Hammadi texts, early Christian scripture and patristic writings, has shed light on some of these gaps in the literature surrounding the motif of the primordial serpent and its correlates. Gnosticism cast a broad net within Classical philosophy and religion, and mixed Christian themes with many of the elements of the primeval serpent and the Demiurge from the ancient Near Eastern and Orphic traditions. However, doctrinally orthodox, early Christian scholars, appear to have affirmed an understanding of the Demiurge and primordial serpent figure in a way that was more conscious of ancient traditions. This was evidenced by strong thematic consistencies between the Judeo-Christian narratives about the primordial serpent that coalesced around the first century BC continuing through the third century AD, and the available earliest written representations of it and ancient Near Eastern sources such as the *Enuma Elish*, dated to approximately twelfth century BC and the Baal Cycle dated approximately the fifteenth century BC.

CHAPTER 1

EARLY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PRIMORDIAL SERPENT

1.1 Serpent and Dragon Symbolism in Early Western Thought

The serpent is arguably the most well attested mythological and symbolic figure in history. Few creatures have been depicted in art and literature as frequently, and perhaps none as significantly, as the serpent. Additionally, in ancient literature the serpent hardly ever carried with it the simply taxonomic connotation of an ordinary terrestrial creature. Commonly, the serpent has been a symbol of primordial chaos and death, but also the divine, or various supernatural figures in general.

One distinct version of the primordial serpent entered written history most verifiably through the Near East and its subsequent interactions with the Classical world and is most traceable and contiguous through the written word of those civilization groups. Therefore, the geographic limitations of the particular serpent of the present study are confined to the lower Caucasus, the region of the Tigris and Euphrates River systems, and the Mediterranean coastal regions which comprised the religious and cultural centers of the Ancient Near East, (usually defined as Mesopotamian, Akkadian, Hittite, Canaanite, and Ugaritic) and the Classical world.

In exploring the Near Eastern influences on Classical thought and into the Christian era, the origins of the motif of the Serpent/Dragon must be addressed. In his exhaustive semiotic study, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, linguist Calvert Watkins affirmed the thesis that the reptilian antagonist has been described by linguists as no less than

“quasi-universal.”¹ This adversary has been termed dragon, as well as snake in ancient Indo-European and Indo-Iranian myths. Similarly, it has been suggested that an Old Babylonian myth, that of the killing of Labbu, shares with these the concept of a menacing cosmic dragon, feared by the gods.²

First, in light of this claim to quasi universality, a word about the possible earliest transmission of the primordial serpent idea may be necessary. Historian and archaeologist Robert D. Miller summarized the state of the present understanding of the motif’s origins, stating that although there has been much scholarly debate about the topic, the previously described Indo-European roots of the Serpent concept likely travelled into the Near East during the 17th or 18th centuries BC by way of various hostile groups from the southern Caucasus entering Babylon.³ There they mixed with extant Semitic ideas of Sumero-Akkadian influence.⁴ Similarly, historian Daniel Ogden noted a theory of “reconstruction” of Indo-European dragon slaying myths in the Graeco-Roman world has been advocated by a significant number of scholars, but added that a “cloud of international folktale” might best account for the presence of the concept across each of these possible venues.⁵ Precise provenance may not be as important to the present study as the acknowledgement of the fluidity of religious and metaphysical ideas across the ancient world.

Next, a cosmic struggle was almost always associated with this primordial serpent. Watkins observed that the motif of a hero struggling with a primal reptilian monster shared

¹ Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill A Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 297.

² Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 44-45.

³ Robert D. Miller, “Tracking the Dragon across the Ancient Near East,” *Archiv Orientalní* 82, no. 2 (January 2014): 240-241.

⁴ Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 241.

⁵ Daniel Ogden, *Drakon: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2013) <https://archive.org/details/drakon-dragon-myth-and-serpent-cult-in-the-greek-and-roman-worlds/page/12/mode/2up?q=tiamat>, 10-11, (accessed September 17, 2021).

common linguistic roots and therefore stretches throughout such outwardly diverse mythic material as the earliest Vedic traditions of Indra fighting the dragon, all the way to Zeus and Typhon, Thor and the Serpent, Hercules and the Hydra, and Perseus and the Gorgon (figure 2).⁶ Ogden summarized the historiographies and meaning of the presence of this serpent/dragon struggle theme pointing out that the explanation of independent evolution has become outdated. He described how in the past myths that demonstrated commonalities were attributed to independent simultaneous development across diverse cultures. But in light of studies of the migratory patterns of folktales during the last two centuries the consensus among folklorists is that similarities found in tales separated by time, place, and culture are attributable to common origins.⁷ The singular but repeating struggle throughout foundational myths has been termed *Chaoskampf* in German, or ‘the struggle against chaos.’ This struggle against chaos was in essence a creation story. It was characterized by the monstrous embodiment of chaos, usually associated with the sea, engaging in combat with a hero who was usually a storm deity and represented benevolent order. Within the genre the struggle resulted in the submission of undifferentiated disorder to the hero deity who then fostered an orderly creation. It was within this widely attested mythic tradition that the serpent character was first associated with this primordial chaos. This chaos/serpent theme was usually therefore strongly associated with the struggle against chaos.⁸

1.2 *Finding the Primordial Serpent of the Near East in the Greek World*

The connection between Greek religion and the Semitic East has been repeatedly affirmed in recent scholarship. It is worth noting that this was not always the case: this view

⁶ Watkins, *How to Kill A Dragon*, 297-298.

⁷ Ogden, *Drakon: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult*, 22.

⁸ Watkins, *How to Kill A Dragon*, 300.

developed only out of recent discoveries. Historian Neil Forsyth summarized the history of the outdated view, and how it began to change stating, “Until the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, and in fact until a good many years afterward, most classical scholars found it convenient, indeed almost obligatory, to discount as fabrications the considerable ancient evidence for contact between the Near East and early Greek literature and philosophy.”⁹

Historian Walter Burkert observed that after the collapse of the Bronze Age eliminated other writing forms, it was likely that languages dispersed through alphabetic script by Phoenicians, Hebrews, Philistines, and other groups throughout Syria-Palestine. Subsequently cultural paradigms were allowed to spread and mingle. As Assyria played a large role in the development of trade between Greek West and Semitic East, Burkert noted that it rapidly assimilated city states and kingdoms, and by 877 BC the Assyrians had reached the Mediterranean. Additionally, archaeological finds have indicated that by the late eighth, and early seventh centuries BC, objects of Oriental provenance were present in Greece. Among these were Greek sanctuary items which began to resemble the style and themes of Eastern art. Greek amulets have also been recovered petitioning protection against, and bearing images similar to Lamashtu, a Semitic demon-like entity associated with serpents. It has also been suggested that such infamous Greek monsters as the Gorgons, themselves notably associated with snakes, share their origins with Lamashtu.¹⁰ Most directly, in the comedy *Pax*, the Greek monster with

⁹ Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 67.

¹⁰Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution Near Eastern Influence in the Early Archaic Age*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992) 10-11, 14-15, 83.

serpentine features *Λαμιασ*, Lamia, was reported to be the daughter of the Semitic deity Belos.¹¹ The cosmology of the Near East and Classical world appear to have been closely intertwined.

Arguably, the most recognizable of the Near Eastern primordial serpent figures within a *Chaoskampf* narrative were best preserved in the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic. Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen described Marduk's battle against the monster Tiamat within the epic as the most prominently featured event of Babylonian myth.¹² In the narrative two monsters, Apsu and Tiamat, symbolize watery chaos. These monsters were defeated by Marduk, who thus created the world and himself became god-king. Of the two, the *Enuma Elish* described Tiamat more extensively. Within the text the monster was described as being the mother of various monsters including dragons, opening her mouth to swallow enemies, and as having a tail.¹³ It was also stated that Marduk took a plant with him into battle against Tiamat, to counteract venom.¹⁴ In light of these descriptors, classical scholar Joseph Fontenrose acknowledged that although some have disputed Tiamat's identity, at least in this instance, she appeared as a serpent.¹⁵ Additionally, Ogden observed that Marduk's battle against Tiamat was depicted on some tenth to seventh century Neo-Babylonian cylinder seals found at Nimrud that showed the hero-god using a thunderbolt against the enormous serpent Tiamat.¹⁶ Assyrian

¹¹ Aristophanes, *Pax*, Trans. Fredericus Bladyes, 758.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015066291231&view=1up&seq=93&skin=2021>, (accessed November 24, 2021).

¹²Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Battle Between Marduk and Tiamat," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 1 (January 1968): 104,

https://www.jstor.org/stable/597902?refreqid=excelsior%3A5a881c0abbbc31e29fe470fd23b14e6e&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents, (accessed September 17, 2021).

¹³ "Enuma Elish," III:31-33, IV:97, V:59, trans. Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses An Anthology of Akkadian Literature, Archaic, Classical, Mature I*. (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 1996), 367,374, 379, <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/csar/files/2011/03/Seri-Enuma-elish.pdf>.

¹⁴ "Enuma Elish," IV:62," Foster, 373.

¹⁵ Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 153.

¹⁶ Ogden, *Drakon: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult*, 11-12.

cylinder seals fitting this description have also been found (figure 1). Of note, because the thunderbolt was widely attested to have been the signature weapon of Zeus, this version of the battle should likely be regarded as significant to discussion of the Near Eastern chaos serpent motif and Greece, and continued to suggest a traffic of ideas from approximately the fourth century BC until end of the Hellenistic era in 33 BC.

Following the battle Marduk's many names were listed, and the details of how he ordered and maintained the cosmos after his victory was extensively described.¹⁷ As a part of Marduk's duty the defeated Tiamat's punishment was described stating:

He shall keep Tiamat subdued
He shall keep her life cut short,
In the future of mankind, with the passing of time,
She shall always be far off, she shall be distant forever.¹⁸

This commentary on the fate of Tiamat importantly demonstrated that the defeat of this figure was closely related to the hero's ordering of the cosmos. The conquest of Tiamat, embodiment of primordial waters, was a sign of his creative power.

The battle between Marduk and Tiamat was closely mirrored in the story of Baal and Lotan, an Ugaritic tale dating to approximately the fifteenth century BC that was ostensibly also a part of the cultural exchange between Greece and the Near East. According to Forsyth, a fragment of a tale about the deity Baal featured a description of Lotan as a dragon which bore a resemblance to the primordial sea serpent of watery chaos.¹⁹ Similar to Tiamat and Apsu in the

¹⁷ "Enuma Elish," VII:1-162, Foster, 391-399.

¹⁸ "Enuma Elish," VII:132-135, Foster, 398-399.

¹⁹ Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 62.

Enuma Elish, the Epic of Baal associated Lotan the primordial serpent with the sea (Yom) and death (Mot) as mutual enemies of Baal. In the Epic of Baal, Lotan (also translated Leviathan) the primordial antagonistic sea dragon defeated by Baal, was described as "...the wriggling serpent, the tyrant with seven heads."²⁰ As will be discussed later, presence of this precise feature in some later representations strongly suggests elements of the Baal Cycle had been passed down in some form.

The myth of Marduk and Tiamat, along with its cognate, Baal and Lotan, found its way around the ancient Mediterranean. Evidence suggests this foundational narrative was not unknown to the later Gnostics. Tablet I of the *Enuma Elish* described the serpentine monster Tiamat stating:

When on high no name was given to heaven,
Nor below was the netherworld called by name,
Primeval Apsu was their progenitor,
They were mingling their waters together,
And *matrix-Tiamat* [emphasis added] was she who bore them all²¹

The translation "matrix-Tiamat," which includes an attribute of Tiamat is significant in the present study. As noted by translator Benjamin R. Foster, the word rendered "matrix" in this tablet alternately bears the meaning "wisdom, skill," or "creator, craftsman."²²

Additionally, evidence exists concerning the counterpart of Tiamat, Apsu that provides insight into the meaning of this figure. Ancient Babylon was regarded as the gate of the heavens,

²⁰ "Baal and Mot" 5:1-3, in *Canaanite Myths and Legends, Second Edition*, ed. J.C.L Gibson, (London: T&T Clark, 2004), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.fhsu.edu/lib/fhsu/reader.action?docID=436487>. 68, (accessed June 11, 2022).

