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THE GNOSTIC RELIGION

The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity

by Hans Jonas

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Contents

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gnostic sects, Epiphanius of Salamis, wrote in the fourth century A.D. From then on, with the danger past and the polemical interest no longer alive, oblivion settled down on the whole subject, until the historical interest of the nineteenth century returned to it in the spirit of dispassionate inquiry. By reason of subject matter it still fell into the domain of the theologian, like everything connected with the beginnings of Christianity. But the Protestant theologians (mostly German) who engaged in the new investigation approached their task as historians who are no longer party to the conflict, though intellectual trends of their own time might sway their sympathies and judgments.

It was then that diverse schools of thought about the historical nature of Gnosticism began to spring up. Naturally enough, the Hellenic, and more particularly "Platonic," thesis of the Church Fathers was revived, and not merely on their authority, for suggestive aspects of the literary evidence, including gnostic use of philosophical terms, as well as the general probabilities of the age, almost inevitably at first point in that direction. Indeed there hardly seemed to be a choice of alternatives as long as only Judaeo-Christian and Greek thought were reckoned with as the forces which could exert influence in that period. But somehow the division of the quantity that is Gnosticism by these known factors leaves too large a remainder, and from the early nineteenth century the "Hellenic" school was confronted by an "oriental" one which argued that Gnosticism derived from an older "oriental philosophy." Though this position reflected a correct instinct, it suffered from the weakness that it operated with an ill-defined and really unknown magnitude—that oriental philosophy the nature and previous existence of which were inferred from the facts of Gnosticism itself rather than independently established. The position gained firmer ground, however, once the mythological rather than the philosophical character of what was felt to be oriental in Gnosticism was recognized and the search for the mysterious philosophy abandoned. It is generally true to say that to this day the "Greek" and "oriental" emphases shift back and forth according to whether the philosophical or the mythological, the rational or the irrational facet of the phenomenon is seen as decisive. The culmination of the Greek and rational thesis may be found at the end of the century

in Adolf von Harnack's famous formula that Gnosticism is "the acute Hellenization of Christianity."

Meanwhile, however, the scientific scene changed with the classical scholar and the orientalist entering the field where before the theologian had been alone. The investigation of Gnosticism became part of the comprehensive study of the whole age of later Antiquity in which a variety of disciplines joined hands. Here it was the younger science of the orientalists which could add most to what theology and classical philology had to offer. The vague concept of generally "oriental" thought gave way to a concrete knowledge of the several national traditions mingling in the culture of the time; and the concept of Hellenism itself was modified by the inclusion of these distinct heterogeneous influences in its hitherto predominantly Greek picture. As to Gnosticism in particular, the acquaintance with such massively mythological material as the Coptic and Mandaean texts dealt a blow to the "Greek-philosophical" position from which it never fully recovered, though in the nature of the case it can never be entirely abandoned either. Diagnosis became largely a matter of genealogy, and for this the field was thrown wide open: one by one, or in varying combinations, the different oriental filiations suggested by the rainbow colors of the material—Babylonian, Egyptian, Iranian—were elaborated to determine the principal "whence" and "what" of Gnosis, with the overall result that its picture became more and more syncretistic. The latest turn in the quest for one dominant line of descent is to derive Gnosticism from Judaism: a needful correction of a previous neglect, but in the end probably no more adequate to the total and integral phenomenon than other partial and partially true explanations. Indeed, so far as traceable pedigrees of elements go, all investigations of detail over the last half century have proved divergent rather than convergent, and leave us with a portrait of Gnosticism in which the absence of a unifying character seems to be the salient feature. But these same investigations have also gradually enlarged the range of the phenomenon beyond the group of Christian heresies originally comprised by the name, and in this greater breadth, as well as in the greater complexity, Gnosticism became increasingly revealing of the whole civilization in which it arose and whose all-pervading feature was syncretism.

had envisioned and which Hellenism had made possible, although the Persian renascence beyond the Euphrates had diminished its geographical scope. The parallel division of Christendom into a Latin and a Greek Church reflects and perpetuates the same cultural situation in the realm of religious dogma.

