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DEFINITIONS OF GNOSTICISM AND THEORIES OF GNOSTIC ORIGINS

It is evident that much remains to be done before we can reach a clear understanding of the development and mutual relationship of the various Gnostic sects, but it is also evident that progress will be greatly hampered, if not impossible, without careful attention to details of definition and chronology.¹

DEFINITIONS OF GNOSTICISM

Preliminary to any discussion of the origin(s) of a religion or religious movement is a definition of its essence.² However, it is precisely at this foundational point that the study of Gnosticism faces one of its greatest challenges. No consensus has yet arisen as to a definition of Gnosticism that satisfies even a majority of scholars—at least, that is, one that researchers are willing to allow to discipline their historical inquiries. The controversy is so great that one contemporary scholar, Michael A. Williams, has despaired of the problem and proposed the abandonment of the category “Gnosticism” or “Gnostic religion” altogether.³ Particularly

¹Robert McL. Wilson, “Gnostic Origins Again,” VC 11 (1957): 109.

²Here I accept Michael Williams’s caution that defining a religion phenomenologically can be helpful to our understanding of that religion but must not be used to determine or limit the search for origins. See Michael A. Williams, “The Demonizing of the Demiurge: The Innovation of Gnostic Myth,” in *Innovations in Religious Traditions: Essays in the Interpretation of Religious Change* (ed. Michael A. Williams, Collett Cox, and Martin S. Jaffee; New York: de Gruyter, 1992), 73–107.

³Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996). On the positive side of things, Williams has proposed as a more useful category, “biblical demiurgy,” as a substitute for “Gnosticism.” See my review of Williams in *J ECS* 6 (1998): 684–85. See also the recent work of Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,

troubling to Williams are the misleading generalizations and unwarranted stereotypes that so frequently accompany the terms. Yet, in light of the fact that “gnosis” and “gnostic” are used as categories in ancient literature⁴ and are dominant features in contemporary scholarship, it is fair to say that the problem of definition remains and must be solved.

ATTEMPTS AT DEFINITIONS

Several difficulties attend the enterprise. First, a large part of the problem is the usage of the term “falsely called knowledge [*gnosis*]” by early Christian heresiologists as an umbrella category for heresy in general.⁵ Second, there seems to be such a variety among gnostic systems that a definition or a list of characteristics shared by all is impossible to create. Further, some of the primary materials included in the Nag Hammadi “gnostic” library include a number of literary works that no serious scholar would term “gnostic.”⁶ These facts being the case, it is imperative that contemporary scholars of ancient Gnosticism reach a consensus on a definition with which the gnostic religion can be studied as a disciplined category.⁷ Without such a consensus, the study of ancient Gnosticism is doomed to remain at an impasse.

Etymologically, the term “gnosis” bears the sense of “knowledge,” particularly a hidden knowledge that is held by an elite group of elect intellectuals.⁸ The obvious flaw with accepting this as a working definition of

2003). This sophisticated treatise, unavailable at the time of writing, argues for the heterogeneous origins of early Christianity and challenges the methods of modern historiography and its definitions of normative Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism.

⁴See Morton Smith, “The History of the Term ‘Gnostikos,’” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978* (ed. Bentley Layton; 2 vols.; SHR 41; Leiden: Brill, 1980–1981), 2:796–807; Bentley Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *The Social World of the First Christians* (ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334–50.

⁵A phrase obviously borrowed from 1 Tim 6:20. See particularly Irenaeus (180 C.E.), whose work *Against Heresies* was highly influential among later heresiologists.

⁶The Nag Hammadi library, as it is called, includes a portion of Plato’s *Republic* (NHC VI,5) and works identified as Hermetic texts (e.g., *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* [NHC VI,6]).

⁷Some scholars refrain from calling “Gnosticism” a religion. For a defense of this designation, see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (3d ed.; Boston: Beacon, 2001), and discussion by Birger A. Pearson, *The Emergence of the Christian Religion* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997), 148–50.

⁸This definition is essentially the one agreed upon by the scholars assembled at the colloquium on gnostic origins held at Messina in 1966, whose results are

Gnosticism is that nearly every religion with a salvific emphasis includes a body of knowledge that must be known and embraced before salvation is gained. Note the definition given by James M. Robinson, general editor of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, as a case in point. In his introduction to that volume, Robinson defined the essence of Gnosticism as

a radical trend of release from the dominion of evil or of inner transcendence that swept through late antiquity and emerged within Christianity, Judaism, Neoplatonism, Hermetism, and the like. As a new religion it was syncretistic, drawing upon various religious heritages. But it was held together by a very decided stance, which is where the unity amid the wide diversity is to be sought.⁹

Such a broad understanding of Gnosticism seems to make it the dominant religious trend of late antiquity, taking into its sweep the major religions of the ancient world.

Further, the gnostic propensity toward defining “true gnosis” as “knowledge of self” has led to innumerable speculations regarding gnostic connections throughout the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds. For example, Giovanni Filoramo, in the introduction to *A History of Gnosticism*, traces this dimension of a broad definition of Gnosticism when he identifies a modern metamorphosis of ancient Gnosticism in European philosophy and psychology:

From the Gnostic myths of the second century AD, first via Manichaean dualism and then via the Bogomil and Cathar myths, what had appeared as a radically pessimistic view of the world for more than a thousand years now emerged, in the most typical representatives of speculative idealism, in the seductive guise of an optimism and an idealistic, progressive, unquenchable rationalism, a monistic pantheism which seems to have little or nothing in common with the ancient matrix. Nevertheless, the spirit of Gnosticism reverberates throughout these systems. Beneath the more abstract trappings of a gnoseological principle it presents itself as acute longing, nostalgia for authentic origins and at the same time as a possibility of total knowledge, without any vestige of what is divine in man, indeed, of his substantial divinity. In its aspiration towards the ‘encounter with the self’, which is fundamental to the Hegelian system, ancient Gnosis appears subdued, stripped of its mythological apparatus and sacred values, sunk into a horizon of optimism and immanence which deprive it of its most violent aspects of protest and rebellion against the rulers of this world.¹⁰

recorded by Ugo Bianchi, ed., *The Origins of Gnosticism: Colloquium of Messina, 13–18 April 1966* (SHR 12; Leiden: Brill, 1967).

⁹James M. Robinson, ed., introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (rev. ed.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 10.

¹⁰Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (trans. Anthony Alcock; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), xv.

What is most interesting regarding Filoramo's observations is that Gnosticism thus understood can embrace both pessimistic and optimistic views of worldly existence, a position that runs contrary to what many scholars identify as Gnosticism's most characteristic element: its anticosmism, or antipathy toward the physical world and its creator(s).

Numerous scholars have proposed more specific definitions that prove somewhat more useful in identifying ancient Gnosticism as a unique religious phenomenon. In April 1966, a colloquium of international scholars assembled at Messina to discuss the origins of Gnosticism.¹¹ The representatives at the conference agreed to separate the terms "gnosis" and "Gnosticism" into two distinct categories. The term "gnosis" would retain a broad application as "knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite."¹² This definition allowed gnosis to serve as a separate category from the "classical," second-century Gnosticism of the ancient world, and yet remain its underlying component. The definition of "Gnosticism" was much more specific:

The Gnosticism of the Second Century sects involves a coherent series of characteristics that can be summarized in the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally reintegrated. Compared with other conceptions of a "devolution" of the divine, this idea is based ontologically on the conception of a downward movement of the divine whose periphery (often called Sophia or Ennoia) had to submit to the fate of entering into a crisis and producing—even if only indirectly—this world, upon which it cannot turn its back, since it is necessary for it to recover the *pneuma*—a dualistic conception on a monistic background, expressed in a double movement of devolution and reintegration.¹³

This definition, though somewhat convoluted, still retains a large degree of usefulness for researchers. The difficulty lies, as shall be demonstrated, with scholars who carelessly apply the term to texts and systems that exhibit only a limited number of elements in the definition.¹⁴

Several scholars have sought to clarify the definition by specifying lists of characteristics that are generally common to second-century

¹¹The papers read and scholarly discussions that followed are collected in Bianchi, *Origins of Gnosticism*.

¹²*Ibid.*, xxvi.

¹³*Ibid.*, xxvii.

¹⁴See "Parts for the Whole," in Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 171–73.

gnostic systems.¹⁵ The following list is a summary of eleven features of Gnosticism delineated by Birger Pearson.¹⁶

1. *Gnosis*. The “adherents of Gnosticism regard *gnosis* (rather than faith, observance of law, etc.) as requisite to salvation. The saving ‘knowledge’ involves a revelation as to the true nature both of the self and of God; indeed, for the Gnostic, self-knowledge is knowledge of God.”
2. *Theology*. “Gnosticism also has . . . a characteristic *theology*, according to which there is a transcendent supreme God beyond the god or powers responsible for the world in which we live.”
3. *Cosmology*. “A negative, radically dualist stance vis-à-vis the cosmos involves a *cosmology*, according to which the cosmos itself, having been created by an inferior and ignorant power, is a dark prison in which human souls are held captive.”
4. *Anthropology*. “Interwoven with its theology and its cosmology is . . . an *anthropology*, according to which the essential human being is constituted by his/her inner self, a divine spark that originated in the transcendent divine world and, by means of gnosis, can be released from the cosmic prison and can return to its heavenly origin. The human body, on the other hand, is part of the cosmic prison from which the essential ‘man’ must be redeemed.”
5. *Eschatology*. “The notion of release from the cosmic prison entails . . . an *eschatology*, which applies not only to the salvation of the individual but to the salvation of all the elect, and according to which the material cosmos itself will come to its fated end.”
6. *Social*. “Gnosticism, at first glance, seems to be a highly individualistic religion, and so it is. But, in fact, Gnostics did gather in communities of like-minded persons.”

¹⁵T. P. Van Baaren defined sixteen characteristics; see his “Towards a Definition of Gnosticism,” in Bianchi, *Origins of Gnosticism*, 178–80. See also Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 247–48, where the author lists eight common ideas in Gnosticism. Ferguson derived his list by combining the observations of Arthur D. Nock, “Gnosticism,” *HTR* 57 (1964): 255–79, and Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 42–47.

¹⁶Birger Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (SAC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 7–9. This list has been adapted and reformatted.

7. *Ritual*. “Closely tied to this is . . . a *ritual* dimension as well, for the Gnostics had religious ceremonies of various kinds.”

8. *Ethical*. “There is, also, . . . an *ethical* dimension, though in this area there was considerable variation from group to group. Most characteristic, reflecting the acosmic nature of Gnosticism, is the propensity toward withdrawal from engagement with the cosmos, which in its most extreme forms involved abstinence from sex and procreation.”

9. *Experimental*. “That all of the aforementioned features of Gnosticism involved . . . an *experimental* dimension almost goes without saying. Religious experience, for the Gnostics, involved joy in the salvation won by gnosis, as well as an extreme alienation from, and revolt against, the cosmic order and those beings attached to it.”