²¹ "Enuma Elish" I:1-5, Foster, 353.

²² "Enuma Elish" I:1-5, Foster, 353.

or *Bab-ilani* in essence being a place from which gods may connect with the earth. However, historian Mircea Eliade observed this was not the oldest understanding of ‘Babylon,’ that the heavenly appellation of Babylon had been superimposed over one that was more consistent with the chaotic, antagonistic primordial serpent motif. He stated, “Babylon had many names, among them ‘House of the Base of Heaven and Earth,’ ‘Link between Heaven and Earth.’ But it was also in Babylon that the connection between earth and the lower regions was made, for the city had been built upon *bab apsu*, ‘the Gate of Apsu,’ *apsu* being the name for the waters of chaos before Creation.”²³ This ostensibly earlier name, Gate of Apsu, appeared to associate the place with this antagonistic monster.

1.3 Orphic Cosmogony:

Titans and Associated Motifs as Exemplars of the Primordial Serpent/Dragon

The intersection of Eastern traditions and Greek thought was especially evident in the Greek Orphic religion in which primordial forces that shaped the cosmos closely resembled those of Eastern traditions in several ways. In the Greek tradition known today as Orphism the bard-like figure Orpheus was conceptualized to have been given special knowledge of the divine through revelation. Although a full Orphic system of religion has not been discovered, it has been characterized as a variation of Hesiod’s cosmogony.²⁴ Classicist Radcliffe G. Edmonds noted that most versions of the Orphic cosmogony explicitly begin with water.²⁵ Eliade

²³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 41.

²⁴ Radcliffe G. Edmonds, “Deviant Origins: Hesiod’s Theogony and the Orphica,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hesiod*, ed. A. Loney and S. Scully, 225-242, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 227- 229.

²⁵ Edmonds, “Deviant Origins,” 229.

additionally observed that popular thought often tried to promote Orpheus as having lived before Homer and that it was apparent that he did not originate in the Mediterranean or derive from the Homeric narrative institution.²⁶ Finally, the Orphic religious message contrasted with that of the Olympian tradition in its more philosophical or even metaphysical bent.²⁷

This phenomenon appears to have affected how the Olympian cosmogony was interpreted. The tale in question was that of the *Τιτανομαχία* or Titanomachy. Although its origins remain an area of debate among Classicists, the source-poem having been lost, allusions to it remain relevant. The most well-attested and authoritative version is that of Hesiod. In *Theogony* Hesiod described the struggle of the elder gods or Titans, children of Gaia, against their progeny the Olympian gods for control of the cosmos. The cyclical nature of this conflict has often brought to mind the *Chaoskampf* motif and by association a succession myth familiar to history and anthropology. For instance, the king of the Titans, Kronos was described by Hesiod stating "...wily Kronos, most savage of their [Earth and Sky] children; and he hated his vigor-giving father."²⁸ Evident here was the theme of new hero deities rebelling against their predecessors, who thereafter became chthonic deities embodying death and evil. It was perhaps because of these qualities that these figures became related to the primordial serpent.

Upon their defeat Kronos and the Titans endured a symbolic descent and were consigned to *Tartaros*. Historian M.L. West noted that the words *khasma* [χάσμα], and *khaos* [χάος] were related in Greek, and suggested a gaping cavern, or yawn.²⁹ It was beyond this χάος, or chaos, in

²⁶ Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas 2, From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 183.

²⁷ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas 2*, 183-184.

²⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. J. Banks, <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/hesiod-theogony-sb/>, 135, (accessed October 19, 2021).

²⁹ M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1997), 288.

Tartaros that according to Hesiod the Titans dwelled.³⁰ Monstrous chimeric children were then born of Gaia to avenge her older children the Titans.³¹ For instance, Hesiod described the monstrous Typhoeus stating, "...whose hands [Typhoeus'], indeed, are apt for deeds on the score of strength, and untiring the feet of the strong god; and from his shoulders there were a hundred heads of a serpent, a fierce dragon, playing with dusky tongues, and from the eyes in his wondrous heads fire was gleaming, as he looked keenly."³² Here the typologically consistent nature of serpent and dragon symbolism is at play, as well as the theme of the underworld. Therefore, it appears that in both Hesiod and the Orphic versions Titans as well as the monsters referred to as Giants had proceeded from Gaia and played antagonistic roles. Additionally, Edmonds observed that references to the Orphic version of this tale were inconsistent causing the battle against the Titans and the battle against the Giants to be conflated in some Orphic sources.³³ He added that Neoplatonists in particular seem to have conflated the Giants and the Titans, having found similar allegorical meanings in the tales.³⁴ Therefore later interpretations of the story seem to have displayed less distinction between these monsters and the Titans.

It has also been noted that Gaia, the mother of the Titans typically envisioned as the earth goddess, is a complex figure that was also associated with giving birth to monsters, having conceived them in some versions with Chaos.³⁵ In this instance Chaos was personified as a primordial deity alongside Gaia. Similarly, the darker aspects of Gaia have been observed by some, who have emphasized the importance of Gaia's chthonic associations, in particular her being the progenitor of chimeric and serpentine Typhoeus, her opposition to the heroic Olympian

³⁰ Hesiod, *Theogony*, <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/hesiod-theogony-sb/>, 807, 814.

³¹ Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil*, 136.

³² Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. J. Banks, <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/hesiod-theogony-sb/>, 820-825.

³³ Edmonds, "Deviant Origins," 234.

³⁴ Edmonds, "Deviant Origins," 234.

³⁵ Emilie Kutash, *Goddesses in Myth and Cultural Memory*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 19.

forces of Zeus, and therefore connected with chaos and underworldly powers.³⁶ These aspects of Gaia closely resembled the Near Eastern Tiamat, and therefore she may be construed as playing a very similar role with a similar meaning.

It was the Titans as they were portrayed in Orphism that bore the most resemblance to Near Eastern traditions pertaining to the primordial serpent. According to “Orphic Fragment 114” the Titans specifically numbered seven male and seven female.³⁷ Burkert noted that within the *Enuma Elish* these defeated gods have been the supporters of Tiamat; in other texts they are called the evil “Seven” who have been bound by the god of the heavens, i.e. Marduk.³⁸ Furthermore, a Babylonian incantation against the demonic Seven Evil Spirits suggested an association with the seven Orphic Titans:

Seven are they, seven are they,
In the Ocean Deep seven are they,
Battening in Heaven seven are they,
In the Ocean Deep as their home they were
reared,
Nor male or female are they,
They are as the roaming windblast,
No wife have they, no son do they beget;
Knowing neither mercy nor pity,”³⁹

³⁶ J.P. Vernant, "The Union with Metis and the Sovereignty of Heaven," in *Myth, Religion, and Society* ed. R. L. Gordon (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 9-10.

³⁷ *The Orphic Fragments*, trans. Otto Kern. <https://www.hellenicgods.org/orphic-fragment-114---otto-kern>. 114.

³⁸ Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution*, 94.

³⁹ "Prayer Against The Evil Spirits," *Utukki Limnuti V:29-42* in *Luzac's Semitic Text and Translation Series XIV*, trans. R.C. Thompson, (London: Luzac and Co., 1903), <https://ia802702.us.archive.org/20/items/devilsevilspirit01thomuoft/devilsevilspirit01thomuoft.pdf>, (accessed June 25, 2022), 77.

The full incantation, ostensibly for protection from the Seven Evil Spirits, described the nature and origins of these terrible figures. They were explicitly antagonistic towards humanity and described as inhabiting the Deep.⁴⁰

Burkert observed the etymology of the Greek word for Titan may be found in the Akkadian word for clay, *titu*, suggesting the appellation Titan may be associated with the idols or figurines made to protect people from them, presumably to ritually destroy.⁴¹ Therefore, Titans were something to be dreaded, and protected against using magic. Synthesis of these Eastern and Western concepts would have seemed natural in the ancient world, the defeated and imprisoned Seven, or Titans.

It was specifically the figure of the Titan Kronos, later called Saturn which was depicted as monstrous and serpentine. “Orphic Fragment 54” directly referred to the Titan Kronos as a *drakon*, translated dragon or serpent. It described the Titan Kronos stating “...Χρόνος οὗτος ὁ δράκων γεννᾶται...” which is translated, “...thus Kronos this dragon is born...”⁴² This association was also noted by historian Jaime Alvar Ezquerra, similarly observed the association between Kronos and chaos and monstrous serpent imagery. He stated, “Out of the Chaos there emerged a god of Unlimited Time, identified with Aion, *Saeculum*, Kronos, or Saturn, and sometimes as Fate or Destiny. This deity is represented as a winged male figure with a lion’s head, encircled by the coils of a snake (figure 3).”⁴³ Therefore, like the monsters created by Tiamat, Gaia had also produced serpentine monstrous offspring in this narrative.

⁴⁰ “Prayer Against The Seven Evil Spirits,” 77.

⁴¹ Burkert, *Greek Religion Archaic and Classical*, 95.

⁴² *The Orphic Fragments*. trans. Otto Kern. <https://www.hellenicgods.org/orphic-fragment-54---otto-kern>. 54.

⁴³ Jaime Alvar Ezquerra, *Romanizing Oriental Gods: Myth Salvation and Ethics in the Cult of Cybele, Isis, and Mithras*, trans. Richard Gordon, (New York: Brill, 2008), 78.

Writing during the second century AD the Christian apologist Athenagoras of Athens preserved many Orphic narratives about creation in the course of criticizing them. In *A Plea for the Christians*, he included a quote attributed to Orpheus, and mocked the implausibility of the monstrous Orphic deities stating: “What that is becoming or useful is there in such a history, that we must believe Kronos, Zeus, Koré, and the rest, to be gods? Is it the descriptions of their bodies? Why, what man of judgment and reflection will believe that a viper was begotten by a god, (thus Orpheus: —

‘But from the sacred womb Phanes begot
Another offspring, horrible and fierce,
In sight a frightful viper, on whose head
Were hairs: its face was comely; but the rest,
From the neck downwards, bore the aspect dire
Of a dread dragon’)

or who will admit that Phanes himself, being a first-born god (for he it was that was produced from the egg), has the body or shape of a dragon...”⁴⁴ Therefore, remnants passed down to the Christian era recalled that the Orphic gods were ascribed serpentine and chimeric bodies.

Additionally, the archaic and mysterious figure of Zeus Meilichios which is translated Zeus: ‘gracious’ or ‘easy,’ was a figure that exhibited some characteristics consistent with the Titan story. This chthonic deity, separate from the Olympian king of the gods Zeus, was noted by Burkert to be portrayed in the form of a serpent.⁴⁵ This was evidenced in part by reliefs associated with the worship of Zeus Meilichios, found at Peiraeus that depicted supplicants with

⁴⁴ Athenagoras, “A Plea for the Christians,” 20, trans. B.P. Pratten, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers vol 2*, Book II:4, New Advent online Library. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0205.htm> , (accessed June 14, 2022).

⁴⁵ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion Archaic and Classical*, trans John Riffian, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Ltd., 1985), 120.

folded hands before an enormous serpent (figure 4).⁴⁶ The nature of propitiation to this underworld deity was also indicative of its nature. Worship was described as un-eaten holocaust, or whole-burnt offerings which were usually associated with the appeasing angry underworld spirits.⁴⁷ This gloomy and solemn sacrifice has been described as “wholly alien,” to that of the festive worship of the Zeus of Homer, and likely more primitive.⁴⁸ Writing in the fifth-century BC Thucydides referred to a festival to the deity, stating “Whether the grand festival that was meant was in Attica or elsewhere was a question which he never thought of, and which the oracle did not offer to solve. For the Athenians also have a festival which is called the grand festival of Zeus Meilichios.”⁴⁹ This timeframe, along with themes of serpentine deity placed Zeus Meilichios well within the sphere of the Orphic primeval Titans with monstrous serpentine characteristics.