It is this spatio-cultural unity, created by Alexander and existing in turn as the kingdoms of the Diadochi, as the eastern provinces of Rome, as the Byzantine Empire, and concurrently as the Greek Church, a unity bound together in the Hellenistic-oriental synthesis, which provides the setting for those spiritual movements with which this book is concerned. In this introductory chapter we have to fill in their background by saying something more about Hellenism in general and by clarifying on the one hand some aspects of its two components, namely, Hellas and Asia, and on the other the manner of their meeting, marriage, and common issue.

(*a*) THE PART OF THE WEST

What were the historical conditions and circumstances of the development we have indicated? The union which Alexander's conquest initiated was prepared for on both sides. East and West had each progressed previously to the maximum degree of unification in its own realm, most obviously so in political terms: the East had been unified under Persian rule, the Greek world under the Macedonian hegemony. Thus the conquest of the Persian monarchy by the Macedonian was an event involving the whole "West" and the whole "East."

No less had cultural developments prepared each side, though in a very different manner, for the roles they were destined to play in the new combination. Cultures can best mix when the thought of each has become sufficiently emancipated from particular local, social, and national conditions to assume some degree of general validity and thereby become transmissible and exchangeable. It is then no longer bound to such specific historical facts as the Athenian polis or the oriental caste society but has passed into the freer form of abstract principles that can claim to apply to all mankind, that can be learned, be supported by argument, and compete with others in the sphere of rational discussion.

Greek Culture on the Eve of Alexander's Conquests

When Alexander appeared, Hellas had, both in point of fact and in its own consciousness, reached this stage of cosmopolitan maturity, and this was the positive precondition of his success, which was matched by a negative one on the oriental side. For more than a century the whole evolution of Greek culture had been leading in this direction. The ideals of a Pindar could hardly have been grafted onto the court of a Nebuchadnezzar or an Artaxerxes and the bureaucracies of their realms. Since Herodotus, "the father of history" (fifth century B.C.), Greek curiosity had interested itself in the customs and opinions of the "barbarians"; but the Hellenic way was conceived for and suited to Hellenes alone, and of them only those who were freeborn and full citizens. Moral and political ideals, and even the idea of knowledge, were bound up with very definite social conditions and did not claim to apply to men in general—indeed, the concept of "man in general" had for practical purposes not yet come into its own. However, philosophical reflection and the development of urban civilization in the century preceding Alexander led gradually to its emergence and explicit formulation. The sophistic enlightenment of the fifth century had set the individual over against the state and its norms and in conceiving the opposition of nature and law had divested the latter, as resting on convention alone, of its ancient sanctity: moral and political norms are relative. Against their skeptical challenge, the Socratic-Platonic answer appealed, not indeed to tradition, but to conceptual knowledge of the intelligible, i.e., to rational theory; and rationalism carries in itself the germ of universalism. The Cynics preached a revaluation of existing norms of conduct, self-sufficiency of the private individual, indifference to the traditional values of society, such as patriotism, and freedom from all prejudice. The internal decline of the old city-states together with the loss of their external independence weakened the particularistic aspect of their culture while it strengthened the consciousness of what in it was of general spiritual validity.

In short, at the time of Alexander the Hellenic idea of culture had evolved to a point where it was possible to say that one was a Hellene not by birth but by education, so that one born a barbarian

could become a true Hellene. The enthroning of reason as the highest part in man had led to the discovery of man as such, and at the same time to the conception of the Hellenic way as a general humanistic culture. The last step on this road was taken when the Stoics later advanced the proposition that freedom, that highest good of Hellenic ethics, is a purely inner quality not dependent on external conditions, so that true freedom may well be found in a slave if only he is wise. So much does all that is Greek become a matter of mental attitude and quality that participation in it is open to every rational subject, i.e., to every man. Prevailing theory placed man no longer primarily in the context of the polis, as did Plato and still Aristotle, but in that of the cosmos, which we sometimes find called "the true and great polis for all." To be a good citizen of the cosmos, a *cosmopolites,* is the moral end of man; and his title to this citizenship is his possession of *logos,* or reason, and nothing else—that is, the principle that distinguishes him as man and puts him into immediate relationship to the same principle governing the universe. The full growth of this cosmopolitan ideology was reached under the Roman Empire; but in all essential features the universalistic stage of Greek thought was present by Alexander's time. This turn of the collective mind inspired his venture and was itself powerfully reinforced by his success.