10. *Myth*. “[W]hat holds everything together for the Gnostic is *myth*. One of the most characteristic features of Gnosticism is its mythopoesis, its impulse to create an elaborate mythical system giving expression to all that gnosis entails. An interesting feature of Gnostic mythopoesis is that there was a great variation in the telling of the myth; each Gnostic teacher would create new elements to be added to his or her received myth, and, with such elaborations, Gnostic myths could become more and more complicated as they developed.”

11. *Parasitical*. “But what makes Gnosticism so hard to define is, finally, its *parasitical* character, a feature that constitutes an eleventh dimension of Gnosticism. This brings up the problem of the relationship between Gnosticism and other religions, chiefly Judaism and Christianity.”

This list is highly instructive and useful in gnostic research, particularly when the following cautions are kept in mind: (1) no gnostic text or system of the second century C.E. will exhibit all of these characteristics equally and uniformly—a demonstration of the tremendous variety among the gnostics; (2) most elements, when taken independently, can be identified with other religious and philosophical systems present in the ancient world—a testament to the syncretistic nature of Gnosticism; and (3) certain features stand out as unique to Gnosticism—an indication of the innovation that Gnosticism brought to the ancient religious and philosophical landscape.

Two concerns stand out as fundamental inquiries for our understanding of the ancient religion called Gnosticism. First, in light of its syncretistic and/or parasitic nature, what is it that distinguishes Gnosticism

from, for instance, Judaism, Christianity, Middle Platonism,¹⁷ and/or other ancient religions so that the faith to which the gnostic adheres is no longer considered Judaism, Christianity, Middle Platonism, or another religion but is a separate entity in itself?¹⁸ And, second, in what ideological, geographical, and historical context did this (or these) unique innovation(s) appear, and why? A proposed answer to the first of these concerns will be provided immediately here. The second concern will underlie the following chapters of this book.

ANTICOSMIC DUALISM: THE UNIQUE FEATURE OF GNOSTICISM

A lack of clarity as to what is unique in Gnosticism has led scholars to see the religious movement “behind any and every ancient tree.” Michael A. Williams, in *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* has come as close as anyone to clarifying the issues of gnostic research and assisting scholars to overcome the impasse in defining Gnosticism and searching for its origins.¹⁹ Williams challenges scholars to focus their studies on the narrower issue of the innovation of “Gnosticism.”²⁰ As the eminent scholar Robert McL. Wilson stated, “Gnosticism as such is neither Jewish nor Christian, but a new creation.”²¹

In the search for Gnosticism’s most unique innovation(s), the feature most frequently identified is its dualism of the material and spiritual realms, particularly its extremely negative view of the cosmos.²²

¹⁷As we will see, these three religious and/or philosophical systems stand out as possible contexts for the derivation of Gnosticism, and it is even argued by some that all three are significant in its origins. See Edwin Yamauchi, “Jewish Gnosticism? The Prologue of John, Mandaean Parallels, and the *Trimorphic Protennoia*,” in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* (ed. R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren; Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain 91; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 467–97.

¹⁸The question begs the issues of whether we conceive of Gnosticism in an adjectival sense (such as “gnostic Judaism” or “gnostic Christianity”) or a substantival sense (Gnosticism as a religion in its own right). Pearson (*Gnosticism*, 7–8) argues for its status as a religion. Pearson cites the work of Ninian Smart, who defines six dimensions of what constitutes “a religion”: doctrinal, mythic, ethical, ritual, experiential, and social, in *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribner’s, 1983), 7–8.

¹⁹See especially ch. 10, “Where They Came From . . .,” 213–34.

²⁰Though, by his very thesis, Williams would not use “Gnosticism” in this definitive sense.

²¹Wilson, in his “Addenda et postscripta” to the Messina proceedings, in Bianchi, *Origins of Gnosticism*, 697.

²²As the colloquium at Messina observed; see Bianchi, *Origins of Gnosticism*, xxviii–xxix. Ioan P. Culianu provides an excellent summary and analysis of Bianchi’s classifications of dualism in the ancient and medieval world. Gnosticism’s dualism is classified as mitigated (temporal), eschatological (destruction

Corresponding to this is the origin of the cosmos as the creation of an ignorant or evil god. In this, Gnosticism has exceeded all of its religious and philosophical peers. In the ancient Mediterranean world numerous kinds of dualism were present. First, there was an *ethical dualism* of good and evil that had various manifestations in the ancient world, particularly in the Judaism of the Essene community at Qumran, but also with cosmic associations in Persian thought. Second, an *eschatological or supernatural dualism* of this age versus the age to come was present in Jewish apocalyptic works and the writings discovered at Qumran. Third, there was a *psychological or cosmic dualism* between material and spiritual, body and soul, as found in Platonic thought, with clear manifestations in, for example, the NT.²³ “Gnosticism,” Ferguson concludes, “is an amalgam of psychological and ethical dualism with a cosmic dualism of this material world and the supercelestial spiritual world. Corresponding to this is the distinction between the hidden God and the Creator God.”²⁴

Scholars who identify this aspect of dualism as the most or one of the most characteristic features of Gnosticism are numerous, as a brief survey of the field suffices to show. The Messina colloquium accentuated the uniqueness of gnostic dualism vis-à-vis Zoroastrian dualism and its favorable view of the cosmos and the metaphysical dualism of Platonism.²⁵ Kurt Rudolph defines Gnosticism as essentially a “dualistic religion” and gives considerable space to the topic of dualism in his major work on the subject.²⁶ Hans-Martin Schenke included the concept of dualism when he defined Gnosticism as “a religious salvation movement of late antiquity in which the possibility of a negative attitude towards self and world is taken up in a special and unmistakable way and consolidated into a consistently world-negating world view, which expresses itself in characteristic word usage, metaphorical language, and artificial myths.”²⁷ Simone Pétrement, following Adolf Hingenfeld, took the criterion of anticosmism a step further to identify the distinction between God and the demiurge as “the fundamental mark of Gnosticism.”²⁸ Pétrement prefers the term “transcendental dualism,” or better still, “a

of the negative principle at doomsday), and anticosmic (devaluation of the world). See Ioan P. Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (trans. H. S. Wiesner and I. P. Culianu; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 45–46 n. 17.

²³These terms are taken from Ferguson, *Early Christianity*, 248.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Bianchi, *Origins of Gnosticism*, xxviii–xxix.

²⁶Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (trans. and ed. R. McL. Wilson; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 2, 57–67.

²⁷Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Problem of Gnosis,” *SecCent* 3 (1983): 76.

²⁸Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (trans. Carol Harrison; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 9.

feeling of transcendence pushed to its limit.”²⁹ Filoramo accepts “radical anti-cosmism” as one of the major innovations of second-century Gnosticism.³⁰ And, finally, Ioan P. Culianu traces dualism as the underlying theme of “gnostic” movements throughout the centuries.³¹

Essentially, gnostic dualism seems to be derived from its preoccupation with the problem of evil in the world.³² As the gnostics defined evil as resident in the material cosmos, the implications that this had upon the character of the creator, the gnostic’s personal identity, and the nature of salvation were tremendous.³³ Michael A. Williams sees Gnosticism as a point of departure on the trajectory³⁴ of what he calls “biblical demiurgy”³⁵ in the ancient world. Basically, what this entails is the attribution of the creation of the physical world to lesser beings, perhaps angels or a divine emanation, rather than to God himself. Where the gnostics created their own innovation was when they cast the demiurge as an ignorant, arrogant, and fallen being who “trapped” divine sparks in the world through the creation of physical bodies. A highly significant step with regard to Judaism and Christianity was the identification of the God of the OT as the evil demiurge, and his creation and law as enslaving entities.

It is precisely here that the gnostics found their unique identity. Admittedly, to this point, we have not allowed the gnostics to speak for themselves. A review of gnostic literature is reserved for later chapters. However, it is important to verify here that the gnostics did understand

²⁹Ibid., 25. For Pétremont, the evil in the gnostic experience was not so much the material world itself, but the fact that the gnostic was subjected to something entirely foreign to his or her true nature.

³⁰See discussion in Filoramo, *History of Gnosticism*, 146–47. Anticosmic dualism is defined as an innovation along with “the meeting with the self,” “the Savior saved,” and “the pleromatic crisis.”

³¹Culianu, *Tree of Gnosis*, esp. 23–49. I disagree fundamentally with Culianu’s broad definition of Gnosticism and application to numerous succeeding and contemporary religious and philosophical movements.

³²See Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*; Gedaliahu A. G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (NHS 24; Leiden: Brill, 1984); Jarl E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism* (WUNT 36; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1985).

³³For an understanding of the relationship between these concepts, see the discussion in Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 57–59. Rudolph observes, “At the base of Gnosis there is a dualistic view of the world which determines all its statements on a cosmological and anthropological level” (56–57).

³⁴The concept of “trajectories” is significant in ancient studies, as proposed in the thesis of Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). This concept will have a significant place in later arguments in this book.

³⁵See Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism.”*

themselves in the way they have been presented.³⁶ A couple of examples will suffice. In *The Apocryphon of John*,³⁷ the creator is identified as Yaltabaoth, an ignorant and arrogant archon, who is virtually equivalent to Satan and is the cause of evil in the world. Upon viewing his creation, he is quoted as saying, "I am a jealous God and there is no other God beside me" (13.8–9), an obvious reference to the God of the OT, following Deut 32:39, Isa 44:6, or Isa 46:9. The text interprets this statement as an admission by Yaltabaoth that another God did indeed exist, for "if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?" (13.12–13). Similarly, *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (II,4) presents the OT God as the creator and blind chief of the archons,³⁸ who "[because of his] power and his ignorance [and his] arrogance he said, with his [power], 'It is I who am God; there is none [apart from me]'" (86.27–31). In each of these texts, the gnostic community, as "the immovable race" (*Ap. John* 29.10) and "the children of the light" (*Hyp. Arch.* 97.13–14), has an origin and a destiny that is superior to the archons.

Gnostic self-understanding is further revealed in terminology that is used for the community in the texts. Interestingly, the self-designation *gnostikos* is never used by the authors or editors of the gnostic texts;³⁹ however, a number of other titles are used: Christians, pneumatics, seed, elect, race of Seth, children of light, the immovable race, and others. It is also significant that some of the gnostic tractates are polemical and define themselves vis-à-vis Judaism, "orthodox" Christianity,⁴⁰ and, perhaps surprisingly, other gnostics.

The gnostics' concern with the origins of evil underlies the basic myths of their texts and determines their self-identity vis-à-vis the cre-

³⁶Note that this glimpse into gnostic self-understanding was not possible prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945. Up until that time, the gnostics were viewed only through the lenses of the early Christian heresiologists. With the publication of the twelve codices (plus eight leaves from a thirteenth), which include fifty-two tractates, a clearer picture is now possible. Also note that the Nag Hammadi library, which generally is categorized as gnostic, is not exclusively gnostic by the definition that I am proposing. The fundamental unity of the works and the purpose of their collection and organization are still highly debated topics. For an overview of positions and his own unique theory, see Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 241–62.