Finally, the Orphic tradition also attempted to reconcile these mythic motifs to understand mankind’s existence and fate. According to Eliade, although much about Orphic belief has remained uncertain, it was clear that within Orphism it was the “Titanic” component of man that he must overcome.⁵⁰ Mankind’s nature as interpreted by Orphism was a mixture of the ashes of the Titans and the body of Dionysus.⁵¹ Historian of religion Giovanni Casadio elaborated on this theme of human corruption via the Titans, and recounted how as descendants of the Titans, mankind shared the guilt of the death of Dionysus, and that the Orphics incorporated this into worship by use of the *thyrsus*, or pine-cone headed spear symbolic of

⁴⁶ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1903), <https://archive.org/details/prolegomenatostu00harr/page/16/mode/2up?view=theater>, 17-19. (accessed November 13, 2021).

⁴⁷ Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 16.

⁴⁸ Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 16.

⁴⁹ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War I*, 125-126, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: E. P. Dutton Inc., 1910), 82.

⁵⁰ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, 189-190.

⁵¹ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, 189.

Dionysus.⁵² Additionally, in *Laws* Plato himself included in the dialogue a reference attributing the corruption of human nature to the Titans, stating “...the shirking of submission to one's parents and elders and their admonitions; then, as the penultimate stage, comes the effort to disregard the laws; while the last stage of all is to lose all respect for oaths or pledges or divinities,—wherein men display and reproduce the character of the Titans of story.”⁵³ The evil aspects of Kronos in particular seem to have been remembered by the later Gnostics. Therefore, within this tradition, the Titans bore a resemblance to the Evil Seven of the Near Eastern tradition in their antagonistic role towards mankind as well as their serpent symbolism.

Conclusion

Ancient Near Eastern narratives attested a connection between the primordial serpent figure, chaos, and the waters before creation that had to be defeated for creation to occur. This motif was passed between cultures and in particular Orphic Greek and Near Eastern traditions bore close resemblance to one another. This was demonstrated in the portrayal of the primordial chaos serpent as both participating in a cosmic struggle, and as having monstrous offspring who were subsequently relegated to the status of serpentine underworld figures themselves, the Seven Evil Gods of Near Eastern tradition, or Greek Titans. These figures held significance in that within these traditions the elements of rebellion, death, and chaos required subduing for the cosmos to be ordered.

⁵² Giovanni Casadio and Patricia Johnson, *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, (Austin: University of Texas Pres, 2009), 47-48.

⁵³ Plato, *Laws*, III, trans. R.G. Bury, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg034.perseus-eng1:3.701>, 701b. (accessed September 7, 2021).

CHAPTER 2

THE DEMIURGE IN PLATO, THE HELLENISTIC ERA, AND NEOPLATONISM

2.1 The Demiurge in Plato

The distance from the ancient Orphic tradition to Plato was not as far as one might expect. Olympiodorus, a Neoplatonist writing his commentary on *Phaedo* during the sixth century AD remarked, “Plato, indeed, borrows from Orpheus everywhere.”⁵⁴ For instance, Eliade noted that references exist within Plato that suggest a lost Orphic tradition pertaining to immortality, with the soul entombed within a body in much the same way the body is buried in a tomb, and/or contained within a prison, ostensibly for an ancient offense.⁵⁵ The theme was again repeated that the body was corrupt and perhaps even a form of punishment. One’s soul bore a relation to the Platonic Ideal of oneself. In contrast, the body in which it was contained was analogous to death and corruption. Eliade asserted that it was in the context of this typology of condemnation and consignment to metaphysical imprisonment that Neoplatonic ideas begin to develop. He noted that later disciple of Plato Xenocrates suggested the idea of the body as “prison,” in the context of Orphic cosmogony.⁵⁶ In essence, the body existed as a trap one must escape. This idea later became highly influential to the Gnostics.

Plato’s cosmology had involved the contrast between the material cosmos and the forms or essences which were in some sense immutable. The concept broadly known as Plato’s Forms presented the idea that any given thing might have a fundamental ontological value or existence, usually conceived as separate from its material substance. The relevant questions raised by this

⁵⁴ Olympiodorus, “Commentary on Plato’s *Phaedo*,” in *The Greek Commentaries on Plato’s *Phaedo*, Volume 1 Olympiodorus*, 7:10, trans L. G. Westerink (Virginia: North Holland Publishing Company, 1976), 114.

⁵⁵ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas 2*, 186,189.

⁵⁶ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas 2*, 189.

concept were summarized by philosopher and historian Frederick Copleston stating, “Since by Ideas or Forms Plato meant objective essences, it becomes of paramount importance for an understanding of the Platonic ontology to determine, as far as possible, precisely how he regarded these essences.”⁵⁷ Because many of the primary sources no longer exist, references made by Plato have often gone without context for the modern reader. However, it was generally surmised that Plato’s conception of the Ideas or Forms existed in a plane apart from the material world of the senses in a transcendent or ‘heavenly’ state, and that significantly, a figure called the Demiurge ordered the material world according to the Forms, and consequently, did not create the Forms.⁵⁸ The term Demiurge/ δημιουργός, translated builder or craftsman, was first used in the metaphysical sense within Plato’s dialogue *Timaeus*. Because of this last element, one might imagine a builder following a plan or blueprint to form the material world.

This divine builder might also be conceptualized as a mind, or fundamental consciousness, but not itself a first cause. Rather the Platonic Demiurge has been interpreted as a sort of intermediary organizer between the first cause and the material cosmos. Professor of Classical Philosophy at the University of Oslo, Thomas Kjeller Johansen described this relationship stating, “the answer to the question why a mind has to think in the manner of a *craftsman* is, then, that it has to be sensitive to the good in a different way from a cause that deals just with being: specifically, it has to be sensitive to the good in the way that only an intelligence that both grasps the formal paradigm and understands how best to make a likeness of it in a fundamentally different medium, can be.”⁵⁹ Therefore, the Demiurge in *Timaeus* was from the

⁵⁷ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. I*, (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 165.

⁵⁸ Copleston, *A History*, 167.

⁵⁹ Johansen, Thomas Kjeller, “Why the Cosmos Needs a Craftsman: Plato, *Timaeus* 27d5-29b1,” *Phronesis* 59 (January 2014): 318-319.

outset conceived as an intelligence that uniquely held the capacity to recognize order and Forms, but was not the First Cause.

The meaning of the Demiurge was similarly related to rationality. Copleston noted that the Demiurge envisioned by Plato was “probably a symbol for the operation of Reason in the universe.”⁶⁰ This was supported by descriptions of the role of the Demiurge within the *Timaeus* dialogue. Describing the work of the Demiurge, the *Timaeus* states “He set about making this Universe so far as He could, of a like kind. But inasmuch as the nature of the Living Creature was eternal, this quality it was impossible to attach in its entirety to what is generated; wherefore He planned to make a movable image of Eternity, and, as He set in order the Heaven, of that Eternity which abides in unity He made an eternal image...”⁶¹ Therefore, this figure had in some sense organized the cosmos as a mirror of the Heavenly or Eternal. David Brakke supported this interpretation noting that within *Timaeus* the craftsman created the visible universe as a “copy of the eternal forms.”⁶²

It was also in the *Timaeus* that Plato’s cosmogony first described this first created being. It was symbolized as an entity dependent on no outside things: “...For of eyes it had no need, since outside of it there was nothing visible left over; nor yet of hearing, since neither was there anything audible; nor was there any air surrounding it which called for respiration; nor, again, did it need any organ whereby it might receive the food that entered and evacuate what remained

⁶⁰ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. I*, 178.

⁶¹ Plato, “*Timaeus*,” 37d, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9* trans. W.R.M. Lamb, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0180%3Atext%3DTim.%3Asection%3D37d>, (accessed July, 3 2022).

⁶² David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth Ritual and Diversity in Early Christianity*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010), 57. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.fhsu.edu/lib/fhsu/reader.action?docID=3300901&query=>, (accessed September 3, 2021).

undigested. For nothing went out from it or came into it from any side, since nothing existed; for it was so designed as to supply its own wastage as food for itself.”⁶³ He went on to describe the cosmic entity as without limbs and moving in a circular pattern, stating “...For movement He assigned unto it that which is proper to its body, namely, that one of the seven motions which specially belongs to reason and intelligence; wherefore He spun it round uniformly in the same spot and within itself and made it move revolving in a circle; and all the other six motions He took away and fashioned it free from their aberrations. And seeing that for this revolving motion it had no need of feet, He begat it legless and footless.”⁶⁴ This independent nature, as will be discussed below, was later interpreted creatively by Gnostics.

Subsequent interpretations of the Demiurge of *Timaeus* were extensive. Spanning hundreds of years these had bearing on how the Demiurge transitioned into the late Classical period. Copleston observed that Plato had retained a certain reticence about the subject, and rather than fully materialize his thoughts on such topics as the Demiurge, he alluded to the idea that it was among the issues about which he was apparently less comfortable writing.⁶⁵ Although Plato did describe the term and concept in *Timaeus*, indeed Plato did not complete a fully formed treatise on the Demiurge.

2.2 Middle and Neoplatonic Development of the Demiurge

Middle and Neoplatonic sources further developed the Demiurge concept. Brakke noted that during the first and second centuries AD admirers of Plato and other intellectuals became increasingly focused on the difference between the changing or material world and the

⁶³ Plato, *Timaeus*, 33c.

⁶⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 34a.

⁶⁵ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. I*, 178.

unchanging or spiritual.⁶⁶ This meant that the ideal of a completely spiritual existence was fascinating to neoplatonic and other contemporary thinkers, including the Gnostics. At the same time, they investigated the distinction between the One and the Demiurge.

Because the Demiurge was conceptualized as a creative but nonetheless created being, the distinction between it and the First Cause, or One, also had bearing on subsequent interpretations by Middle and Neoplatonists, as well as Christianity. Copleston described the One as the source of Forms, and that in allusions to a Father, Plato was referring to this transcendent being from which the Forms emanated.⁶⁷ Therefore, precedent was set for an increasingly important distinction that became relevant to Classical thought and philosophical thought into the Christian era. It was third century Roman philosopher Plotinus who clearly articulated this important distinction which served to disambiguate the Demiurge of Plato from the increasingly relevant idea of a singular, perfect, and benevolent creator.

First, in *The Enneads* Plotinus wrote six dissertations expanding upon and synthesizing hundreds of years of spiritual and philosophical concepts. His work has been widely attested to represent a culmination of Neoplatonic thought. Among these concepts was Plato's uncreated One. Copleston noted that Plotinus spoke out against Gnostics but given the time period, was interestingly silent on Christianity.⁶⁸ Plotinus expanded upon the concept of an uncreated Creator, often labeled the One by equating it with that which is essential, with all things good emanating from it. He stated, "...when we speak of The One and when we speak of The Good we must recognize an Identical Nature; we must affirm that they are the same- not, it is true, as venturing any predication with regard to that [unknowable] Hypostasis but simply as indicating it

⁶⁶ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 59.

⁶⁷ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. I*, 178-179.

⁶⁸ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. I*, 464.

to ourselves in the best terms we find.”⁶⁹ Here Plotinus put forward a theology that placed the One in a category of its own, and in a category which equates the Creator with Good.