Cosmopolitanism and the New Greek Colonization

Such was the inner breadth of the spirit which Alexander carried into the outward expanses of the world. From now on, Hellas was everywhere that urban life with its institutions and organization flourished after the Greek pattern. Into this life the native populations could enter with equal rights by way of cultural and linguistic assimilation. This marks an important difference from the older Greek colonization of the Mediterranean coastline, which established purely Greek colonies on the fringes of the great "barbarian" hinterland and envisaged no amalgamation of colonists and natives. The colonization following in the footsteps of Alexander intended from the outset, and indeed as part of his own political program, a symbiosis of an entirely new kind, one which though most obviously a Hellenization of the East required for its success a certain reciprocity. In the new geopolitical area the Greek element no

longer clung to geographic continuity with the mother country, and generally with what had hitherto been the Greek world, but spread far into the continental expanses of the Hellenistic Empire. Unlike the earlier colonies, the cities thus founded were not daughter cities of individual metropoles but were fed from the reservoir of the cosmopolitan Greek nation. Their main relations were not to one another and to the distant mother city but each acted as a center of crystallization in its own environment, that is, in relation to its indigenous neighbors. Above all, these cities were no longer sovereign states but parts of centrally administered kingdoms. This changed the relation of the inhabitants to the political whole. The classical city-state engaged the citizen in its concerns, and these he could identify with his own, as through the laws of his city he governed himself. The large Hellenistic monarchies neither called for nor permitted such close personal identification; and just as they made no moral demands on their subjects, so the individual detached himself in regard to them and as a *private* person (a status hardly admitted in the Hellenic world before) found satisfaction of his social needs in voluntarily organized associations based on community of ideas, religion, and occupation.

The nuclei of the newly founded cities were as a rule constituted by Greek nationals; but from the outset the inclusion of compact native populations was part of the plan and of the charter by which each city came into being. In many cases such groups of natives were thus transformed into city populations for the first time, and into the populations of cities organized and self-administering in the Greek manner. How thoroughly Alexander himself understood his policy of fusion in racial terms as well is shown by the famous marriage celebration at Susa when in compliance with his wishes ten thousand of his Macedonian officers and men took Persian wives.

The Hellenization of the East

The assimilating power of such an entity as the Hellenistic city must have been overwhelming. Participating in its institutions and ways of life, the non-Hellenic citizens underwent rapid Hellenization, shown most plainly in their adoption of the Greek language: and this in spite of the fact that probably from the beginning the

still going on at a time when movements of renascence of national languages and literatures were already under way. The earliest, indeed anachronistic, example of such a situation is provided by the familiar events of the Maccabaean period in Palestine in the second century B.C. Even as late as the third century A.D., after five hundred years of Hellenistic civilization, we observe a native of the ancient city of Tyre, Malchus son of Malchus, becoming a prominent Greek philosophic writer and at the instance of his Hellenic friends changing (or suffering them to change) his Semitic name first to the Greek *Basileus,*[1] then to *Porphyrius,*[2] thereby symbolically declaring his adherence to the Hellenic cause together with his Phoenician extraction. The interesting point in this case is that at the same time the counter-movement was gathering momentum in his native country—the creation of a Syrian vernacular literature associated with the names of Bardesanes, Mani, and Ephraem. This movement and its parallels everywhere were part of the rise of the new popular religions against which Hellenism was forced to defend itself.

Later Hellenism: The Change from Secular to Religious Culture

With the situation just indicated the concept of Hellenism underwent a significant change. In late antiquity the unchallenged universalism of the first Hellenistic centuries was succeeded by an age of new differentiation, based primarily on spiritual issues and only secondarily also of a national, regional, and linguistic character. The common secular culture was increasingly affected by a mental polarization in religious terms, leading finally to a breaking up of the former unity into exclusive camps. Under these new circumstances, "Hellenic," used as a watchword *within* a world already thoroughly Hellenized, distinguishes an embattled cause from its Christian or gnostic opponents, who yet, in language and literary form, are themselves no less part of the Greek milieu. On this common ground Hellenism became almost equivalent to conservatism and crystallized into a definable doctrine in which the whole

[1] "King"—the literal translation of Malchus.