³⁷An important text found in two recensions in three different Nag Hammadi codices, NHC II,1, III,1, and IV,1.

³⁸The creator's name is Samael, which means "god of the blind."

³⁹Though Bentley Layton ("Prolegomena," 337–38) observes that this term, used by the heresiologists, was likely a self-applauding appellation based upon its positive usage in philosophical circles. Certainly the heresiologists used the term in a pejorative manner.

⁴⁰The designation "orthodox" is anachronistic in the context of the first two centuries of our era.

ator of the world. Jacques Ménard provides an excellent analysis of gnostic self-definition in contrast with orthodox Christianity and Judaism:

Gnosticism is indeed essentially defined by this myth of the fall. In the Valentinianism of Irenaeus (*AH* I.1–8 . . .), or that expounded by the *Gospel According to Philip* of Codex VIII [*sic*], whether in the *Paraphrase of Shem* in Codex VII or even the *Authentikos Logos* of Codex VI or the *Bronté* of this same Codex, it is always a question of a myth of the fall, that of a universal soul wishing to make a world resembling the celestial one, and this universal soul is depicted with the traits of either the fallen Sophia or the fallen “Nous” (the Logos in the *Tripartite Tractate* of Codex I). And it is into this fallen world that the individual soul descends, recognizing through its thought the counterfeit nature of this material world into which it is now plunged. And it will henceforth be occupied with the salvation of all sparks or droplets of light in man or even in matter, by liberating these divine particles that are imprisoned below.

This myth is common to all Gnostics, in whatever variant forms they presented it, and through it they distinguished themselves from all other religions, such as, for example, Christianity.⁴¹

Described thus, the fundamental dualistic myth underlies and determines gnostic cosmology, anthropology, and soteriology.

In his doctoral dissertation, Wayne Flory argues for the consistent theme of the Nag Hammadi texts as the gnostics’ understanding of their own consubstantiality with the divine and their consequent freedom from and authority over the demiurge.⁴² Understanding their fundamental nature to be derived from a higher plane of being, they no longer needed to be subjected to the limitations of the cosmos or its creator. Pearson is in full agreement when he defines “the heart and core of the Gnostic religion” as “the idea of the consubstantiality of the self with God.”⁴³ With this knowledge in mind, the gnostic could be saved from the tyranny of the demiurge.

Clement of Alexandria, in his *Excerpts from Theodotus* (78.2), provides a suitable conclusion on gnostic self-understanding. The gnostics’ claim is simply this: we know “who we are and what we have become; where

⁴¹Jacques Ménard, “Normative Self-Definition in Gnosticism,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (ed. E. P. Sanders et al.; 3 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980–1982), 1:140–41.

⁴²Wayne S. Flory, *The Gnostic Concept of Authority and the Nag Hammadi Documents* (Mellen Biblical Press Series 33; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen Biblical Press, 1995).

⁴³Birger A. Pearson, “Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and the Development of Gnostic Self-Definition,” in *Gnosticism*, 132. This essay is a revision of the original, which first appeared in Sanders et al., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, 1:151–60.

we were or where we had been made to fall; whither we are hastening, whence we are being redeemed; what birth is and what rebirth is.”⁴⁴

CONCLUSION ON DEFINITIONS

Though many scholars seem to embrace the concept of anticosmic dualism and/or biblical demiurgy as significant innovations present in second-century Gnosticism, the unity of this perspective tends to break down in the determination of gnostic origins. What appears to be the situation is that scholars set aside these conceptions as insignificant to the definition of Gnosticism and/or anachronistically read the full system into settings and texts where only certain elements of the “classic” gnostic systems exist, as I will demonstrate in the following pages.

On the other hand, it is significant to point out that the multiplicity of proposals for gnostic origins with their corresponding and varying degrees of validity should not be seen as evidence that the quest for origins is beyond hope and should be abandoned.⁴⁵ Rather, it testifies first to the syncretistic nature of Gnosticism, and second to the uniqueness of the innovation of its underlying myth. That its essential anticosmism and theology regarding the demiurge is unparalleled in the ancient world marks it as a unique religious phenomenon. What one should expect to find is not so much a single source for or *the* definitive context of Gnosticism. Rather, what may be determined is *a* ripe intellectual and historical (and perhaps geographical) context in which the innovation of Gnosticism could have occurred, resulting in the creative gnostic religion of the early second century C.E.

THEORIES OF GNOSTIC ORIGINS

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to examining the arguments and merits of the most common proposals for gnostic origins. A few prefatory words are in order. There has been a tremendous proliferation of theories regarding gnostic origins, and the body of literature is large. Thus, providing a survey of positions regarding the origins of Gnosticism is a monumental task, and the survey here is of necessity brief, general, and concerned primarily with secondary materials. What follows is intended to provide a context for a further discussion of the origins of Gnosticism as a product of disappointed Jewish apocalypticism and/or messianism, to be

⁴⁴Quoted in Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 7, 202 n. 15.

⁴⁵I agree with Williams that we should not expect to find “a smoking gun” (*Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 231).

taken up in the following chapters. For the positions discussed in this chapter, footnotes and bibliography are provided for those wishing to pursue an amplification of the arguments of each theory.⁴⁶

In a sense, it might be more effective if this section focused exclusively upon dualistic conceptions in the ancient world rather than upon general theories of origin. That anticosmic dualism with its resultant biblical demiurgy is the distinctive characteristic of Gnosticism can be demonstrated by asking this question: what is it that makes a religious/philosophical system gnostic and not something else (e.g., Jewish, Middle Platonic, or Christian)? Put another way: without the radical anticosmism of the second century and the inversion of the Jewish God into the evil demiurge, what makes any of the gnostic texts non-Jewish, non-Platonic, or non-Christian and definitively gnostic? Apart from their distinct dualistic character and resultant views of cosmology, anthropology, and soteriology, writings and schools often classified as gnostic would be reduced to groups on the fringe of, but clearly within the bounds of, the vast array of religions and philosophies in the ancient world.⁴⁷ “Gnostifying” groups, if they may be called that, would be classified as one of the many Judaisms, Middle Platonic schools, Christianities, or other religions of late antiquity⁴⁸ that were grappling with philosophical issues and hermeneutical problems. Gnosticism, it will be shown, has affinities with themes from many religions of the ancient world, but none of them provide the innovation that became Gnosticism in the second century.

GNOSTICISM AS A CHRISTIAN HERESY

The study of the gnostic religion was hampered for centuries by the circumstance that testimony to its existence was preserved almost exclusively through the writings of its theological opponents. Though this does not mean that their presentations were wholly erroneous, their

⁴⁶For a dated yet thorough survey of gnostic origins, see Gerard van Groningen, *First Century Gnosticism: Its Origin and Motifs* (Leiden: Brill, 1967). For a more recent discussion, see Flory, *Gnostic Concept*, esp. 1–35.

⁴⁷This point is illustrated in the debates regarding the classification of texts as gnostic, nongnostic, Jewish, Christian, or any combination of these within the Nag Hammadi library. See the helpful chart in Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 47–48.

⁴⁸That Judaism, Christianity, Gnosticism, and, I would assume, other religions of antiquity were not homogeneous has been clearly demonstrated through new evidences and research in recent decades, so that each of these religions is conceptualized in the plural versus the singular (i.e., Judaisms, Christianities, and Gnosticisms, as per Alan Segal, *The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity* [BJS 127; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987], and Jacob Neusner, “Comparing Judaisms,” *HR* 18 [1978]: 177–91). It should be noted, however, that the pluralization of the terms still argues for the essential core of identity that each of these categories defines.

accounts inevitably did involve bias, exaggeration, and stereotypes. Likewise, up until the modern era, Gnosticism has been understood to be an early Christian heresy.

The clear impression that the early heresiologists gave to later historians was that Gnosticism was an aberration of apostolic Christianity. Luke's account of a conflict between Peter and Simon Magus in Acts 8 was amplified in the mid-second century to be the root and source of the gnostic heresy, indeed, all heresy. The first record of this account comes from the pen of Irenaeus (130–200 C.E.) in his *Adversus haereses* (*Against Heresies*).⁴⁹ Irenaeus probably followed Justin Martyr (fl. 150–165 C.E.) in his evaluations, and Hippolytus (170–235 C.E.), Eusebius (266–340 C.E.), and Epiphanius (315–403 C.E.) were highly dependent upon Irenaeus. Though each one added the observations of individual research and experience,⁵⁰ the picture is relatively uniform.

Irenaeus traces a succession of gnostic heretics from Simon Magus to Menander to Saturninus and Basilides.⁵¹ When he reaches the mid-second century, gnostic individuals and groups multiply extensively. Information about each individual and group is limited, and the value of each heresiologist's report is greatly debated.

In spite of the influence of Adolf von Harnack's characterization of Gnosticism as "the acute Hellenisation of Christianity,"⁵² the theory of a Christian origin for Gnosticism fell out of vogue with some of the critical works of the last century. This is particularly true of the work of scholars in *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* ("The History of Religions School"), chiefly Richard Reitzenstein, Wilhelm Bousset, Rudolph Bultmann, and Bultmann's students Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson.⁵³ Modern scholarship now remains set in almost a new "orthodoxy" accepting either the existence of a pre-Christian Gnosticism that influenced Christian origins⁵⁴ or a parallel and independent development of Christianity and Gnosticism.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.23.

⁵⁰ See the discussion in Grant, *Gnosticism*, 4.

⁵¹ The identity and teachings of each of these individuals will be discussed in ch. 4.

⁵² See Adolf von Harnack, *The History of Dogma* (trans. Neil Buchanan; London: Williams & Norgate, 1905), 1253.

⁵³ For an overview of issues and literature pertinent to this school, see Edwin Yamauchi, "History-of-Religions School," in *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright, and J. I. Packer; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988): 308–9.

⁵⁴ For example, see Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2 vols.; 2d ed.; New York: de Gruyter, 2000), 1:381–89, 2:212–24; Pearson, *Gnosticism*. For a refutation of this position, see Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*.

⁵⁵ For example, this is the position of Pheme Perkins, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), esp. 1–19.

A few lone voices uphold the traditional view. Upon examination of the Nag Hammadi codices, Arthur Darby Nock stated, "The relation of these and other new texts [the Nag Hammadi texts] to the New Testament seems to me to vindicate completely the traditional view of Gnosticism as Christian heresy with roots in speculative thought."⁵⁶ Simone Pétrement has further restored some credibility to the Christian heresy position in a recent work, *A Separate God*. Though the book includes many idiosyncratic positions, its basic thesis and survey of evidences is quite persuasive and cannot be easily dismissed. Though a Jewish origin for Gnosticism subsequent to the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132–135 C.E. has the greatest appeal for Edwin Yamauchi, he contends that several gnostic doctrines could not have been developed apart from the influence of Christianity.⁵⁷ These voices have been joined more recently by Alastair H. B. Logan,⁵⁸ whose argument generally entails a repositioning of the central myth underlying the development of the *The Apocryphon of John* as deriving from Christianity.