Next, Plotinus further elaborated on this primal Good by distinguishing what precisely was its connection with evil. He stated: “...the First Existence is the self-contained Existence of The Good; but there is also an Act upon It, that of the Intellectual-Principle which, as it were, lives about It...Such is the untroubled, the blissful, life of divine beings, and Evil has no place in it; if this were all, there would be no Evil but Good only, the first, the second and the third Good. All, thus far, is with the King of All, unfailing Cause of Good and Beauty and controller of all.”⁷⁰ Here it is noteworthy that Plotinus equated the One, with the Good, and purest form in existence. According to Plotinus, as logical extension of this theology, Evil was equated with the absence of existence, or separation from the Good. Additionally, Copleston observed that the World-Soul proceeds from the *Nous*.⁷¹ Additionally, according to Copleston Plotinus affirmed an Orphic and Neo-Pythagorean view that also equated matter with the principle of evil, the privation of something, and not a positive principle itself, thus approximating something very similar to dualism.⁷² He added that because this tendency was the case, Plotinus might logically have been led to deprecate the visible universe, but in fact had stopped short of this.⁷³

Finally, a detail noted by the philosopher Porphyry suggests that during this period, which coincided with the rise of Gnosticism, the serpent had begun to take on a significance in

⁶⁹ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, trans. Stephen Mackenna, II:9:1, https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0204-0270,_Plotinus,_The_Six_Enneads,_EN.pdf, (accessed November 24, 2021).

⁷⁰ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, trans. Stephen Mackenna, I: 8:2, https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0204-0270,_Plotinus,_The_Six_Enneads,_EN.pdf.

⁷¹ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. I*, 467-468.

⁷² Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. I*, 469-470.

⁷³ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. I*, 470.

connection with the soul or death in the philosophical community. Recording the death of Plotinus as told by his companion Eustochius in the year 270 AD, he reported that Plotinus' last words evoked his belief in returning to the One, and included a portentous note stating: 'I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the All.'⁷⁴ At that point he recounted that a serpent crawled out from the bed of Plotinus, and left through a hole in the wall, continuing: "As he spoke a snake crept under the bed on which he lay and slipped away into a hole in the wall: at the same moment Plotinus died."⁷⁵ Whether this portentous occurrence signified the departure of material, or evil from the philosopher upon his death indicating his success, or conversely the divine component of Plotinus returning to its source has remained open for debate. However, the fact that it was recorded suggested significance was assigned to it within the context of the philosophy of the time.

Conclusion

The Demiurge as proposed by Plato was closely related to reason, organization, and the shaping of the material cosmos around the model of the eternal or divine. Subsequently, his intellectual descendants further explored the idea that the Demiurge was also separate from the One, or most fundamental Creator. Later thinkers also took this idea and emphasized the importance of the difference between the material and the spiritual. As the one who arranged the physical cosmos to mirror the perfect eternal forms, the Demiurge was at the forefront of this divergence. Plotinus associated the material with the privation of something, but importantly stopped short of the conclusions of the Gnostics. Gnostics eventually explored these subjects in a unique way.

⁷⁴ Poryphry, *The Life of Plotinus*, http://www.ldysinger.com/@texts/0260_plotinus/03_life_porph.htm.

⁷⁵ Poryphry, *The Life of Plotinus*, http://www.ldysinger.com/@texts/0260_plotinus/03_life_porph.htm.

CHAPTER 3

THE PRIMORDIAL SERPENT IN ANCIENT JEWISH SCRIPTURE AND THOUGHT

3.1 The Serpent within Jewish Scripture

The Hellenistic world was one in which ideas were freely shared. The thinkers of Greek philosophy and religion found themselves interacting with foreign ideas, and likewise Greek philosophical and religious concepts came into contact with other cultures. For instance, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria living during the first century AD drew upon the idea of the Demiurge and labeled it the Word or *Logos* of God, which functioned as an intermediate between the material world and the One.¹ Differing ideas about the Demiurge became a hallmark of the first and second centuries AD. It was in this context that Second Temple, and early Rabbinic Jewish thought led directly to how Christians would ultimately contend with these ideas as they emerged and were reinterpreted in Gnosticism.

To understand where Jewish thought on the topic rested by late antiquity, one must first examine the Jewish Scripture. Within the library of Jewish scripture, known as the Tanakh, also called the Old Testament by Christians, the figure of Leviathan was a sea dwelling, serpentine chaos figure, and has bearing on the topic at hand. However, it should, at the outset, be explored why this figure specifically, and not all supernatural serpent figures in Jewish tradition are relevant to the present discussion.

Not every important serpent in Jewish tradition was a representation of the primordial chaos serpent and should likely not be syncretized with that particular serpent motif.

¹ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 60.

Supernatural serpents have been variously translated and have played different roles, and this was also true within Jewish tradition. The serpent of Genesis 3 has naturally been the most famous Biblical serpent. It was described as “more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made.”² The figure immediately tempted the first couple to eat forbidden fruit and was subsequently destined by God to crawl on its belly, and to eat the dust of the earth. It must be acknowledged that descriptive imagery of the underworld and death was present. For instance, the Hebrew word for the “dust,” אֲפָרָה the serpent was destined to eat was identical to the word for the substance from which Adam had been created and to which he would return in death.³ Despite this chthonic element, this figure was likely separate from the chaos serpent. The tempter of Genesis 3 translated “serpent” נָחַשׁ (*nāḥāš*) was used in Jewish texts interchangeably with the other Hebrew word for serpent, שָׂרָפִים (*sārāpīm*) from which the term seraph has been derived, literally meaning “burning one,” or “shining one.”⁴ The same word was used in Isaiah 6:6 to describe a flying creature bearing a message for the prophet suggesting the angelic role associated with the terms seraph, or seraphim (plural). Professor of Hebrew Tryggve Mettinger noted that these creatures were also observed in extrabiblical literature such as the book of I Enoch as the sleepless throne guardians of Yahweh.⁵ The angel Gabriel was also described within I Enoch as being in authority over various supernatural beings in service to God, including cherubim and “the serpents.”⁶ Additionally, study of iconographic imagery from Egypt and Palestine has gradually affirmed the idea that the image of the uraeus, a winged supernatural

² Genesis 3:1, English Standard Version.

³ James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible with Greek and Hebrew Dictionary*, “Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary H6080,” (Nashville: Regal, 1977), 90.

⁴ Strong, “Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary H5175, H8314,” 78, 121.

⁵ Tryggve Mettinger, in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. ed. Karel van Der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. Van Der Horst, (Boston: Brill, 1999), 743.

⁶ I Enoch, Trans. George Nickelsburg and James VanderKam, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 20:7.

serpent, sometimes semi-humanoid, was likely the same as the Biblical seraph.⁷ This evidence, along with the Genesis narrative placing the figure in proximity to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, again suggesting a guardian capacity, may be enough to eliminate this figure as identical with the primordial chaos serpent Leviathan. However, it is also noteworthy that widely attested Christian tradition, influenced by extant Jewish traditions, interpreted the serpent of Genesis 3 as a fallen angelic being and not a representation of primeval chaos. Therefore, identification as a seraph, a Jewish serpentine guardian figure, and most likely not Leviathan or the Near Eastern chaos serpent is indicated.

Having established the boundaries of the serpent motif in Jewish scripture, a close exploration of the relevant figure sheds light on the implications for Judaism and eventually Christianity. In the context of ancient religion, descriptions of Leviathan in Jewish texts placed it well within the category of primordial chaos serpent, and not a normal member of the animal kingdom. Professors of religion and Old Testament literature, John H. Walton and Victor H. Matthews, and professor of history Mark Chavalas disambiguated this figure stating:

Leviathan has often been identified as a crocodile, which were found mostly in Egypt, (where it symbolized kingly power and greatness), but also sparsely in Palestine. However, the multiple heads here and the fiery breath in Job 41:19 make the crocodile identification difficult. Alternatively, Leviathan has been depicted as a sea monster, (see Is. 27:1). Support for this is found in Ugaritic texts which contain detailed descriptions of a chaos beast, representing the seas or watery anarchy, in the form of a many headed twisting sea serpent who is defeated by Baal...Biblically, Leviathan would therefore most easily fit into the category of “supernatural” creature (like Cherubim) as opposed natural or purely mythological.⁸

⁷ Mettinger, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, 743.

⁸ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000), 540.

Additionally, the more sinister dragon-like qualities were also implied with Leviathan's linguistic association with the previously mentioned monster serpent, Lotan. Forsyth asserted that this was shown within the linguistic evidence stating, "The root (lwh) means "twist" or "coil" (Hebrew lwy, writhe), and so this famous name signifies originally the "twister," a natural term for a serpent and destined to take on the various trickster-ish implications of the English word."⁹ Therefore, etymology suggests the Jewish scriptures and those who interpreted them were conscious of the significance of this term.

Leviathan was alluded to a handful of times in the text of the Tanakh, and each of those times identification with the primordial chaos serpent was evident. Jewish Scriptures first noted Leviathan in hymns. Psalm 74:13-14 described the Hebrew God subduing the creature stating:

You divided the sea by Your strength;
You broke the heads of the sea monsters in the waters.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.¹⁰

The language surrounding Leviathan in Jewish literature was also indicative of its connection with chaos, and the primordial underworld and/or sea, playing much the same role as its Ugaritic and Babylonian correlates. Oxford University lecturer in Old Testament studies John Day noted that the defeat of the chaotic sea was an important motif in Jewish scripture and that this act was seen as interchangeable with the act of creation, and additionally that strong arguments could be made that in a symbolic sense the parting of the Red Sea on behalf of the

⁹ Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 62.

¹⁰ Psalm 74:13-14, ESV.

children of Israel in the Exodus narrative was a reminder of this creative act.¹¹ Again, Jewish scripture demonstrated awareness of the primordial serpent figure.

Moreover, additional evidence for this awareness came from the Genesis creation account itself, which evoked the chaos serpent in ways that would have been more apparent in the original language. The Hebrew word for “deep” used in Genesis 1:2 is significant on this account. The passage stated, “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”¹² The Hebrew word translated “deep,” here was תְּהוֹם (tehom).¹³ Assyriologist Heinrich Zimmern asserted that this word likely had its origin in none other than the Eastern chaos dragon Tiamat, and that the phenomena of void, darkness, and the primeval depths before Creation were almost certainly allusions to the pagan dragon Tiamat.¹⁴ This again placed the associated motifs of the absence of creation, and its watery representative well within ancient Jewish theology.

Additionally, Psalm 104:25-26 continued the motif of Yahweh’s dominion over the chaotic sea, and significantly, featured a more domesticated Leviathan, stating:

Here is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with creatures innumerable,
living things both small and great.

There go the ships, and Leviathan, *which you formed to play in it* [emphasis added].¹⁵

¹¹ John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23.

¹² Genesis 1:2, ESV.

¹³ Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, “Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary H84145,” 123.

¹⁴ Heinrich Zimmern, *The Ancient East, No. III: The Babylonian and Hebrew Genesis*, Translated by J. Hutchison, (London: Long Acre, 1901), 5.

¹⁵ Psalm 104:25-26, ESV.

Here the Leviathan inhabited a tamed sea on which ships traversed, and the creature itself played or variously the word for “play,” שָׂחַק *sāḥaq* has been translated mock, or sport.¹⁶ The observation can be made that in comparison to Yahweh, there was no danger or threat implied by its inhabiting the sea.

Similarly, Isaiah 27:1 listed Leviathan as one figure that would face judgement and was clearly subordinate, as well as easily defeated. The figure is described in the prophetic work as a “twisting serpent,” “fleeing serpent,” and “dragon who lives in the sea.”¹⁷ Significantly, the Hebrew word used in the passage for serpent was again נָחָשׁ (*nāḥāš*) and was used parallel with the word for sea monster, or dragon, תַּנְיִן (“Tannîn”).¹⁸ This made the correspondence clear between the Leviathan figure, dragon, and serpent, while also once again eliminating any possible conflation with a simple natural taxonomy of a crocodile or whale.

Additionally, the ‘large fish’ featured in the Biblical story of Jonah, was likely an allusion to Leviathan. It has been observed that when relating this tale, the translators of the Greek Septuagint notably chose the Greek word, *κῆτος* (*kêtos*), usually translated in English sea monster, rather than the more straightforward *ἰχθύς* (*ichthys*, fish).¹⁹ Importantly, *κῆτος* had sometimes carried the meaning Tannîn, and therefore implied Leviathan, not a normal fish.²⁰ The idea that the fish of Jonah was Leviathan, and that the prophet had been captive in its belly, i.e., in the chaotic watery depths, for three days would later have important implications for Christian

¹⁶ Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, “Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary H7832,” 114.