[2] "The purple-clad"—an allusion to his original name as well as to the major industry of his native city, purple-dyeing.

tradition of pagan antiquity, religious as well as philosophical, was for the last time systematized. Its adherents as well as its opponents lived everywhere, so that the battlefield extended over the whole civilized world. But the rising tide of religion had engulfed "Greek" thought itself and transformed its own character: Hellenistic secular culture changed into a pronouncedly religious pagan culture, both in self-defense against Christianity and from an inner necessity. This means that in the age of the rising world-religion, Hellenism itself became a denominational creed. This is how Plotinus and still more Julian the Apostate conceived their Hellenic, i.e., pagan, cause, which in Neoplatonism founded a kind of church with its own dogma and apologetic. Doomed Hellenism had come to be a particular cause on its own native ground. In this hour of its twilight the concept of Hellenism was at the same time broadened and narrowed. It was broadened in so far as, in the final entrenchment, even purely oriental creations like the religions of Mithras or of Attis were counted in with the Hellenistic tradition that was to be defended; it was narrowed in that the whole cause became a party cause, and more and more that of a minority party. Yet, as we have said, the whole struggle was enacted within a Greek framework, that is, within the frame of the one universal Hellenic culture and language. So much is this the case that the victor and heir in this struggle, the Christian Church of the East, was to be predominantly a Greek church: the work of Alexander the Great triumphed even in this defeat of the classical spirit.

The Four Stages of Greek Culture

We can accordingly distinguish four historical phases of Greek culture: (1) before Alexander, the classical phase as a national culture; (2) after Alexander, Hellenism as a cosmopolitan secular culture; (3) later Hellenism as a pagan religious culture; and (4) Byzantinism as a Greek Christian culture. The transition from the first to the second phase is for the most part to be explained as an autonomous Greek development. In the second phase (300 B.C.—first century B.C.) the Greek spirit was represented by the great rival schools of philosophy, the Academy, the Epicureans, and above all the Stoics, while at the same time the Greek-oriental synthesis was

progressing. The transition from this to the third phase, the turning to religion of ancient civilization as a whole and of the Greek mind with it, was the work of profoundly un-Greek forces which, originating in the East, entered history as new factors. Between the rule of Hellenistic secular culture and the final defensive position of a late Hellenism turned religious lie three centuries of revolutionary spiritual movements which effected this transformation, among which the gnostic movement occupies a prominent place. With these we have to deal later.

(*b*) THE PART OF THE EAST

So far we have considered the role of the Greek side in the combination of West and East, and in doing so started from the internal preconditions that enabled Hellenic culture to become a world civilization following upon Alexander's conquests. These preconditions had of course to be matched by preconditions on the oriental side which explain the role of the East in the combination —its apparent or real passivity, docility, and readiness for assimilation. Military and political subjection alone is not sufficient to explain the course of events, as the comparison with other conquests of areas of high culture shows throughout history, where often enough the victor culturally succumbs to the vanquished. We may even raise the question whether in a deeper sense, or at least partially, something of the kind did not also happen in the case of Hellenism; but what is certainly manifest at first is the unequivocal ascendancy of the Greek side, and this determined at least the form of all future cultural expression. What, then, was the condition of the oriental world on the eve of Alexander's conquest to explain its succumbing to the expansion of Greek culture? And in what shape did native oriental forces survive and express themselves under the new conditions of Hellenism? For naturally this great East with its ancient and proud civilizations was not simply so much dead matter for the Greek form. Both questions, that concerning the antecedent conditions and that concerning the manner of survival, are incomparably harder to answer for the oriental side than the parallel ones were for the Greek side. The reasons for this are as follows.

In the first place, for the time before Alexander, in contrast with the wealth of Greek sources we are faced with an utter paucity of oriental ones, except for the Jewish literature. Yet this negative fact, if we may take it as a sign of literary sterility, is itself a historical testimony which confirms what we can infer from Greek sources about the contemporary state of the Eastern nations.

Moreover, this vast East, unified in the Persian Empire by sheer force, was far from being a cultural unity like the Greek world. Hellas was the same everywhere; the East, different from region to region. Thus an answer to the question regarding cultural preconditions would have to fall into as many parts as there were cultural entities involved. This fact also complicates the problem of Hellenism itself as regards its oriental component. Indeed, Gustav Droysen, the originator of the term "Hellenism" for the post-Alexandrian Greek-oriental synthesis, has himself qualified the term by stating that in effect as many different kinds of Hellenism evolved as there were different national individualities concerned. In many cases, however, these local factors are little known to us in their original form. Nevertheless, the overall homogeneity of the ensuing Hellenistic development suggests some overall similarity of conditions. In fact, if we except Egypt, we can discern in the pre-Hellenistic Orient certain universalistic tendencies, beginnings of a spiritual syncretism, which may be taken as a counterpart to the cosmopolitan turn of the Greek mind. Of this we shall have more to say.