For evidence of how much out of vogue the Christian heresy position is, one can look to the biting comments of Birger Pearson, who describes Pétrement's and Logan's position as "flying in the face of the primary evidence now available to scholarship."⁵⁹ Other, more reserved, scholars merely classify the theory as "outdated."⁶⁰ Yet, despite this strong scholarly bias against a Christian origin for Gnosticism, the arguments of Pétrement and Logan need to be heard, and, at minimum, be credited with demonstrating that the evidence does not present a closed case.⁶¹

The contention of Pétrement is this: "In separating Gnosticism and Christianity our scholars have not allowed us to understand Gnosticism."⁶² Her argument is best summarized as follows:

⁵⁶ Arthur D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (ed. Zeph Stewart; 2 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 2:956.

⁵⁷ Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*; idem, "Some Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 46–70; "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" *CH* 48 (1979): 129–41. Yamauchi speaks most directly to the gnostic redeemer myth.

⁵⁸ Alastair H. B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996).

⁵⁹ Pearson, *Emergence*, 150. Pearson excuses Eusebius's adherence to this view as ignorance of the primary evidence; he offers no excuse for Pétrement and Logan.

⁶⁰ Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 3.

⁶¹ On this point, the carefully researched work of Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, must be considered. There are still a number of scholars who see gnostic origins in the late first, early second century C.E., as will be discussed.

⁶² Pétrement, *Separate God*, 3.

Given the fact that all the forms of non-Christian Gnosticism seem to be attested later than Christian Gnosticism—not counting the fact that properly Gnostic ideas are less pronounced and less distinctive in the former than in the latter—one cannot be sure that Gnosticism was not initially Christian. It seems to me that the theory according to which the Gnostics were originally and essentially Christian heretics, which in no way excludes the possibility that their ideas subsequently penetrated into traditions outside Christianity, is a theory that can still be upheld, and that it can even be upheld by arguments that are better founded than the opposite opinion, and that it is still the best explanation that can be given for this phenomenon and that there really is not another.⁶³

For Pétrement, pivotal to the discussion was the dating of evidences and a review of the types of issues Christianity addressed as a context for gnostic development. In the latter case, Christianity, particularly Johannine and Pauline theology, raised the issues of a savior, redemption, and the existence of a double revelation, the old and the new. “These problems, around which Gnostic speculation turns, *are posed by Christianity and by it alone*. They are not posed either by Hellenism or Persian religion or Judaism or by any other tradition that has been posited as a source of Gnosticism.”⁶⁴

Most critical to our discussion of Gnosticism as a dualistic religion are Pétrement’s arguments regarding the evidences of the NT. “The authors of the New Testament did not know—at least there is no text that allows us to affirm that they knew—a doctrine in which the Creator God (the Demiurge) was distinguished from the true God. And this is without doubt the most characteristic mark of Gnosticism.”⁶⁵ In fact, gnostic ideas are most likely derived from Johannine and Pauline concepts. For Pétrement, the evaluation of the OT God as the demiurge was the creative genius of Saturninus and Basilides, early second-century teachers in Syria and Egypt respectively. According to our definition, they might be classified as the “first true gnostics.” Pétrement, along with Bianchi, traces the roots of anticosmic dualism to Hellenistic philosophy as integrated by these Christian heretics.⁶⁶ Pétrement proposes the following progression in gnostic development: first, a severe gnostic attitude toward the world and Judaism; second, a turning point in Valentinus; and third, the development of Sethian and Ophite Gnosticism.⁶⁷

⁶³Ibid., 4.

⁶⁴Ibid., 15.

⁶⁵Ibid., 8.

⁶⁶Bianchi reverses Harnack’s formula for Gnosticism as “an acute Hellenization of Christianity” to “an acute christianization of Hellenism”; see the discussion in Bianchi, *Origins of Gnosticism*; also Culianu, *Tree of Gnosis*, 53.

⁶⁷Note that this thesis completely contradicts the contemporary scholarly view that Sethian Gnosticism is pre-Christian, dating even to the second and first centuries B.C.E. See John D. Turner, “Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary His-

As we noted, Alastair H. B. Logan argues for a Christian origin of Gnosticism on the basis of its mythological development, particularly those myths related to *The Apocryphon of John*.⁶⁸ His inquiry rests on three presuppositions:⁶⁹

1) [F]irst, that the form or forms of Gnosticism found in the so-called “Sethian” texts cannot be understood apart from Christianity.⁷⁰

2) [M]y second presupposition is that one is justified in seeking both a central core of ideas, a myth or myths based on and concretely expressed in a rite of initiation as a projection of Gnostic experience, which holds it together, and in treating it as a valid form (or forms) of interpreting Christianity.

3) My final presupposition is to assume that Irenaeus’ summary in Adv. haer. 1.29 is closest to the original form of the Christian Gnostic myth of Father, Mother and Son, and that it underwent progressive development including “Sethianization,” until it emerged in the latest form of the *Apocryphon*, the long recension.

In all of this, Logan upholds the integrity of the Christian sources, particularly the account of Irenaeus. For Logan, even those gnostic texts that seem most removed from Christianity’s underlying myth can be understood only in light of it. This is particularly true of the heavenly redeemer figures and ritualistic elements present in non-Christian gnostic texts.

In the first chapter of his monograph, Logan offers a specific theory of gnostic origins. “Platonically-influenced Christians” constructed “their own myth of origins in reaction to contemporary Jewish persecution, a myth which in its several variants was influenced by Johannine and Valentinian ideas and then underwent a ‘Sethian’ reinterpretation, largely as a response to ‘orthodox’ Christian criticism.”⁷¹ In this comment it appears that Logan believes that the radical anticosmism of the gnostics was inspired negatively by Jewish persecution of Christians and positively by

tory,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. C. Hedrick and R. Hodgson; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 55–86; Pearson, “The Figure of Seth in Gnostic Literature,” in *Gnosticism*, 52–83. Pétrement sees it as a later development in Gnosticism.

⁶⁸NHC II, 1, III, 1, and IV, 1; the Berlin Coptic Codex = Papyrus Berolinensis 8502; and the “gnostic” system summarized by Irenaeus in *Haer.* 1.29.

⁶⁹The following propositions are established in Logan’s introduction to *Gnostic Truth*, pages xviii, xix, and xx, respectively. They have been adapted and reformatted. The italics are Logan’s.

⁷⁰Logan sees the attempts to derive Gnosticism from Jewish sectarian sources as basically unproven and irrational.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, xx.

the demiurgical concepts of Hellenism (and, likely, Hellenistic Judaism) with which they were familiar.

These reconstructions by no means prove a Christian origin for Gnosticism, but they do raise issues that must be addressed. The dating of sources is absolutely crucial in determining the origins and chronology of gnostic developments.⁷² Likewise, tracing the lines of dependence between related theories and documents is not always simple and is often highly subjective. The caution raised is that historians of religion must not close their eyes to alternative reconstructions of gnostic origins simply because those reconstructions coincide with traditional views that currently are out of vogue. The scholarly “orthodoxy” that postulates a pre-Christian Gnosticism is still unproven and suffers from numerous deficiencies. Not least of these are the glaring lack of clear textual support and, as Pétremont contends, the fact that the NT evidence offers no indication that the OT God had been demoted to the status of the demiurge. If, indeed, Gnosticism was a significant threat to Christianity in its inception, why is there no polemic against it in its earliest writings?

Further, if, as others claim, Gnosticism arose in a Jewish context in the pre-Christian era, why was there no first-century Jewish polemic against this radical position regarding the creator? It is interesting to note that polemical writings against the gnostics do not arise until the second century, not primarily from Jewish, but from Christian, circles. Only later is a polemic found in rabbinic sources⁷³ and in the writings of the great neoplatonist Plotinus.⁷⁴ As for gnostic polemics, they posit themselves primarily against the “Great Church,” secondarily against the Jews, and least frequently against other gnostics.⁷⁵ These polemical battles are significant factors in tracing origins and determining chronology, and they will be addressed later in this study.

One further point needs to be discussed before considering alternative theories. The theory of a Christian origin for Gnosticism should not

⁷²What is most characteristic of and frustrating about the work of many contemporary scholars is its fundamental resolve to push late and sometimes hypothetical documents to earlier periods and better-attested documents to later periods, seemingly for no better reason than to support their theories, which obviously run contrary to traditional views.

⁷³The significant works of Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (SJLA 25; Leiden: Brill, 1977), and Nils Dahl, “The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia: Jewish Traditions in Gnostic Revolt,” in Layton, *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 2:689–712, will be discussed in ch. 2. The issue of polemics will be a major topic in ch. 4.

⁷⁴Plotinus, “Against the Gnostics,” *Enn.* 2.9.

⁷⁵Primarily for ethical reasons related to asceticism. See the discussion of gnostic polemics in Ménard, “Normative Self-Definition,” 1:145–50.

be abandoned for a purely Hellenistic or Jewish matrix, for the existence of such a homogeneous position is impossible to determine. The religions of the ancient world, as with religions today, were heterogeneous—that is, mixing ideas in a fluid intellectual environment while maintaining a central essence of faith. What must be kept in mind is that both Judaism and Hellenism had a major impact upon Christian origins and development. Further, what may be identified as a Jewish or Hellenistic influence in a late first-, early second-century C.E. milieu may have been filtered through a Christian matrix, as Gnosticism was conceived as a religion and worked out its own self-understanding amidst its ideological forebears and peers.

GNOSTICISM AS A PRODUCT OF IRANIAN DUALISM

The identification of Eastern or Iranian religion as a major source for religious developments in the ancient Jewish-Christian world was popularized by Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reitzenstein (1920s) of the German school of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. The sources of Iranian religion were so rich that Reitzenstein identified Eastern origins for not only Christianity and Gnosticism, but also Judaism and Greek Platonism. In the 1960s, Carsten Colpe thoroughly exposed the underlying misconceptions of Reitzenstein's theories, particularly their dependence upon ninth-century C.E. compilations.⁷⁶ In spite of this, several gnostic elements continue to be traced to Iranian sources.

Essentially, two chief characteristics of Gnosticism are traced to Iranian thought: dualism and the redeemer myth. Kurt Rudolph, a thoroughgoing syncretist when it comes to gnostic origins, is a good example of one who supports the Iranian origins of gnostic dualism. Speaking of the variety of dualistic systems, he notes,

One of the best known is the Iranian Zoroastrian dualism, which sets a good and an evil god at the beginning of world history and views this history as dominated by the conflict between the two, until the good god with help of his adherents at the end of time carries off the victory. This dualism is however essentially ethically oriented, since it lays decisive importance upon religious and moral attitude and outlook, and the opposites "good" and "evil" do not coincide with those of "spiritual" and "corporeal" or "material," but also are interwoven with the latter. We shall see that this dualism had a great influence upon developing Gnosis.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösmythus* (FRLANT 60; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). See discussion in Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, and Culianu, *Tree of Gnosis*.