¹⁷ Isaiah 27:1, ESV.

¹⁸ Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, “Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary H8577,” 114.

¹⁹ Scott B. Noegel, “Jonah and Leviathan Inner Biblical Allusions and the Problem with Dragons,” *Articles/Articoli*, <https://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/PDFs/articles/noegel-jonah-2015.pdf>, 2015. 239-240, (accessed April 2, 2022.)

²⁰ Noegel, “Jonah and Leviathan,” 240.

theology pertaining to the Leviathan figure. It is also important to note that if the big fish of Jonah was some incarnation of Leviathan, then it was implicitly submissive to Yahweh.

Moreover, Job 41 extensively described the fearsome creature which was subordinate to Yahweh. Here it is described as an inexorable, scaly, seafaring, fire-breathing entity. In addition to the descriptors, the passage posed a series of questions which in a sense hinted at the figure's position in Jewish theology:

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook or press down his tongue with a cord?

Can you put a rope in his nose,

or pierce his jaw with a hook?

Will he make many pleas to you?

Will he speak to you soft words?

Will he make a covenant with you

to take him for your servant forever?

Will you play with him as with a bird,

or will you put him on a leash for your girls?²¹

The implication here is that the answer to the rhetorical questions being posed is of course no, but Yahweh could do all these things with Leviathan. Such was the power Jewish thinkers attributed to Yahweh. This was in stark contrast to the many previous uses of the primordial chaos serpent figure in which the hero-god engaged in a life or death struggle with the monster. Such a struggle was not found in Jewish thought. As Miller observed, Leviathan was God's plaything, a mere pet, while at the same time a terrible monster.²² This potent polemical

²¹ Job 40:1-5, ESV.

²² Robert D. Miller, "Dragon Myths and Biblical Theology," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (January 2019): 48. <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.fhsu.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0040563918819812>. (Accessed January 16, 2022).

statement essentially offered a different perspective on the old primordial serpent that in some ways affirmed other ancient religious ideas, while also reframing them in a Jewish way.

3.2 The Primordial Serpent in Extrabiblical Jewish Tradition

Judaism during the Second Temple era not only accounted for the primordial serpent and Leviathan figure within the Tanakh but also in its broader literature. This was most apparent in the pseudepigraphical collection of stories known as *The Book of Enoch*, or *I Enoch*, dating to around the second century BC. The story, most familiarly alluded to in Genesis 6:1-4, and the Christian epistles 2 Peter 2:4, and Jude 1:6, was well known to Second Temple Jewish scholars. It was also widely attested in the *Book of Giants*, and *Jubilees* 5:1-7. Although various versions of the story exist, the core narrative in summary recounted how a group of angels known collectively as *Watchers*, listed by name, formed a pact, and rebelled against God. They subsequently taught human beings various technological arts such as sorcery and metallurgy (for use in war implements) leading people to sin. They also united with human women, producing various giants and monstrous offspring who filled the world with violence. This resulted in God's decision to flood the world in the Deluge. The fallen divine beings were punished for this betrayal by being imprisoned in a chthonic abyss, sometimes translated *Tartarus*, to await final judgement.

Within the narrative the primordial serpent appeared in several ways that inform the present discussion. Each of these allude to association between the fallen angels or *Watchers* and the primordial serpent. First, Leviathan was explicitly mentioned in much the same humbled state as in the Tanakh. For its role in the rebellion of the *Watchers*, Leviathan is listed among those to be judged by God, and Leviathan's punishment is to be prepared as food for the

righteous.²³ Importantly, this passage also included a detail that demonstrated Judaism's literacy in Near Eastern cosmology in that it described Leviathan specifically as female, echoing the ancient Near Eastern monster Tiamat.²⁴

Next, when listing these fallen divine beings within the text, descriptions were provided that not only suggested their affiliation with evil things, but also allusions to being associated with the serpent figure. I Enoch 69:12-17 described one such fallen Watcher as "...the one who taught the sons of men all the evil blows of spirits and demons...the bite of the serpent...the son of the serpent whose name is Taba'et."²⁵ Aside from the associated serpent motifs, translator's notes indicated that the final line is in question, having been disturbed in extant copies.²⁶ It would be therefore possible to surmise that the similar words dragon, תַּנִּין (tannin) or deep, תְּהוֹם (tehom) may have once fit into the passage, either of which would have been equally appropriate in light of the themes present. Taken together, these allusions, as well as the reference to Leviathan having some role in the rebellion, suggest the Watchers were considered associates, in some way of Leviathan.

Finally, the fallen Watcher figures within the Enoch tradition also exhibited parallels with the previously discussed Titans as well as Near Eastern myth and seem to have mirrored those figures' relationship with the primordial mother of monsters. Historian of religion Jan Bremmer also noted similarities between the story of the revolt of the Titans and the Jewish rebellion in Heaven and observed that the Jews themselves sometimes connected their fallen angels with the

²³ | Enoch, 60:24.

²⁴ | Enoch,60:7.

²⁵ | Enoch, 69:12-17.

²⁶ | Enoch, footnote c in Nickelsburg and VanderKam, 90.

pagan succession myth.²⁷ In the previously mentioned *Laws III*, the sin of rebelling against one's parents was said by Plato to "reproduce the character of the Titans of story."²⁸ Therefore, the common theme of rebellion serves as a link between these parallel narratives. Moreover, in the same way the Titans and the evil spirits of the *Enuma Elish* were sent to *Tartaros*, so too were the Watchers. The angel Raphael, in obedience to God, was asked to bind the rebellious angels and cast them into darkness.²⁹ Raphael was elsewhere described as the ruler of *Tartaros*, and essentially fulfilled the role of jailer there.³⁰ Therefore, Enochic literature suggested a parallel Jewish exegesis of a popular pagan myth involving divine rebels connected with a primordial serpent figure.

Conclusion

Jewish thinkers put forward a competing narrative surrounding the familiar primordial serpent figure that made a polemical statement about Yahweh as reflected in their Scriptures. Day echoed this sentiment and suggested that the acknowledgment of Yahweh as the true victor over chaos was a deliberate indictment against Baalism.³¹ This literary device was not unusual in Jewish scripture; Hebrew scholar Gary Rendsburg noted similar mockery of Baal in I Kings 18:27.³² Therefore Leviathan was treated in a similar way. Miller summarized a similar interpretation of these connections stating, "Israel does not believe in dragons, and I do not think Canaanites did, either. But Israel does claim that whatever Canaanites mean when they say "Baal

²⁷ Jan Bremmer, *Greek Religion and Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, (New York: Brill, 2008), 73.

²⁸ Plato, *Laws*, III, trans. R.G. Bury, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg034.perseus-eng1:3.701>, 701a.

²⁹ *I Enoch*, 10:4.

³⁰ *I Enoch*, 20:3.

³¹ Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon*, 27.

³² Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Mock of Baal in I Kings 18:27," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (July 1988): 414-417.

slew the Sea,” is true of Yahweh, not Baal. Indeed, what was an incomparably difficult victory for Baal—as it was for Tarhunt, Teshub, and Indra—was child’s play for Yahweh...”³³ This way of thinking about the Hebrew God, Yahweh, particularly his relationship to extant ideas about primordial chaos, would go forward and be adopted in the Christian era. The Judeo-Christian narrative about who ‘slew’ or sometimes simply tamed the monster, was supported by its thematically consistent use of the primordial serpent idea when compared with ancient Near Eastern and Greek religious traditions. In contrast, Gnostic interpretations used the primordial serpent and its offspring in a different way.

³³ Miller, “Dragon Myths,” 48.

CHAPTER 4
THE GNOSTIC DEMIURGE AND THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN PRIMORDIAL SERPENT
TRADITION

4.1 The Gnostic Demiurge

Emerging during the late Classical era, Gnosticism was a patchwork of philosophical and religious ideas. There was no single ‘orthodox’ Gnostic systemic doctrine, and it should be acknowledged that discoveries have continued to be made about the assertions and practices of this loosely defined set of writings and beliefs. However, New Testament historian Robert M. Grant offered insight into what came to be known as Gnosticism. He pointed out that although Gnostics drew upon mythology, they were ultimately devoted to freedom of thought, conceived of structure as tyrannical, and believed *gnosis* or knowledge, was related to the divine.¹ Historian Henry Chadwick observed that this knowledge was not merely philosophical or intellectual, but also had to do with special knowledge about the origins of the world, the origin of evil, and man’s destiny with regard to these origins.² Additionally, Grant described the likely beginnings of Gnosticism, as accounted for by modern scholars, as traceable to Hellenistic philosophy, Iranian [Near Eastern] religion, Christianity, and heterodox Judaism, and noted that components of all these were to be found within Gnostic thought.³

Gnosticism used ideas that were informed by Neoplatonism and Middle Platonism to create a bifurcation of Old Testament and New Testament concepts of supreme deity, and the incarnation of Christ. Moreover, it has been the traditional consensus among historians and

¹ Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism & Early Christianity*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 12.

² Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church I*, (New York: Penguin, 1984), 35.

³ Grant, *Gnosticism & Early Christianity*, 13.

Christian scholarship that this was an attempt to reconcile Christianity with the Hellenistic philosophical idea that physical matter itself was inferior and problematic, and that the duality of matter and spirit were roughly equivalent to good and evil.⁴ This analysis was also echoed by Turner who summarized this attempted synthesis stating, "...one might say that the Sethian picture of the world and its origins resulted from the interpretation of the biblical protology of the book of Genesis in light of the Platonic distinction between an ideal, exemplary realm of eternal stable being and its more or less deficient earthly and changeable copy."⁵ The idea of this deficiency in creation was echoed throughout Gnostic thought. Gnosticism therefore was committed to understanding the ostensibly flawed nature of creation and the cosmos and was not homogenous but pervasively open to varied interpretations of existing ideas and divine supernatural figures in the pursuit of gnosis.

In discussing Gnosticism it should also be mentioned that modern scholarship has occasionally contested the existence of a sect that could rightly be categorized as Gnostic at all. Some have suggested that it existed only as a part of a spectrum of beliefs emerging in the early Christian era and may have little descriptive power. Attempting to re-write the narrative about Gnosticism, scholars such as Brakke have asserted early Christian leadership merely liked to imagine itself unified, and minimized diversity.⁶ As a consequence, heterodox groups were simply labeled Gnostic by those attempting to refine and unify diverse groups of early Christians. Likewise, he argued that since Gnostics did not themselves unite under a banner of Gnosticism, but only followed what he described as a "school of thought," they could not be

⁴ Dylan M. Burns, "Providence, Creation, and Gnosticism According to the Gnostics," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24 (April 2016): 55-56.

⁵ Turner, "The Gnostic Sethians," 10.

⁶Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 112.

said to exist as a proper sect.⁷ Therefore, according to Brakke the category commonly known as Gnosticism was merely a product of the suppression of, and competition between, the many alternative interpretations of Jesus of Nazareth's significance in the early Christian era.⁸ In contrast with this view, French philosopher Simone Pétrement observed that although groups such as Simonians, Menandrians, Saturnalians, Valentinians, Ophites, Sethians and others all came to be categorized as "Gnostics," justification existed for this umbrella term in that they shared demonstrable common features.⁹ Likewise, Brakke did allow that similarities existed between those groups which amounted to what he described as a skeleton or framework for what would later be designated as 'Gnostic' by Church fathers, and that supernatural figures, especially the nature of the 'first ruler,' i.e. the Demiurge, were a part of this core framework.¹⁰ Therefore, even under the scrutiny of critical scholarship, the Gnostic narrative did have degrees of unity as it pertains to the present analysis of the primordial serpent, the Demiurge, and related figures as a mythological typology.