⁷⁷Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 59–60.

Later in his review, Rudolph makes a distinction between two types of dualism that are evident in the gnostic texts.⁷⁸ The first, what Hans Jonas terms “Iranian” because of its closeness to the Iranian-Zoroastrian type, is the ethical dualism between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, essentially represented by Mandeism and Manicheism and present in the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Odes of Solomon*. Rudolph posits that this dualism “influenced the remaining systems or that it was the starting point for their speculations.” The other, called “Syrian-Egyptian” by Jonas because of its geographical orientation, involved a “graduated decline from the highest deity (the ‘unknown God’)” and “is the cause of the origin of the evil and dark powers.”⁷⁹

Several points need to be noted in regard to this. First, Rudolph does not specify, at least in this context, how it was that the ethical type of dualism led to the anticosmic type, only that it happened and that the first was the “starting point” for the latter. This is a large leap indeed. Second, a distinction between Iranian and gnostic dualisms is worthy of note: the eternal nature of the former. It is a significant factor in gnostic theology (theodicy) that the anticosmic dualism is a temporal concept. The lower, “evil” god is the product of a fall within the pleroma and was not coeval with the higher, “good” god. Similarly, the lower god is a force in no wise a match for the superior god, but is deluded in the extent of his power, even imagining that he alone is god, being ignorant of the higher god. Third, Rudolph insists on the Eastern origins for gnostic dualism when a clear ethical dualism was present in first-century Judaism, particularly at Qumran. This is not to say that Iranian influences are entirely absent, only that it is highly likely that those elements, if present, were mediated through Jewish lines.⁸⁰ Grant suggests that “we can then inquire whether most of the Iranian elements—specifically, the emphasis on dualism—are not already found in Jewish apocalyptic and especially in the literature produced or preserved at Qumran by the Essenes.”⁸¹ Thus, it is likely that Gnosticism is much more influenced by Jewish theological developments than by Iranian ones.

A final point must be made regarding chronology, a significant point when it comes to Iranian concepts.⁸² Much of this has to do with the dating of Iranian manuscripts and the direction of influence among Iranian

⁷⁸Ibid., 65.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰A position that Rudolph seems willing to concede later in his work: “they were introduced . . . through the apocalyptic-Jewish filter” (ibid., 283).

⁸¹Grant, *Gnosticism*, 15.

⁸²For a thorough discussion of the Zoroastrian religion and the problems of dating, see Edwin Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 395–466.

religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism. As we noted, Reitzenstein based his theories regarding Iranian influence upon ninth-century C.E. materials. One further point is that there is a branch of Persian religion that did have a more negative type of dualism, Zurvanism. However, Culianu is quick to observe, "Zurvanism is no older than the IIIrd century [C.E.]," and he concludes that "the Iranian origin of gnostic dualism is thus excluded."⁸³

Mention must be made at this point of the Iranian redeemer myth that was proposed by Reitzenstein. Basing his theories on Persian documents that only recently had been discovered (1918) and that he did not realize were Manichaean, Reitzenstein sought to prove the existence of a salvation mystery religion that he presented as the foundation of pre-Christian Gnosticism.⁸⁴ Though his theories have been thoroughly discounted, his scholarship has had a far-reaching effect, so that many scholars still look to Iran for the origin of gnostic and Christian influences. In contrast, Alan Segal advocates a Christian origin of the redeemer figure. "It is beginning to look like it was Christianity, in its zeal to apply all Hebrew designations of divinity to Christ, which first put together the complete myth of the redeemed redeemer who descended to earth to save his followers."⁸⁵ Arthur D. Nock agrees and puts the influence in the other direction. "In general apart from the Christian movement there was a Gnostic way of thinking, but no Gnostic system of thought. . . . It was the emergence of Jesus and the belief that he was a supernatural being who had appeared on earth which precipitated elements previously suspended in solution."⁸⁶ As with gnostic dualism, a direct line of influence from Iranian to gnostic is highly unlikely, while in certain cases the influence may be reversed.⁸⁷

A final point of consideration is the presence of a veiled reference to the Mithraic rock imagery in one Nag Hammadi codex. Mithraism was an important mystery religion in the Roman Empire, rivaling Christianity.⁸⁸

⁸³Culianu, *Tree of Gnosis*, 27. Yamauchi concurs with Culianu's observation, identifying the Sasanid era (226–637 C.E.) as the time in which Zurvanism flourished. Further, the "fullest sources are both late and non-Zoroastrian." See Yamauchi, *Persia*, 440–42.

⁸⁴See discussion in Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 74–79.

⁸⁵Segal, *Two Powers*, 218–19.

⁸⁶Nock, "Gnosticism," 278.

⁸⁷This certainly is true of Manichaean Gnosticism, which has its roots in the Elchasaite Jewish baptismal movement, as the Cologne Mani Codex confirms. See discussion in Edwin Yamauchi, "Elchasaites, Manichaeans, and Mandaeans in the Light of the Cologne Mani Codex," in *Beyond the Jordan: Studies in Honor of Harald Mare* (ed. Glenn A. Carnagey Sr.; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 33–46. I thank Dr. Yamauchi for the opportunity to review this article prior to its publication.

⁸⁸For a helpful overview, see Yamauchi, *Persia*, 493–521.

The reference is in *The Apocalypse of Adam* (V,5, 80.21–25), and speaks of an “illuminator” who originated from a rock. One of the symbols of Mithraism was the motif of a rock birth. Yet, like other Iranian influences, the chronology of Mithraic evidences is highly debated, and clear evidences are late. At the earliest, the Mithraism that became popular in the Roman Empire developed in the late first century C.E., and likely it was later. Based upon his review of documentary and archaeological remains, Yamauchi concludes that the reference to the rock birth in *The Apocalypse of Adam* suggests the possibility that the work was “composed in Italy not earlier than the second century.”⁸⁹ The rock symbol of *The Apocalypse of Adam*, if indeed it stems from Mithraism, is of little consequence, particularly with regard to gnostic origins.

GNOSTICISM AS A PRODUCT OF PLATONIC PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

The connections between Gnosticism and Platonic philosophical thought have long been recognized. Even the early Christian and Greek polemical works written against Gnosticism recognized the ideological connections. Epiphaneus, son of Carpocrates, a gnostic teacher who flourished in Egypt as early as 125 C.E., is said to have been instructed by his father in the systems of Plato and wrote a philosophical treatise entitled *On Righteousness* or *On Justice* (*Strom.* 3.2.5.3). Hippolytus stated that Basilides was simply advancing for his own doctrines the clever musings of Aristotle (*Haer.* 7.2), which he learned in Egypt (7.15; cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.24.1; *Hist. eccl.* 4.7). And Irenaeus claimed that Valentinus’s concept of emanations originated with Pythagoras (*Haer.* 1.1.1). Hippolytus even provided the caricature that the gnostics are “like cobblers patching together, according to their own particular interpretation, the blunders of the ancients” (*Haer.* 6.15). Likewise, the third-century neoplatonist Plotinus was sufficiently concerned with gnostic influence that he wrote a treatise, *Against the Gnostics*, in which he characterized his opponents as “arrogant” and “delusive.” He had to admit that “generally speaking, some of these peoples’ doctrines have been taken from Plato,” but others, he was quick to add, “are things they have found outside the truth” (*Enn.* 2.9.6).

Harnack’s famous characterization of Gnosticism as “the acute Hellenization of Christianity” we already have noted, as also Bianchi’s revision, “the acute Christianization of Hellenism.” Arthur D. Nock

⁸⁹ Edwin Yamauchi, “*The Apocalypse of Adam*, Mithraism, and Pre-Christian Gnosticism,” in *Études mithriaques: actes du 2e congrès international, Téhéran, du 1er au 8 septembre 1975* (ed. J. Duchesne-Guillemin; Acta Iranica 17/4; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 560. Yamauchi concludes from this study that *The Apocalypse of Adam* provides no basis for a pre-Christian Gnosticism.

characterized the gnostic religion as “Platonism run wild.”⁹⁰ Many of the tractates in the Nag Hammadi library are quite philosophical; in fact, codex VI includes a portion from Plato’s *Republic* (VI.5), though its import in the collection is highly debated. Robinson observes that the translator “clearly did not understand the text, though it obviously seemed edifying and worth translating.”⁹¹ Platonic philosophy certainly affected the gnostics, but precisely in what ways the gnostics drew from Hellenistic philosophy and whether Platonic concepts could account for the origins of gnostic anticosmic dualism are questions to be answered.

Robert Grant suggests that Platonic philosophy supplied the linguistic vehicle for the conveyance of gnostic thoughts, rather than serving as its point of departure.⁹² On the influence of Platonism, Grant indicates as clear examples the cases of Philo and Judaism, Plutarch and Egyptian religion, and the apologists and Christianity. It is interesting to note that Grant, who at first proposed a Jewish origin for Gnosticism, later abandoned his thesis “in favor of a stronger emphasis on Middle Platonic philosophical elements as primary components of Gnosticism.”⁹³ Williams observes several striking similarities to neopythagoreanism and Middle Platonism that can be found in Gnosticism: higher and lower “gods”; a view of the material cosmos as an inferior copy of higher reality; and the quest for the recovery of forgotten self-understanding.⁹⁴ Yet, he is quick to observe the equally striking dissimilarities. The cosmos of the “classic” gnostic systems is not merely inferior; “rather, it is a horrific mistake, created and tyrannized by a family of monstrous and ruthless beings.”⁹⁵ This in no wise finds expression in the procosmic conceptions of the Greek philosophers. Likewise, Ferguson identifies the following elements in Gnosticism as particularly Platonic: a remote spiritual being; the soul as immortal and imprisoned in the body; and a disparagement of the material world. He adds that though the gnostics found philosophical support for these concepts in Greek writers, they extended “them to an extreme beyond what philosophers advocated.”⁹⁶

A review of gnostic concepts and language as revealed in the works of the church fathers and the primary literature discovered at Nag

⁹⁰Nock, “Gnosticism,” 267.

⁹¹Robinson, introduction to *Nag Hammadi Library*, 2.

⁹²Grant, *Gnosticism*, 15.

⁹³See comment in Culianu, *Tree of Gnosis*, 53. This view is supported by R. van den Broek, “Jewish and Platonic Speculations in Early Alexandrian Theology: Eugnostus, Philo, Valentinus, and Origen,” in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring; SAC; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 190–203.

⁹⁴Williams, “Demonizing,” 75.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁶Ferguson, *Early Christianity*, 245.

Hammadi demonstrates strong strains of Platonism that do not require documentation. For our purposes, the larger concerns are the gnostic demotion of the demiurge to an evil creator and the relationship between Platonic and gnostic concepts of dualism. With regard to the former, John Dillon has provided an excellent survey of Platonic philosophy in the era of gnostic development, entitled *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*. He makes this observation about the development of Platonic theology:

Initially the Demiurge seems to have been taken as the supreme principle, active in the world, but when under Neopythagorean influence the One, as a totally transcendent first principle, was placed above the active principle, the Demiurge came to be seen as a second God, Intellect ("nous"), the agent or "logos" of the Supreme God, and this is the view that prevails during the period under review in this book.⁹⁷

These concepts, at first glance, seemingly fit well as an ideological foundation for gnostic themes. However, the leap from the Platonic "logos" who is essentially good to the negatively cast gnostic demiurge is enormous.