Within Gnosticism, the most preeminent among the supernatural figures, also referred to as Divine Principals, was its highly complex version of the Demiurge. There are several notable characteristics of the Demiurge according to the Gnostics, which shed light on how they interpreted Platonic, pagan, and Jewish ideas. Each of these demonstrated how Gnostics attempted to reconcile the seemingly conflicting ideas that converged and mingled in the first centuries of the Christian era.

⁷ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 90.

⁸ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 110-112.

⁹ Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, trans. Carol Harrison, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 2.

¹⁰ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 25, 37, 124.

First, reflecting upon *Timaeus*, Gnostics saw room to parse out a unique version of the Demiurge that differed from previous ones. Turner explained how a Platonically informed Jewish interpretation of creation, exemplified in Philo, contrasted with the way the Gnostics synthesized their Demiurge from Plato:

Thus in Middle Platonic fashion, Philo of Alexandria identified the Biblical creator God with a supreme Monad who generates and presides *over* the Logos—the paradigmatic model of the *Timaeus* conceived as an intelligible world of ideas identified as God’s thoughts—whose powers create and govern the sensible world. But the Gnostic reading of scripture revised this ranking by identifying the supreme God of Genesis with Plato’s Demiurge, whose supremacy—on a *literal reading* of the *Timaeus*—appeared to be compromised by having to consult a divine paradigm *above* him as the model for his creation. This suggests that there must be a God presiding over the ideal realm who is superior to the God of Genesis.¹¹

This interpretation amounted to a toehold in which the creator of Genesis could be construed as inferior and therefore flawed or incomplete. This in turn suggested to the Gnostic that much of the orthodox Jewish and Christian tradition about Creation could be re-examined. To this end, the Gnostic texts describe the Demiurge as an Archon (or Ruler) who was created first, and responsible for the flawed material world, a broken counterfeit creation in comparison to the heavenly ideal.¹² Therefore, although the Demiurge within Gnosticism was the creator of the world, he was also closely associated with the element of chaos, and the outer darkness.¹³ This craftsman god contrasted with previous versions in that it was overtly malicious.¹⁴ Forsyth characterized the difference between these versions of the Demiurge stating, “This term [Demiurge] derives ultimately from Plato (meaning "world-maker"), but what it meant among these late Hellenistic spiritual movements was the idea of a creator god who had bungled his job

¹¹ Turner, “The Gnostic Sethians,” italics in original, 11-12.

¹² Turner, “The Gnostic Sethians,” 11.

¹³ Mettinger, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, 186.

¹⁴ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 61.

and who was therefore unworthy of worship.”¹⁵ To the Gnostic, this also explained the seemingly jealous, insecure deity of the Old Testament, who was regarded as distasteful to some Greek minds.¹⁶

Next, it was at this stage that the serpent motif re-emerged. The flawed intermediate divine figure which Gnostics identified as the Demiurge was also known by other names that often carried with them connotations worth examining. In the same way the Titan Kronos, and a slew of monsters, had been in some versions the children of the primordial mother Gaia, a figure known as Yaldabaoth was the first Ruler or Archon, and was the child of the primordial goddess named for wisdom, Sophia Pistis.¹⁷ In a passage within “On the Origin of the World,” part of the *Nag Hammadi* collection, Yaldabaoth was born of chaos and the abysmal waters before creation via the primordial feminine figure Sophia Pistis.¹⁸ He then went about creating the Earth, separating the land from waters much like the God of the Genesis account.¹⁹ Similarly, in describing this figure the early Christian scholar and bishop, Irenaeus of Lyon, observed how Valentinian Gnostics held that this figure was “involved with oblivion,” resulting in a number of unsavory behaviors.²⁰ Irenaeus also noted that the figure of Sophia Pistis was regarded by some Gnostics as taking the form of a serpent albeit in the context of the tempter-serpent of the Garden of Eden.²¹ Although as discussed above the primordial serpent was likely not the same as the tempter of the Garden, there was likely room for the serpent of the Garden to sometimes be cast as the primordial serpent. Therefore, this allusion may also suggest a possible relationship with

¹⁵ Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 319.

¹⁶ Turner, “The Gnostic Sethians,” 12.

¹⁷ “On the Origin of the World,” 99:23-100, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, trans., Marvin Meyer, 204.

¹⁸ ¹⁸ “On the Origin of the World,” 99:23-30, 204.

¹⁹ ¹⁹ “On the Origin of the World,” 100:29, 205.

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies Book I*, trans. Alexander Roberts, 30:8.

²¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies Book I*, 30:15.

Tiamat, emblem of the chaotic sea personified as a serpent, and bearer of monstrous offspring. Furthermore, the birth of the Gnostic Demiurge Yaldabaoth as well as specifics about his appearance were described in “The Apocryphon of John,” sometimes called “The Secret Book of John.” In it Yaldabaoth was described as a serpent with the face of a lion and flashing eyes like lightning (figure 5).²² This aspect is noteworthy in that it again evoked the king of the Titans, Kronos, who as previously discussed was at different times depicted both as a dragon, and as having a lion’s head. In examining this connection, Pétrement noted that German theologian Wilhelm Bousset had likewise concluded that Yaldabaoth was simply Saturn (Kronos) or some variation of him.²³ Therefore the Gnostic Demiurge had much more to do with this often-hostile pagan figure than a benevolent creator.

Relatedly, an important element of Gnosticism was the position of mankind within their cosmology. Human beings were connected with Yaldabaoth as their creator in Gnostic thought, and therefore flawed as well. Within Gnostic texts it was also Yaldabaoth, not the traditional Judeo-Christian God who created mankind. In one account along with the heavenly Powers he created, Yaldabaoth, or chief creator, formed Eve, who subsequently gave birth to Adam.²⁴ Similarly, in an alternate account the heavenly Powers created Adam, but it was the chief creator (i.e. Gnostic Demiurge) who breathed life into him, and notably it was a separate “female spiritual presence,” who was the serpent tempter of the Garden.²⁵ Therefore, humanity was precariously conceived, not by a perfect supreme being but by this inferior figure.

²² “The Secret Book of John,” 9:25-10:19, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, Trans., Marvin Meyer, 115.

²³ Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 42.

²⁴ “On the Origin of the World,” 112:25-117:15, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, trans., Marvin Meyer, 212-214.

²⁵ “The Nature of the Rulers,” 89:17-90, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, trans., Marvin Meyer, 193.

Next, Gnostics fashioned their Demiurge in contrast with the God of the Old Testament through the characteristic of “blindness.” Yaldabaoth was described within the Gnostic cosmological essay found at Nag Hammadi, “The Nature of the Rulers,” as blind, but in this sense the blindness was ignorance and arrogance.²⁶ Unaware of his status as a created being, he claimed supremacy. This was the Gnostic indictment of traditional conceptions of the Old Testament God. In his ignorance, Yaldabaoth made the same claim as the Judeo-Christian God in Isaiah 27:5, stating “I am God there is no other [but me].”²⁷ Also, because of this blindness, the appellation Samael, or “blind god” or “god of the blind” was noted to be given to this Demiurge.²⁸ Rather than the traditional omnipotent creator of Jewish and Christian narratives, the implication was that this Demiurge was demonic and under the name Samael the Gnostic Demiurge was listed among other demonic forces, including Leviathan.²⁹

Moreover, a passage within the Gnostic essay “The Gospel of Judas,” described further aspects of the Yaldabaoth figure, stating: “And look, from the cloud an [angel] appeared, whose face blazed with fire, and his name was Nebro, which is interpreted as ‘rebel,’ but others name him Yaldabaoth...”³⁰ Here the Demiurge Yaldabaoth was described as rebel, and the theme of rebellion again emerged drawing associations with the angelic Watcher rebels of Jewish tradition, and the Greek Titan narrative. Additionally, the description of the face blazing with fire evoked the passage from “The Secret Book of John” noted above, which described Yaldabaoth’s eyes as flashing like lightning.

²⁶ “The Nature of the Rulers,” 86:27, 191.

²⁷ “The Nature of the Rulers,” 86:27-87:23,191.

²⁸ The Nature of the Rulers,” 86:27-87:23, 191.

²⁹ Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil*, 216.

³⁰ “The Gospel of Judas,” 50:15-20, Codex Tchacos, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, trans. Marvin Meyer, 766.

Finally, and perhaps most practically, there was a likely racial component that may have biased the Gnostics' attitude against the traditional Jewish creation account. It has generally been accepted that Gnosticism, especially Valentinian Gnosticism had its roots at least in part, within heterodox Jewish speculation about the nature of the figure of Sophia from Jewish tradition.³¹ However, in spite of this Forsyth noted an increasing alienation from Judaism also existed within Gnosticism, further leading them to identify the Demiurge, the flawed and demonic Yaldabaoth as the Old Testament God.³² He further observed that Gnostics attributed the lineage of the Hebrew people to a grotesque union between Yaldabaoth and Eve, the direct offspring from this union, Cain and Abel, here described as "ugly," were imagined as the progenitors of the Hebrew people.³³ This potential explanation suggests Gnostics had a cultural and racial reason to diverge from Jewish narratives. The racial divide therefore may have served to further alienate the Gnostics from the Jewish and orthodox Christian community.

4.2 Early Christian Refutations of Gnosticism and Exegesis of the Demiurge

The history of the early Church has been characterized by a need to bolster core, early Christian beliefs against philosophical and religious systems which sought to blend and reinterpret them. However, these unorthodox interpretations, including Gnosticism, may have also had early roots. Theologian, and leading historian of the early church Henry Chadwick noted that as early as Paul's interactions with the Church at Corinth a Gentile influence had established a belief that some were spiritually superior due to possession of special knowledge, including the idea that the material world was evil, or fundamentally flawed, especially the

³¹ Turner, "The Gnostic Sethians," 10.

³² Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 328.

³³ Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 328-329.

human body, and was therefore inconsequential.³⁴ This was at first an issue for the Church due to the immorality that had apparently resulted from the dualistic idea that the physical was irrelevant and that moral behavior did not matter if one had special spiritual knowledge.³⁵ However as described above, Gnostic ideas about the world and man's place in the cosmos became more elaborate and yielded larger issues for orthodox Christianity than simple immorality as they progressed. Paul's refutation of the spiritual cliquishness and resultant immorality at Corinth was the first in a genre of writings that became increasingly necessary if Christianity was going to remain cohesive. As discussed above, pagan beliefs were also sometimes preserved by the earliest Christian scholars such as Athenagoras of Athens in their apologetic writing. Their knowledge of pagan cosmogenic narratives combined with this need for cohesion to refute Gnosticism.

Irenaeus, an early Church scholar and bishop of Lyon born around the year 120 AD has been the Christian writer most closely associated with the refutation of Gnosticism. His most famous work *Against Heresies*, sometimes still referred to by its Latin name *Adversus Haeresus* was an effort to describe and carefully address Gnostic principles and teachings which were regarded as heresies. While working to distinguish orthodox Christian doctrine from Gnosticism, he also sought to parse the differences between Christianity and Judaism, portraying the Jews as having ultimately rejected God, something which may have had practical motivations in light of persecutions that took place during the late first and early second centuries AD.³⁶

Irenaeus found the heretical beliefs of the Gnostics to be prolific and prone to re-emerging. In book one of *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus described the heretical teachings of the

³⁴ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 33-34.

³⁵ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 34.

³⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, 7:4.

school of the Gnostic Valentinus as being like the “Lernaean hydra,” the seven-headed, and Leviathan-like dragon of Greek legend which regrew two heads for each one that was cut off.³⁷ He used the comparison to this well-known monster to describe the difficult to eradicate nature of Gnostic heresies. Enemies of the faith were often compared to the Leviathan in the early Church. For instance one church history by an anonymous Church historian hailed the victorious Constantine for removing the dragon (δράκοντος), a likely reference to Constantine’s efforts to purge heretics from the Church.³⁸ Although Irenaeus refuted Gnosticism on the basis of several basic Christian doctrines, it was on the grounds of the creation and the Gnostic cosmogony that Irenaeus dealt with the Gnostic Demiurge and what he considered to be the flawed nature of the Gnostic thesis.