Further, Dillon traces the development of a strain of extreme dualism that developed in Middle Platonism and Gnosticism. Though he repeatedly turns to Persian sources for the inspiration of this extreme dualism, the failure of this reasoning has already been observed. Kurt Rudolph provides this summary of Platonic dualism:

It knows the two levels of existence: the spiritual eternal ideas and their transitory material (spatial) counterparts, which form the cosmos; the latter do indeed signify a loss of being, but nevertheless belong to the good part of the creation (for the bad part Plato ultimately made an "evil world soul" responsible). This "ontological" or "metaphysical" dualism is likewise, as we shall show, a presupposition of the Gnostic.⁹⁸

It must be clarified here, as Rudolph does in the next paragraph, that though the Platonists did observe a deficiency in the cosmos, they did not view it as evil. They remain essentially procosmic. Rudolph offers one exception to this uniform stance: "apart from certain Orphic teachings, which are of uncertain date."⁹⁹ To these teachings we now turn.

Various Hellenistic philosophies manifest a certain degree of alienation from the world, including, for instance, Epicureans and Stoics.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 7.

⁹⁸Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 60.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰See the overview of Arthur H. Armstrong, "Gnosis and Greek Philosophy," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas* (ed. Barbara Aland et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 87–124.

However, as Arthur H. Armstrong observes, “By far the most important form of alienation from this world to be found in any genuine Hellenic tradition is, of course, that to be discovered in the Pythagorean-Orphic tradition which became so influential in the first centuries of our era.”¹⁰¹ Armstrong attributes the influence of this tradition to its acceptance by Plato, though “with some reserve and with eventual modification in a more world-accepting direction.”¹⁰² With this identification, Armstrong identifies these differences between Platonic-Pythagorean and gnostic world-alienation, which should call for some restraint in the equating of the two or establishing dependence:

1) “First of all, for the Platonist or Pythagorean our lower world, though there is much evil in it, whose presence has to be explained, is predominantly a good world. It really is a cosmos, a thing of beauty and order, and even in its degree divine. It is brought into being and ruled by a good divine power or powers who are not responsible for the evil in it (this is one of the cardinal doctrines of Platonic theology: all *theoi* are good and do good, not evil). There can therefore be no question of *total* rejection of the world or a spirit of revolt against its maker or rulers, even when there are believed to be higher divinities beyond them.”

2) “Secondly, the existence of the cosmos is necessary (and often thought to be eternal). It is not the result of an incursion of a positive evil principle or the lapse of a higher spiritual power. Even when there is a hierarchy of divinities the divine goodness flows down smoothly, without break or fault, to the demiurgic power. And if the cosmos is necessary, the essential principles required for its constitution are necessary: and the non-divine principle responsible for the existence of evil in it is as necessary as the divine principle responsible for its good.”¹⁰³

For a Platonist to claim, as the gnostic, that the cosmos and the heavens created by the demiurge were evil would be “serious blasphemy.”¹⁰⁴

This is precisely the position of Plotinus when he took up his pen to write *Against the Gnostics* (*Enn.* 2.9).¹⁰⁵ Plotinus does indeed use the term “blasphemous” or, more literally, “violent abuse” (σφόδρα λοιδορήσεται,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 95. This list has been adapted and reformatted.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹⁰⁵ For the text, see Plotinus, *Enneads*, vol. 2 (trans. Arthur H. Armstrong; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

10.33–34) with reference to the gnostics' doctrine and their use of the works of classic philosophers. He approaches his topic with strong rhetoric because of both the gravity of the gnostics' errors and the fact that some philosophers were being enticed into gnostic circles. Plotinus rejected the gnostics on two basic grounds, as summarized by Richard Wallis:

- 1) First, Gnostics despise both the sensible world and its creator, whereas Platonists recognize the relative importance of a divinely-produced imitation of an ideal model.
- 2) Second, while Gnostics agree with Platonists on many points, owing, Plotinus charges, to borrowings from Plato, they abuse him and the other ancient philosophers and seek knowledge through divine revelation, instead of giving reasoned account of their beliefs.¹⁰⁶

Both of these positions, according to Plotinus, were nonphilosophical and un-Hellenic and worthy of his vehement castigation.

What one finds in Gnosticism are numerous Greek philosophical terms and concepts, so that Platonic influence upon Gnosticism cannot be denied. However, its primary themes contradict fundamental Platonic concepts. The question remains: from where does gnostic dualism and its theology of the demiurge arise? As Dillon's observation regarding Platonism in the era between 80 B.C.E. and 220 C.E. reveals, Platonic developments certainly set the stage for gnostic innovations; however, they clearly were not their source.

Culianu offers some interesting comments regarding Platonic influence upon biblical exegesis in the ancient world that are pertinent at this juncture.¹⁰⁷ He minimizes the influence of Hellenism in Jewish and the Samaritan circles. For Culianu, Philo was an exception in Jewish history. Though Philo's tremendous impact upon biblical exegesis and hermeneutics is undeniable, that influence was felt perhaps more particularly in Christianity and Gnosticism than in Judaism. Thus, with Jewish and Samaritan sources eliminated, the question is raised again: where is the entry point for Platonic influence in Gnosticism? Though not going so far as to identify Christianity as the root of Gnosticism, Culianu makes this observation: "We simply ascertain that Christianity, like Gnosticism, was based on Platonic biblical exegesis. It was thus easier to jump from Christianity to Gnosticism than from Judaism or simple Platonism to

¹⁰⁶Richard T. Wallis, introduction to *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (ed. Richard T. Wallis; Studies in Neoplatonism 6; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 1–2. This list has been reformatted.

¹⁰⁷See discussion in Culianu, *Tree of Gnosis*, 126–27.

Gnosticism.”¹⁰⁸ It seems that, for Culianu, Christian exegetical traditions, as evidenced to a limited degree in Paul and to a much fuller extent in the second-century church fathers, may have been a crucial point of contact in gnostic development. Platonism may have entered Gnosticism through Christian exegetical and hermeneutical traditions.¹⁰⁹

In the final analysis, Platonic philosophy alone does not seem to provide a very appealing environment for the birth of Gnosticism. Though Platonic language, concepts, and exegetical traditions are observable, they fail to explain what it is that makes Gnosticism distinct as a religious entity. Arthur H. Armstrong offers this conclusion:

I think, then, in general, that any influence which may have been exerted by any kind of Greek philosophy on Gnosticism was not genuine but extraneous and, for the most part superficial. We are dealing with the use of Greek ideas, often distorted or strangely developed, in a context which is not their own, to commend a different way of faith and feeling, not with a genuine growth of any variety of Gnosticism out of philosophy, whatever some ancient heresiologist may have thought.¹¹⁰

This statement does not preclude the mutual influence of gnostic and Platonic traditions in later periods, but such a study is beyond the purview of this book.¹¹¹

GNOSTICISM AS A PRODUCT OF HERMETICISM

It is fitting at this point to comment briefly upon the *Hermetica*.¹¹² The *Corpus hermeticum* is a collection of texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (“thrice great Hermes”), “compiled in Greek between the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 143 n. 233. In this same note Culianu resists defining the roots of Gnosticism as Christianity.

¹⁰⁹ Culianu goes further to postulate the production of gnostic texts by Platonists “of dubious orthodoxy,” some of which may have found their way into the Nag Hammadi collection. He even posits that this may be the source of some of the Sethian gnostic materials, thus agreeing essentially with Pétrement’s assessment of the Sethians (see n. 67 above). These issues will be broached again later in this book.

¹¹⁰ Armstrong, “Gnosis,” 101.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Pearson, “Gnosticism as Platonism,” in *Gnosticism*, 148–64. Also, both Armstrong and Pétrement allow for gnostic influence upon Numenius; see Armstrong, “Gnosis,” 106–9, 123; Pétrement, *Separate God*, 228–29. See also Wallis, *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*.

¹¹² For an excellent overview of the materials and their historical context, see Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (rev. ed.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993). For the primary materials, see A. D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière, eds., *Corpus hermeticum* (4 vols.; Paris: Société d’édition “Les Belles Lettres,” 1954–1960).

sixth and ninth centuries, but originating in the third, or perhaps the second, century [C.E.].”¹¹³ They are highly syncretistic, deal with “astrological, magical, philosophical, and religious” themes, and have close relations with Middle Platonism and Jewish speculation.¹¹⁴ That Gnosticism has positive connections with Hermeticism is obvious from the fact that several Hermetic texts can be identified in the Nag Hammadi collection. They are *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (VI,6), *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (VI,7), and *Asclepius* 21–29 (VI,8).¹¹⁵

What is essential for our purposes is to ask whether Hermeticism is indeed gnostic in the “classic” sense, and if not, whether Gnosticism could have developed with it as a crucial source. The answer to the first part of the question is a qualified no, for the Hermetic literature, though in no wise systematic or uniform, is essentially optimistic, with pantheistic strains. Some of the documents do, however, display a pessimistic mood and a dualism of an ethical-cosmic variety. In these latter texts, Filoramo accentuates the themes of “piety with knowledge” (*eusebeia meta gnoseos*), alienation from the world, and salvation through knowledge, and concludes, “These themes represent a typical example of Gnosis, free from Christian influence, which preaches new, difficult paths toward a rebirth of the Gnostic type, using Platonic themes.”¹¹⁶ What appears to be clear from the secondary literature is that one’s definition of Gnosticism is the chief determinant of whether the Hermetic texts are to be classified as gnostic.¹¹⁷

The Hermetic writings were some of the first to be explored as evidence for pre-Christian Gnosticism. Some Hermetic texts, particularly *Poimandres*, include a revealer-redeemer. Contemporary studies have demonstrated its origination from Jewish speculation as opposed to Iranian sources, as Reitzenstein formerly proposed.¹¹⁸ Further, some Hermetic tractates include the depiction of a second “Mind” who is responsible for creation, but these texts lack the radical dualism of

¹¹³ See Filoramo, *History of Gnosticism*, 8–9. Edwin Yamauchi concurs with these dates; see his “Hermetic Literature,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume* (ed. Keith Crim et al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 408.

¹¹⁴ See Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 69–72.

¹¹⁵ Yamauchi includes *The Authoritative Teaching*, which he describes as “not explicitly Hermetic but probably a popular form of it” (see “Hermetic Literature,” 408).

¹¹⁶ Filoramo, *History of Gnosticism*, 9.

¹¹⁷ Georg Luck identifies the Hermetic thought as a “form of Gnosticism” (“The Doctrine of Salvation in the Hermetic Writings,” *SecCent* 8 [1991]: 31–41). Luck stresses salvation through gnosis, asceticism, and spiritual regeneration.

¹¹⁸ For discussion, see Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 69–70. Yamauchi concludes that the “Anthropos” of *Poimandres* “is not a savior like Christ” (“Hermetic Literature,” 408).

Gnosticism in which the creation is evil and the creator is in opposition to the highest God.¹¹⁹ In the final analysis, particularly because of the dating of texts, the Hermetic literature cannot have been a source for gnostic origins, though later gnostics did find inspiration from the writings, as is indicated by their inclusion in the Nag Hammadi library.

GNOSTICISM AS A PRODUCT OF PAGAN RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

To declare that the centuries surrounding the genesis of Christianity were times of tremendous religious activity is to state the obvious. Hans Jonas wrote of the “profound spiritual ferment” of the eastern Mediterranean world; of Palestine as “seething with eschatological (i.e., salvational) movements”; of the “spiritual crisis of the age”; and of the “thought of an agitated period.”¹²⁰ Though some scholars, such as Peter Brown and Pheme Perkins, question the sense of agitation or despair that is often said to have characterized this period, they do recognize the religious creativity and syncretism that was evident.¹²¹ Wayne Flory summarizes Brown’s thought: “Gnosticism is a prime illustration of a rather creative reshuffling of already known and readily available ideas from both the ancient and contemporary worlds of philosophic and religious thought.”¹²²

Most scholars would agree that Gnosticism did not originate from a single source, though they might define one or more traditions as of primary significance. Kurt Rudolph is the classic example of a contemporary scholar who can see influences on gnostic thought and practice from nearly every quarter, including Judaism, Hellenism, mystery religions, and Eastern religions. However, it is to the dynamism and flexibility of the Hellenistic religions that he credits the rise of Christianity and Gnosticism (the latter he identifies as one of these “dynamic” Hellenistic religions). He states, “This flexibility, which corresponds to the whole flux of the Hellenistic world civilization, put in place of the old, apparently static, popular religions with their strong collective links with custom and tradition, a religious individualism which made possible the rise of confessional religions with a missionary character.”¹²³ To this dynamism and flexibility he credits these features: division of religious communities into an inner and an outer circle of the faithful; concentrations on redemption and a savior; salvation as participation in the divinity; salvation in a spiritualized world (versus the present); and

¹¹⁹ Yamauchi, “Hermetic Literature.”

¹²⁰ Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, xv, 33.

¹²¹ See discussion in Flory, *Gnostic Concept*, 4–13, esp. 10–11.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹²³ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 287.

the attainment of this salvation through faith, knowledge, and wisdom (i.e., intellectual attitudes).¹²⁴

The question of the influence of the Eastern and mystery religions upon Christianity and Gnosticism has long been an issue of debate. This influence had been a primary thesis of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, whose problematic methods and use of late evidences we have already noted. Culianu contends strongly with proponents of this school of thought, even indicting the motives behind their research and historical reconstruction as anti-Semitic, with a purposeful bent toward showing the Eastern (and Aryan) origins of the Jewish, gnostic, and Christian religions.¹²⁵ With one of its major proponents, Reitzenstein, thoroughly discredited, the question still remains whether pagan religions influenced gnostic thought.

We have already noted that the heresiologists accused the gnostics of patching their systems together from a variety of sources. Flory has compiled a list of references from the church fathers that indicate specifically Eleusinian, Orphic, and Pythagorean influences, "as well as the mysteries themselves" in general.¹²⁶ These references, according to Flory, were not observed by Robert McL. Wilson in his "Gnosis and the Mysteries," when he dismissed the influence of the mysteries on Gnosticism.¹²⁷ However, these further references do little to discredit Wilson's general conclusion that "the mysteries were esoteric religions, their initiates vowed to secrecy, so that we know comparatively little of their actual beliefs and practices. This unfortunately has sometimes allowed free play to speculation and to inferences for which there is no real foundation."¹²⁸ Though Wilson does not absolutely deny resemblances between the mysteries and gnostic thought, he cautions against determining from this that there were specific points of contact. With reference to other Eastern religions, Gilles Quispel, who supports a Jewish origin for Gnosticism, chides, "Thus allegedly almost the entire near east belonged to the ancestors of Gnosticism:

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ See Culianu's discussion in *Tree of Gnosis*, 51–53. He notes that German scholars subsequent to World War II have exposed this hidden agenda.

¹²⁶ Flory, *Gnostic Concept*, 20–21; quotation is from Hippolytus, *Haer.* 15.

¹²⁷ See R. McL. Wilson, "Gnosis and the Mysteries," in R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren, *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* (Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain 91; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 451–57.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 452. Wilson (n. 3) cites one work that claimed that the mystery religions had their headquarters in Jerusalem, and for which he refused to provide bibliographical details to avoid giving the volume "a publicity which it does not deserve."

Iranian Zostrianus, Babylonian astrology,¹²⁹ Syrian Norea, Samaritan Dositheos and the Jewish 'true prophet' are found together in this hodge-podge."¹³⁰

What can be taken from this debate? Certainly, the ancient world was a place where ideas were fluid and borrowing took place. However, in the determination of gnostic origins, it must be observed that it is unnecessary, and likely inaccurate, to posit a direct impact of Eastern mystery religions upon Gnosticism. The more immediate and probable point of contact was with Hellenistic Judaism, whose variety and creative borrowings are only now beginning to be explored.

Further, the differences between the mysteries and Gnosticism were great. What is so characteristic of Gnosticism, and not characteristic of the Hellenistic mysteries, is its literary history, particularly its exegesis of extant religious materials (chiefly Jewish, but even Christian, texts) and its willingness to codify its myths and teachings in written form. Also, what must not be overlooked is that the mysteries do not hold out great promise in discovering the origins of gnostic anticosmic dualism or its denigration of the creator. Syncretism could in no wise account for these elements in Gnosticism. Wilson states it bluntly: "Gnosis is not *merely* syncretism."¹³¹ For these reasons, gnostic origins must be sought elsewhere.

GNOSTICISM AS A PRODUCT OF JEWISH SPECULATION

At first glance, probably the strangest position regarding the origins of Gnosticism is that it arose from Judaism. When its most characteristic elements are defined to be its depiction of the physical world as evil and the creator as a fallen god, specifically the God of the OT, its lack of commonality with Judaism is obvious. And such is the contention of numerous scholars. Karl-Wolfgang Tröger observes, "If the Gnostic religion is in fact a religion of its own, which has found its own verbal expression—then anthropology and cosmology, theology and soteriology are parts

¹²⁹ The Babylonian astral religion (along with philosophy) was a major source for the widespread star worship of the Hellenistic age. Babylonian gods were identified with the stars, and a complex theology was developed. It is postulated that the heavenly ascent of the soul through planetary realms with their ruling powers derives from these considerations. See Ferguson, *Early Christianity*, 187; Alan F. Segal, "Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity, and Their Environment," *ANRW* 23.2:1333–94; M. P. Nilsson, "The Origin of Belief among the Greeks in the Divinity of the Heavenly Bodies," *HTR* 33 (1940): 1–8.

¹³⁰ Gilles Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (Zürich: Origo, 1951), 9; quoted in Flory, *Gnostic Concept*, 23–24.

¹³¹ R. McL. Wilson, "'Jewish Gnosis' and Gnostic Origins: A Survey," *HUCA* 45 (1974): 183.

belonging together in a *conception sui generis*, and this conception, based on *this particular spirit*, cannot be thought to have come from Judaism.”¹³² Arthur H. Armstrong expressed that his reservations regarding a Jewish origin for Gnosticism stemmed from the influence of Hans Jonas. “Jonas has well brought out the intensity and consciously anti-Semitic character of alienated Gnosticism, and has convinced me that it is at least improbable that the first Gnostics were actually Jews, however unorthodox.”¹³³ Roelof van den Broek came to the same conclusion following his survey of theories: “The spirit of Gnosticism cannot be explained from Judaism.”¹³⁴

This being the case, how can someone argue for a Jewish origin of Gnosticism? To put the question another way: how can scholars such as Robert McL. Wilson, Gilles Quispel, George MacRae, Kurt Rudolph, Birger Pearson, Alan Segal, Henry Green, Gedaliahu Stroumsa, Jarl Fossum, and Edwin Yamauchi¹³⁵ contend that Gnosticism developed out of Judaism?

Michael Williams divides the theories of those who argue for Jewish origins into three types: (1) theories focusing on problems of hermeneutics and theodicy; (2) theories focusing on social conflict or crisis; and (3) theories focusing on socioeconomic factors.¹³⁶ Individual scholars and their theories often cross the lines marking these categories, but Williams’s construct is otherwise helpful in discussing the situation of current scholarship. The first of these theories will be discussed immedi-

¹³²Karl-Wolfgang Tröger, “The Attitude of Gnostic Religion towards Judaism as Viewed in a Variety of Perspectives,” in *Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi, Québec, 22–25 août 1978* (ed. Bernard Barc; Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi: section études 1; Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval; Louvain: Peeters, 1981), 97.

¹³³Armstrong, “Gnosis,” 92 n. 7. Armstrong cites Jonas’s essay “*The Hymn of the Pearl: Case Study of a Symbol, and the Claims for a Jewish Origin of Gnosticism*” (in *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974], 277–90), which in no uncertain terms was written as a polemic against Gilles Quispel’s position on the topic. See Quispel, “Gnosticism and the New Testament,” in *Gnostic Studies I* (Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul 34/1; Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut in het Nabije Oosten, 1974), 196–212.

¹³⁴Roelof van den Broek, “The Present State of Gnostic Studies,” VC 37 (1983): 61.

¹³⁵At least in one regard. Yamauchi argues for a polyphyletic origin for Gnosticism: from Judaism, cosmology; from Hellenistic philosophy, anthropology; and from Christianity, soteriology. See Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*; idem, “The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Roots of Gnosticism,” *TynBul* 29 (1978): 143–75. Yamauchi’s position will be discussed further in ch. 2.

¹³⁶Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 220–29.

ately here; the second and third, which belong together, will form the basis of ch. 2.

Perhaps the strongest argument for a Jewish origin for the gnostic religion is its preoccupation with themes and terms derived from the OT and Jewish speculation. It is certainly true that many gnostic writings reverse typical interpretations of biblical passages, but the familiarity of the gnostics with the early chapters of Genesis as well as other key portions of the OT is exceptional. Wilson makes a major point for this while arguing for a Jewish origin for Gnosticism, and he cites the scriptural index of Werner Foerster's anthology of gnostic texts as proof.¹³⁷ Another important connection with Judaism is the gnostics' adoption and adaptation of biblical names for God,¹³⁸ and of a variety of biblical characters. The self-designations that the gnostics used in their texts, such as "elect," "seed," and "sons of light," are Jewish in origin. And of great significance is the existence of Hebrew puns and plays on words in the gnostic texts that indicate that the authors knew Hebrew, since such usages would not transfer in translation.¹³⁹ Based upon the presence of items such as these, Birger Pearson comes to the conclusion that while Christian elements are largely absent or introduced into the gnostic texts in secondary revisions, "the Jewish features observable in the texts are absolutely basic to the Sethian system."¹⁴⁰ Perkins comments, "The strongest arguments for a connection between gnostic mythologies and a Palestinian environment are linguistic."¹⁴¹

Many themes evident in gnostic works are found in Jewish speculations during the period surrounding the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. Themes such as the personification of wisdom and the development of angelology were investigated and developed by both traditions, though

¹³⁷R. McL. Wilson, "The Gnostics and the Old Testament," in *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism, Stockholm, August 20–25, 1973* (ed. Geo Widengren; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977), 165; Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts* (trans. R. McL. Wilson; 2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1972–1974), 2:350–52. More recent works add to this argument; see, for example, Craig Evans, Robert Webb, and Richard Wiebe, eds., *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index* (NTTS 18; Leiden: Brill, 1993).