First an examination of Irenaeus’ system of analysis and defense of beliefs is necessary to understand his position against Gnosticism and the associated motif at hand. Chadwick described Irenaeus as adhering to essentially three tools against heresies. These were Apostolic succession, the recognition of a New Testament canon, and the Rule of Faith.³⁹ Each of these had direct bearing on Gnosticism in different ways. Apostolic succession meant that leaders of the Church had directly inherited authority from original Apostles who knew Jesus; if this traceable succession was true then the existence of secret teachings given by Jesus to his Apostles, as the Gnostics believed, would not be likely since they would have been taught to bishops like Irenaeus by their predecessor.⁴⁰ Next, because Gnostics affirmed many different and conflicting documents related to Jesus, Irenaeus emphasized the importance of excluding these by

³⁷Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book I, 30:15.

³⁸ Anonymous Cyzicenus, in *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3:6 ed. Günther Christian Hansen (Gelasius Cyzicenus, CPG 6034). Berlin; New York, 2002, <https://pta.bbaw.de/pta/reader/?left=urn-cts-pta-pta0036.pta001.pta-grc1&right=notext>. (accessed June 12, 2022).

³⁹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 42-44.

⁴⁰ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 42.

canonizing the most widely accepted and coherent narratives into an accepted New Testament.⁴¹ As discussed above, Gnostic writings like those found at Nag Hammadi purported to be secret knowledge and this antithetical position to that of the most widely recognized Christian texts likely made them easily excluded. Finally, Irenaeus used what he described as the “Rule of Faith” a summary of Christian beliefs in which importantly, God the Father was affirmed to be the supreme and sole Creator of heaven, earth, and mankind, as described in the book of Genesis.⁴² This meant that Christianity was in continuity with this Old Testament, i.e. Jewish tradition.⁴³ This was perhaps the most potent tool of the three, and the one with the most bearing on the figure of the Gnostic Demiurge Yaldabaoth, because it directly contradicted the Gnostic notions that the creator of the earth or mankind was not the supreme deity, the Old Testament was inferior or had an inferior god, and that the traditional Jewish account of creation was inconsistent with the doctrines of Christianity.

Next, Irenaeus’ refutation of the Gnostic creation narrative hinged upon the idea that God, the same God of the Christian Gospels and the Jewish Tanakh, created the cosmos himself *ex nihilo*, or from nothing. He argued that because God must be perfectly good, and had declared his creation good, that the idea of Yaldabaoth, the chaos-born Demiurge of the Gnostics, was essentially absurd *prima facie*. He asserted neither angels nor any other lesser deity could logically have formed creation without the Father’s consent and that conversely, such figures as Yaldabaoth could not have been ignorant or ‘blind’ to the existence of God, and assumed himself supreme, as the Gnostics asserted their Demiurge had.⁴⁴ The implication was that any idea of the

⁴¹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 43.

⁴² Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 44.

⁴³ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 44.

⁴⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies, Book II*, trans. Alexander Roberts, 5:1-4.

fundamentally corrupt nature of the material world, including mankind, was not consistent with the idea of a Supreme Deity at all. Likewise, the idea that the Kronos-like Demiurge of the Gnostics had created the world in total ignorance of the Supreme God's existence was improbable, as Irenaeus argued that Jews of his day adjured demons in name of God, i.e. they acknowledged his authority, and therefore how could a hypothetical powerful figure like Yaldabaoth be less aware than demons were known to be?⁴⁵ Therefore the participation in creating the cosmos by any malignant inferior being was unthinkable to Irenaeus and in orthodox Christian belief.

In contrast with Gnostic thinkers, Irenaeus formed his articulation of doctrine hand-in-glove with Jewish theology, which as discussed above informed his interpretation of creation, primordial chaos, and in a sense participated in the final incarnation of the primordial serpent in the Classical world. Scholars have pointed out how Irenaeus drew upon Jewish interpretations of creation to support his argument and sustain early Christian doctrine. For instance, Professor of Theology M.C. Steenberg noted how although Irenaeus eventually developed a stricter interpretation of creation *ex nihilo*, he along with early Church theologians Justin and Theophilus affirmed the assertion of Second Temple era text II Maccabees 7:28 that God created the cosmos 'out of non-being,' which has been alternately interpreted from 'chaos,' 'unformed substance' and 'primordial matter.'⁴⁶ Steenberg added that Justin likely nevertheless believed any matter the God of Genesis used was still formed by God and not eternal or pre-existent.⁴⁷ This affirmed the view of Theophilus of Antioch who had stated, "What great thing is it if God made the world out

⁴⁵ Irenaeus, *Against*, 7:2-3.

⁴⁶ M. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption*, ed. J. Den Boeft (New York: Brill, 2008), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.fhsu.edu/lib/fhsu/reader.action?docID=468429>. 40-41, (accessed January 7, 2021).

⁴⁷ Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 42.

of existent materials? For even a human artist, when he gets material from someone, makes of it what he pleases. But the power of God is manifested in this, that out of things that are not he makes whatever he pleases; just as the bestowal of life and motion is the prerogative of no other than God alone.”⁴⁸ Therefore, the Christian and Jewish God was represented as different from the pagan deities who had defeated monsters and ordered the cosmos such as Marduk and Baal. Baal was not only directly mocked within scripture as mentioned above, but the creative power of Baal and Yahweh also differed. For instance, professor of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern studies Wilhelm J. Wessels observed that within the Old Testament book of Jeremiah the polemic against Baal was “founded on the idea that Yahweh is the creator who in his power and might can take away that which Baal supposedly can provide and is hailed for.”⁴⁹ However, these differences between Baal and Yahweh still demonstrated a working understanding of the pagan material. To the Christian scholar, the primordial serpent may have played a similar role in its theology, but the deity who subdued it was distinct.

Irenaeus also parted from the Gnostics on the topic of human nature and the creation of mankind. While the Gnostics’ various accounts discussed above involved sexual, or at least metaphysically sexual misadventures enacted by supernatural figures, including the Demiurge, Irenaeus supported the ancient Jewish view. This view based on the account in Genesis 1:26-27 and 2:7, was that God himself formed mankind out of dust and breathed spirit into him, making him in his image. This meant that from the beginning mankind was both a being of dust, i.e. raw matter, as well as the spirit of God, and therefore also contained something immaterial and

⁴⁸ Theophilus of Antioch, “To Autolytus,” trans. Marcus Dods, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers vol 2*, Book II:4, New Advent online Library. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02042.htm>, (accessed July 4, 2022).

⁴⁹ Wilhelm J. Wessels, “God the Creator: Contrasting Images in Psalm 65:10-14 and Jeremiah 23:9-15,” *Old Testament Essays* 23, no. 3 (January 2010): 855. <https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.10520/EJC86063>. (accessed July 16, 2022).

immortal.⁵⁰ This union of body and spirit was antithetical to the Gnostic view that matter, and mankind was so corrupt it could only have been born from a deluded creator. Rather than conceiving mankind as a spirit trapped in a body like a prison, as the Gnostics, Neoplatonists, and Orphists before them had, the Christian narrative suggested mankind represented not the flawed offspring of a monster, but unity between spirit and matter. The implication again was that the Christian and Old Testament narratives were cohesive, and the Gnostic Demiurge could not have created mankind.

Additionally, the New Testament canon familiar to Irenaeus contributed to how the primordial chaos dragon was resolved within Christian belief. The dragon- like figures within the apocalyptic New Testament text Revelation shared a strong affinity with the Jewish and ancient Near Eastern dragons of primordial waters, and at the same time demonstrated how Gnostic ideas of the primeval serpent or any other permutations of that motif were departures from the original meaning. The last book of New Testament canon, the apocalyptic Revelation, also known as the Revelation of St. John, contained imagery that was highly referential to the Old Testament books of the same genre, Daniel and Isaiah. In a vision describing cosmic events past and future, images were included that would have been familiar to both Greco-Roman readers, as well as Jewish ones. Revelation 12:3 recounted an image of a great red dragon with seven heads menacing a divine woman and child and the heavens.⁵¹ To readers in the ancient world, this multi-headed dragon would have recalled the Hydra as well as the Leviathan of Jewish tradition, which as mentioned above was also often depicted with many heads, for instance in Psalm 74:13-14. The relationship between the dragon of Revelation and the Old Testament Leviathan

⁵⁰ Steenberg, "Irenaeus," 103.

⁵¹ Revelation 12:3, ESV.

as well as Near Eastern counterparts, was emphasized by Professor of New Testament Criticism Adela Yarbro Collins. She summarized the consensus stating: “The use of the term *drakon* for the monster in Revelation 12 shows that he is related to the OT serpentine sea-monster referred to in Isa 27:1 and elsewhere, namely, *livyathan*, rendered by *drakon* in the LXX [Septuagint]. Leviathan and related beasts (Rahab - Job 9:13, 26:12, Isa 51:9, Ps 89:10 and Tannin - Ps 74:13) in the OT clearly reflect the opponent of Baal, Yamm (Sea) and the sea-monster Lotan of Canaanite mythology, as a number of studies have pointed out.”⁵²

Although the Revelation 12 passage characterized the dragon in this instance explicitly as the “devil and Satan,” the motif employed here was nevertheless that of the Leviathan. As discussed above, room exists for a distinction between the Leviathan of Jewish literature and the serpent of the Garden or Satan, or similarly for Satan to be cast as Leviathan for narrative reasons in this particular context. Regardless, the description intentionally evoked the motif in question, the Leviathan, in both appearance and meaning.

Like the Leviathan and Tiamat the seven headed dragon in Revelation 12:9 also allied with other monstrous beasts. Revelation 13:1 recounted a deceptive and antagonistic beast that came out of the sea, which like the traditional Leviathan, had many heads (figure 6).⁵³ The location of the sea, also seems to have intentionally linked this figure to the Leviathan of Jewish tradition. Most significantly, mirroring the judgment of Leviathan from Isaiah discussed above, the dragon and beast of Revelation were judged by God, thereby abolishing death, and establishing a new creation. As Collins noted, this complete annihilation of the adversary, the Leviathan, and the sea in Revelation heralded a new creation.⁵⁴ This act above all demonstrated a

⁵² Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, (Missoula: Scholar’s Press, 1976), 76.

⁵³ Revelation 13:1

⁵⁴ Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 226-227.

unity between the roles of the primordial chaos dragon in Christianity and the earlier traditions. Its destruction yielded the full restoration of creation foretold in Christian doctrine. Therefore, its use in Revelation not only rejected the Gnostic view of creation, but effectively echoed the Near Eastern association between the defeat of a primordial serpent and the ordering, or in this case re-ordering of the cosmos.

The refutation of the Gnostic Demiurge continued within Patristic writings beyond Irenaeus. The idea that the Old Testament Creator was not a separate inferior entity from the God of Christians, (and therefore not the monstrous Demiurge Yaldabaoth) was also expanded upon by Origen of Alexandria, a Christian scholar of the mid third century A.D. Origen observed: "...I must wonder how the dissentients [i.e. Gnostics] can connect the two Testaments with two different gods. These words, were there no others, are enough to convict them of their error. For how can John [the Evangelist] be the beginning of the Gospel if they suppose he belongs to a different God, if he belongs to the demiurge, and, as they hold, is not acquainted with the new deity?"⁵⁵

Perhaps most importantly, Origen also placed Christ himself in the role of Demiurge in contrast to the Gnostic conception of it. Commenting upon the origin of the cosmos described in the Gospel of John, Origen stated "One might, however, think of the sense in which it points to the author, to that which brings about the effect, if, as we read, God commanded and they were created. For Christ is, in a manner, the demiurge, to whom the Father says, 'Let there be light,' and 'Let there be a firmament.' But Christ is demiurge as a beginning (arche), inasmuch as He is wisdom. It is in virtue of His being wisdom that He is called arche."⁵⁶ Origen's remarks

⁵⁵ Origen, "Commentary on John," trans. Allan Menzies, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Book I:14, New Advent Online Library, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1015.htm>, (accessed February 11, 2022).