¹³⁸See, for example, Joseph Dan, "Yaldabaoth and the Language of the Gnostics," in *Geschichte-Tradition-Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag, Bd 1: Judentum* (ed. H. Cancik, H. Lichtenberger, and P. Schäfer; 3 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1996), 1.557–64. Dan follows both Pétrement and Grant in the position that gnostic names for God are derived from Hebrew.

¹³⁹See Birger Pearson, "Jewish Sources in Gnostic Literature," in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran, Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (ed. Michael E. Stone; CRINT 2/2; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 443–81.

¹⁴⁰Pearson, "Jewish Elements," 127.

¹⁴¹Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 22.

obviously they did not always reach similar conclusions. As an example, Robert McL. Wilson identified three affinities that the gnostics had with Philo: (1) emphasis on the complete transcendence of the supreme God; (2) interposition of a series of intermediaries between the supreme God and the world; and (3) a general disparagement of the sense-perceptible world.¹⁴² Wilson is quick to clarify the sharp contrasts between Philo and the gnostics, particularly in the second and third points, but he is willing to concede that Philo is a precursor of the later gnostic movements.¹⁴³

A major concern of Jewish speculation that Philo raised and other Jews shared was the possibility of intermediaries between the supreme God and the physical world. Alan Segal, Peter Hayman, and Jarl Fossum have addressed this topic in separate works. Alan Segal traced the development of the “two powers in heaven” theory in rabbinic traditions. He suggests that the gnostics developed their “demiurgical” theology in the aftermath of the Second Jewish—or Bar Kokhba—Revolt (132–135 C.E.).¹⁴⁴ Peter Hayman contends that most forms of Jewish belief can more accurately be described as “cooperative dualism” than as “monotheism.”¹⁴⁵ Though this theory is undoubtedly overstated, the presence of a dualistic strain in Jewish theology at least opens the door for the gnostic leap toward a fallen creator. Stephen G. Wilson is careful to point out the breadth and direction of that leap.

Still, if we accept that there was a dualistic strain in Judaism, the gnostic challenge would have been less to their belief in the unity of God than in their estimation and ranking of the two deities: in the Jewish system the supreme God is creator and works hand in glove with his subordinate; in Gnosticism the two gods work against each other, and creation is assigned to the ignorant god who is also the god of the Old Testament.¹⁴⁶

Because of the great breadth of this leap, Jarl Fossum looks for gnostic origins in disenfranchised Jews in Samaria, who, he believes, may have had fewer inhibitions against such a move.¹⁴⁷ Though none of these theories is without serious flaws, the greatest problem common to them is that nowhere

¹⁴²Robert McL. Wilson, “Philo and Gnosticism,” *Kairos* 14 (1972): 213–19; see discussion in Pearson, “Philo, Gnosis, and the New Testament,” *Gnosticism*, 171–73.

¹⁴³Wilson, “Philo and Gnosticism,” 215; cf. Pearson, “Philo,” 171. Pearson is less cautious than Wilson in calling Philo a gnostic, though ultimately he resists doing so.

¹⁴⁴Segal, *Two Powers*. This will be discussed more fully in ch. 2.

¹⁴⁵Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies,” *JJS* 22 (1990): 1–15.

¹⁴⁶Stephen G. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70–170 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 373 n. 14.

¹⁴⁷Fossum, *Name of God*. Williams discusses the problems with this theory in *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 222–24.

in Judaism, even in Samaria, is the negativism toward the cosmos and its creator seen as it is found in Gnosticism. There is pessimism, but not anti-cosmism. In no sense is the original cosmos evil or created by evil beings.

For Michael Williams, the key to understanding the origins of Gnosticism¹⁴⁸ lies in its hermeneutics and the problems it was attempting to solve. He observes that Irenaeus, in his polemic against Valentinus and other second-century opponents, states that the gnostics devise another god in their attempt to explain “ambiguous passages of scripture.”¹⁴⁹ Williams sees gnosticism rising in Jewish circles that are contending with theodicy, the embarrassing anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms of the OT,¹⁵⁰ and issues related to asceticism—especially in light of a creator who approved of sex.¹⁵¹ As various circles of Jews contended with these and other issues, and particularly asceticism,¹⁵² Williams surmises that logic could easily have led to gnostic conclusions.

Williams finds support for his focus upon hermeneutics and the question of theodicy in Gedaliahu Stroumsa’s *Another Seed*. Stroumsa argues, “At the root of the Gnostic rejection of the material world and its creator lies an obsessive preoccupation with the problem of evil.”¹⁵³ Stroumsa examines gnostic interpretations of the accounts of the origin of evil in Gen 3, the story of Adam and Eve, and Gen 6, the descent of the “sons of god” to the “daughters of men.” Though he does not posit a specific context for the gnostic leap, Stroumsa holds that the gnostics seized upon the Jewish theory of intermediaries between God and creation to develop their most characteristic feature.

The Gnostics, who were obsessed by another problem, that of the existence of evil and its source, picked up this duality between God and the demiurge and radicalized it by demonizing the demiurge and identifying him with Satan. Here, too, the identification of evil with matter, important though it may be, is only secondary to the demonization process, which transformed a hierarchical duality into a *conflicting* dualism.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ Though it should be pointed out that he would not use this category, particularly with a capital G.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 77; cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.10.1. Williams also cites *Haer.* 1.3.6, where Irenaeus faults the gnostics for their use of Scripture.

¹⁵⁰ For a helpful discussion comparing and contrasting anthropomorphism in ancient pagan and Jewish religions, see Edwin Yamauchi, “Anthropomorphism in Ancient Religions,” *BSac* 125 (1968): 29–44; “Anthropomorphism in Hellenism and Judaism,” *BSac* 127 (1970): 212–22.

¹⁵¹ See discussion in Williams, “Demonizing,” 73–107, esp. 86–94.

¹⁵² Asceticism was particularly attractive in the ancient world. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

¹⁵³ Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 17.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 172. See further discussion in Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 221–22.

Though this theory leaves one desiring a specific context, the plot is plausible.

There are those who would posit a specific context for gnostic innovation or at least parallels in Judaism. Kurt Rudolph has suggested that the Qumran community provides a significant link between Jewish apocalyptic and wisdom traditions and gnosis.¹⁵⁵ He describes the dualism of the Qumran covenanters as a “cosmological dualism” between an angel of darkness and an angel of light who were created by God and operate under his limited sovereign control.¹⁵⁶ Rudolph also designates their concept of salvation a “soteriological concept of knowledge” and cites the *Thanksgiving Hymns* (1QH^a) as the primary proof.¹⁵⁷ Pheme Perkins argues, “The formation of gnostic mythology and its initial ritual expression in rites of baptismal purification are not dependent upon emerging Christianity . . . the structural elements in gnostic mythologizing are distinctive versions of first-century Jewish materials concerning the origins of the world.”¹⁵⁸ Both Rudolph and Perkins would identify the rise of Gnosticism in Syro-Palestinian Jewish baptismal circles.

In response to those who would argue against Gnosticism deriving from Judaism, Williams retorts, “Innovators *create* differences; otherwise their products would not be innovations.”¹⁵⁹ He continues, “The real issue is whether Jewish tradition was such that Jews would never have been likely to undertake innovations such as these demiurgical myths. In my view, the latter cannot be demonstrated.”¹⁶⁰ Pearson would concur, adding that it was *only* Jews who could have made such innovations.

The Gnostic attitude to Judaism, in short, is one of alienation and revolt, and though the Gnostic hermeneutic can be characterized in general as a revolutionary attitude vis-à-vis established traditions, the attitude exemplified in the Gnostic texts, taken together with the massive utilization of Jewish traditions, can in my view only be interpreted historically as expressive of a move-

¹⁵⁵Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 279–81. Rudolph’s theory regarding wisdom traditions depends upon his supposition of Greek influence upon Ecclesiastes. This thesis is unsupportable, as per Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁵⁶Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 279; cf. *Rule of the Community* (1QS) III, 13–IV, 26. It should be noted that the dualism of Qumran is very different from that of Gnosticism. The *Rule of the Community* presents two opposing spirits who were created by the sovereign God. The concepts are conditioned and controlled by the rigid monism that pervades the OT and does not parallel or imitate Zoroastrian or gnostic dualism. On the relation between Zoroastrian and Qumranian dualism, see discussion in William S. LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 77–81, esp. 81.

¹⁵⁷Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 280.

¹⁵⁸Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 18–19.

¹⁵⁹Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 218.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*

ment of Jews away from their own traditions as part of a process of religious self-redefinition. The Gnostics, at least in the earliest stages of the history of the Gnostic movement, were people who can aptly be designated as “no longer Jews.”¹⁶¹

Pearson, as others, is convinced of gnostic origins stemming from Judaism, and it appears that this thesis is most plausible. Yet, where his and others’ theories come up short is in defining a context in which the most characteristic elements of Gnosticism appeared, particularly prior to the emergence of the “classic” Gnosticism of the second century. It is one thing to suggest an origin; it is another to determine an occasion.

A clear distinction should be made, at this juncture, between speculation and occasion. That Jewish intellectuals were experimenting with various hermeneutical methods, responding to Hellenistic challenges, and perhaps incorporating religious and philosophical ideas from the intellectual environment of the ancient world is one thing; to say that these factors led them to abandon fundamental principles of their faith, particularly monotheism and a positive image of the creator and his creation, is quite another. It is difficult to imagine a Jewish intellectual not keeping speculations in check, unless, of course, there was some mitigating circumstance that led to the abandonment of foundational presuppositions. Stephen G. Wilson summarizes the problem:

The key objection, articulated in various ways, is that there are no Jewish precedents for the deliberate inversion of Jewish values, that the Jewish material is so often used in such a radically anti-Jewish way that the notion of its arising within Judaism is neither provable nor credible. This is in many ways the nub of the problem, for if the theory of Jewish origins is to be sustained, a plausible explanation of gnostic anti-Judaism must be offered.¹⁶²

Thus, we turn to sociological and crisis theories of gnostic origins from within Judaism.

¹⁶¹ Pearson, “Jewish Elements,” 130.

¹⁶² Wilson, *Related Strangers*, 205.