⁵⁶ Origen, *Commentary on John*, I:22.

also closely mirrored the *Logos* or Word discussed above, that was described by Philo.

According to Origen, Christ having taken part in creation with God the Father, had created a good cosmos, and existed in unity with the Old Testament God. Therefore, according to some early Christian thinkers, the role of Demiurge itself was designated to Christ.

In *Contra Celsum* Origen criticized the philosopher Celsus, who according to Origen held an interpretation of the Leviathan in which the being was “the soul which had travelled through all things,” and was depicted in a diagram as a circle uniting other circles.⁵⁷ Citing the passage Psalm 104:25-26 mentioned above, Origen expressed incredulity that such a figure depreciated by the Psalmist could be placed in such cosmic regard by Celsus.⁵⁸ Celsus’ powerful and significant Leviathan suggested possible Gnostic influence. According to Celsus it was a being whose soul in some way permeated creation. Origen’s response to it demonstrated he was not comfortable with assigning cosmic significance to the old sea dragon and viewed it firmly defeated and in submission to God as the Psalmist had.

Rejection of the Gnostic Demiurge, or any monstrous element of it was fully solidified by the early Byzantine era of the fourth century AD. This was evidenced in part by the writings of such scholars as Basil of Caesarea, bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia, Asia Minor. One of the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil lived during the middle of the fourth century AD. Basil and his peers closely scrutinized Classical Greek philosophy in conjunction with Christianity, ostensibly hoping to bridge these truths. Scholars have noted he was influenced by Plato, but importantly hewed more closely to an interpretation that rejected the more Neoplatonic elements.⁵⁹ In

⁵⁷ Origen, “Contra Celsum,” trans. Frederick Cromble, in in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 4, Book VI:25, New Advent Online Library, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04166.htm>, (accessed June 11, 2022).

⁵⁸ Origen, “Contra Celsum,” VI:25.

⁵⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture, The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 95.

Hexaemeron, Homily I, Basil, like Origen, used the term Demiurge in a way that explicitly contrasted with the Gnostic usage, stating:

It appears, indeed, that even before this world an order of things existed of which our mind can form an idea, but of which we can say nothing, because it is too lofty a subject for men who are but beginners and are still babes in knowledge. The birth of the world was preceded by a condition of things suitable for the exercise of supernatural powers, outstripping the limits of time, eternal and infinite. The Creator and Demiurge of the universe perfected His works in it, spiritual light for the happiness of all who love the Lord.⁶⁰

This passage explaining creation identified the Demiurge and Creator as perfectors of the universe, a cosmos designed to promote happiness and light, not as a prison for the spirit created by a mad blind Demiurge as the Gnostics had held. Basil demonstrated that by the early Byzantine period thinkers had rejected the idea of the flawed material world.

Another of the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, Bishop of Cappadocia from 372-395 AD, cemented the role of the Leviathan in the cosmology of Christianity, and like Basil, did so in a way that left no room for the Gnostic interpretation. Instead, it brought to mind the previously discussed themes found in ancient Near Eastern narratives. Nyssa wrote about the theology behind Christ's death by employing an image of Christ using himself as bait on a fishhook to catch the primordial serpent, stating "For this reason, having swallowed the bait of the flesh, he was pierced with the fishhook of deity, and so the snake was caught with the fishhook, just as it is said in the book of Job, 'You shall catch the snake with a fishhook'."⁶¹ Importantly, as in many cases, the word rendered snake in this passage from Job, as well as in Nyssa's original Greek was δράκων, (*drakon*). As elaborated above, the dragon here as well as in

⁶⁰ Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron, Homily I: 5*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/32011.htm>. (Accessed April 29, 2022).

⁶¹ Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ," in *Patristic Monograph Series 9*, eds. Andreas Spira and Christoph Klock, trans. S. G. Hall, (Cambridge: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1978), 35.

Job was a part of the Leviathan motif. Nyssa suggested that like Jonah, Christ had descended into death for three days. Through God's power death had not confined Christ just as through God's power the belly of the Leviathan had not held Jonah. This idea was likely alluded to by Jesus himself in Matthew 12:39 in which he stated, "...an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."⁶² In using this illustration, Nyssa like other Christian intellectuals before him placed the primordial serpent in submission to the Creator.

Conclusion

The Gnostics interpreted the God of the Jewish Tanakh and Christian Old Testament as having associations with the flawed material world, and therefore inferred that the figure described there was not an eternal flawless deity but in fact an inferior Demiurge regarded as demonic, described as ignorant, blind, and resembling the monstrous pagan god Kronos. This involved utilizing Platonic and Jewish ideas in unorthodox ways. This was demonstrated by their use of the Demiurge figure, pagan Titan/succession myth, and Jewish I Enoch rebellion narrative to describe how this counterfeit creator might exist. At the same time, contemporary prejudicial attitudes about the Jewish Christian community may have also influenced Gnosticism and consequently led them even further away from a more cohesive interpretation of the material they were borrowing.

The Gnostic interpretation of the Demiurge was derived from mythological monsters and served as a way of explaining the perceived corruption of the material world while deconstructing the Jewish and Old Testament creator by association. While Gnostic narratives

⁶² Matthew 12:39, ESV.

maintained some of the mythological motifs passed down through a mixture of Near Eastern and Greek traditions, orthodox Christian scholarship clung to the older Jewish and Near Eastern narratives in a more fundamental way. In their refutation of Gnostic heresies, they echoed the Jewish and ancient Near Eastern idea that the waters or depths before creation represented most popularly in this context as Leviathan, were decisively destroyed or tamed for creation to occur and had therefore not created the world or mankind. Concurrently, Christian scholars such as Irenaeus and his successors asserted that the “good” creation described in Genesis was incompatible with a narrative in which any monstrous deities had created a corrupt cosmos.

CONCLUSION

The motif of the primordial serpent associated with the watery void before creation and evil has appeared in many of the most ancient cultures. Scholars who have focused on the motif of the primordial chaos serpent or dragon have suggested a theory of monogenesis for the figure wherein an original narrative spread out from a common source, thus explaining its frequent appearance in the region. This distinct figure known by various names was a part of the extensive interplay recent scholarship has revealed between ancient Near Eastern religion and that of the early Greeks. This has been supported by depictions in archaeological findings, similar monstrous serpent figures such as Typhoeus in Greek myth, and especially the development of Orphic traditions in which the seven Titans, particularly Kronos, correlated with the mother of monsters in Near Eastern tradition, Tiamat. These also shared the common idea that the chaotic serpent figure or permutations of it were subdued by a heroic or divine figure who, in an act of creation, subdued the symbol of watery chaos in a great struggle thereby establishing order.

A parallel narrative was also visible within the Jewish tradition of the sea serpent Leviathan. In Jewish scripture, the figure also appears emblematic of the waters before creation, and antagonism towards humanity, which has been supported by linguistic evidence. Although the God of Jewish tradition diverged from Eastern dragon-slaying narratives in that the Jewish God was explicitly undaunted by the figure, the Leviathan itself played a very similar role. Leviathan was associated with a similar narrative to that of the Titans and the Seven Evil Spirits of the Near Eastern tradition as demonstrated in the Second Temple era text of I Enoch. In this tradition, fallen angelic figures known as Watchers rebelled against God, and were cast into *Tartaros* as punishment. Mentioned among the Watchers by name was Samael, and this figure

was later identified with the Gnostic Demiurge. Importantly, within the text, the Watchers were described as associates of Leviathan, thereby completing the connection of these figures with the Seven Evil Spirits, and Titan traditions.

Ideas about creation continued to be developed by Greek philosophy. The philosopher Plato introduced the term Demiurge as a primordial builder figure who was the arranger of the material cosmos. Later Platonists developed the idea and became increasingly preoccupied with differentiating the material and eternal. Because of this, the Demiurge was eventually adopted by the Gnostics during the Christian era who symbolically identified it as a serpent with a lion's head that closely resembled representations of the Titan Kronos, and was in this version the offspring of a primordial goddess Sophia Pistis rather than Gaia. Yaldabaoth had created the material world, and so the Gnostics associated their Demiurge with the idea of the inferiority of material things. If matter was deficient then its creator must have also been fundamentally flawed. Concurrently, they imagined that if the Creator of the Old Testament existed, then he must have been this demonic, monstrous Demiurge.

The motif reached a culmination in the Christian era. Although they spanned centuries, the Ancient Near Eastern, Orphic Greek, Jewish and Christian traditions had preserved the idea of the primordial serpent as a fearsome figure emblematic of disorder, the absence of creation, and the chaotic sea. This figure and its symbolic offspring were repeatedly demonstrated in myth and legend to require subduing for order, creation, and life to occur. Often combining elements of serpents with other animals such as lions, they may have represented undifferentiated disorder.

It was early Christian scholars like Irenaeus and Origen who in refuting Gnosticism affirmed this older, antagonistic role of the primordial monsters for the Christian era. Early

Christian polemics against Gnostic heresies closely mirrored the Jewish and ancient Near Eastern idea that elemental chaos, represented in this context as Leviathan, was itself tamed and had not created the cosmos. Similarly, within Christian thought this was also believed to be in some way repeated at the renewal of creation foretold in Christian doctrine, and in Scripture such as the book of Revelation. Therefore, a more consistent and direct connection existed between the orthodox Christian characterization of the primordial serpent figure than the Gnostic interpretation of it.

Christian scholars such as Irenaeus, Origen, and the Cappadocian Fathers decisively affirmed that if the cosmos was declared good by the God of Genesis, then this was incompatible with an interpretation where chimeric monsters had created a corrupt material universe. Rather, if there was a divine Demiurge or organizer of the cosmos, it was a good and benevolent one and was according to some Christian scholars even Christ himself. In affirming this, they in some sense circled back to a narrative consistent with the most ancient Near Eastern and Greek cosmogonies, one in which the old serpent emblematic of the watery abyss before creation, had to be overcome for a good world to exist. Once the dragon and monstrous offspring were defeated, the cosmos could enter an ordered condition. The difference for Christians was that God had created everything himself, and that any Leviathan which had been defeated was subordinate and diminutive in comparison. Early Christian scholarship demonstrated a more robust handling of the meaning of these ideas when contrasted with Gnostic uses of the same material. Therefore, Christian theological examinations, and perhaps Christian historiography in general, demonstrated itself to be a strong resource for the examination of the history of pre-Christian ideas.

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Appendix A: REFERENCED IMAGES



Figure 1. Assyrian Cylinder Seal 900 BC-750 BC. Serpentine figure with hero figure, possibly Tiamat and Marduk. British Museum 89589.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1896-0619-1.



Figure 2. Athenian Red-Figure circa 400BC. Heracles, Iolaus and the Hydra.

Regional Archeological Museum, Antonio Salinas.

<https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/M13.4.html>.



Figure 3. Marble Statue from Mithraeum in Ostia, 190 AD.
Leontocephaline Saturn with snakes. Vatican Museum.

<https://www.mdpi.com/2673-9461/2/2/3/htm>.



Figure 4. Votive Relief 400 BC. Giant bearded serpent with worshippers,
likely Zeus Meilichios,

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fd/Votive_relief_of_Aristomenes_to_Zeus_Meilichios_%284th_cent._B.C.%29_in_the_National_Archaeological_Museum_of_Athens_on_1_June_2018.jpg



Figure 5. Image from “*L’antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*” Bernard de Montfaucon 1719. Leontocephaline Serpent Yaldabaoth.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d2/Lion-faced_deity.jpg/150px-Lion-faced_deity.jpg



Figure 6. “The Two Beasts” *Luther Bible* 1534, depicting the seven headed dragon and the beast from the sea in the book of Revelation.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f4/Beast_from_the_sea%2C_Luther_Bible_%281534_edition%29.jpg