Finally, in the period after Alexander the supremacy of pan-Hellenic civilization meant precisely that the East itself, if it aspired to literary expression at all, had to express itself in the Greek language and manner. Consequently the recognition of such instances of self-expression as voices of the East within the totality of Hellenistic literature is for us frequently a matter of subtle and not unequivocally demonstrable distinction: that is to say, the situation created by Hellenism is itself an ambiguous one. With the interesting methodological problem this presents we shall have to deal later.

These are some of the difficulties encountered in any attempt to clarify the picture of the Eastern half of the dual fact which we call Hellenism. We can nonetheless obtain a general though partly

as petrifaction could also be regarded as a mark of the perfection which a system of life has attained—this consideration may well apply in the case of Egypt.

In addition, the Assyrian and Babylonian practice of expatriating and transplanting whole conquered peoples, or more accurately their socially and culturally leading strata, had destroyed the forces of cultural growth in many of the regions outside the old centers. This fate had in many cases overtaken peoples of a more youthful cultural age who were still to unfold their potentialities. For the imperial manageability thus gained, the central power paid with the drying up of the potential sources of its own regeneration. Here we have doubtless one of the reasons for the torpor of the old centers we mentioned before: by breaking the national and regional vital forces throughout the kingdom, they had as it were surrounded themselves with a desert, and under these conditions the isolated summit of power was denied the benefit of whatever rejuvenating influences might have come from below. This may in part explain the state of paralysis in which the East seems to have been sunk prior to Alexander and from which it was delivered by the revivifying influence of the Hellenic spirit.

Beginnings of Religious Syncretism. Yet this same state of affairs contained also some positive conditions for the role which the East was to play in the Hellenistic age. It is not just that the prevailing passivity, the absence of consciously resisting forces, facilitated assimilation. The very weakening of the strictly local aspects of indigenous cultures meant the removal of so many obstacles to a merging in a wider synthesis and thus made possible the entry of these elements into the common stock. In particular, the uprooting and transplantation of whole peoples had two significant effects. On the one hand, it favored the disengagement of cultural contents from their native soil, their abstraction into the transmissible form of teachings, and their consequently becoming available as elements in a cosmopolitan interchange of ideas—just as Hellenism could use them. On the other hand, it favored already a pre-Hellenistic syncretism, a merging of gods and cults of different and sometimes widely distant origins, which again anticipates an important feature of the ensuing Hellenistic development. Biblical history offers examples of both these processes.

The earliest description of the genesis of an intentional religious syncretism is found in the narrative in II Kings 17:24-41 concerning the new inhabitants settled by the Assyrian king in evacuated Samaria, that well-known story of the origin of the Samaritan sect which closes with the words:

> So these nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images, both their children and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day.

On a world-wide scale religious syncretism was later to become a decisive characteristic of Hellenism: we see here its inception in the East itself.

Beginnings of Theological Abstraction in Jewish, Babylonian, and Persian Religion. Even more important is the other development we mentioned, the transformation of the substance of local cultures into ideologies. To take another classic example from the Bible, the Babylonian exile forced the Jews to develop that aspect of their religion whose validity transcended the particular Palestinian conditions and to oppose the creed thus extracted in its purity to the other religious principles of the world into which they had been cast. This meant a confrontation of ideas with ideas. We find the position fully realized in Second Isaiah, who enunciated the pure principle of monotheism as a world cause, freed from the specifically Palestinian limitations of the cult of Jahweh. Thus the very uprooting brought to fulfillment a process which had started, it is true, with the older prophets.

The uniqueness of the Jewish case notwithstanding, certain parallels to these developments can be discerned elsewhere in the political disintegration of the East or can be inferred from the later course of events. Thus, after the overthrow of Babylon by the Persians the Old-Babylonian religion ceased to be a state cult attached to the political center and bound up with its functions of rule. As one of the institutions of the monarchy it had enjoyed a defined official status, and this connection with a local system of secular power had supported and at the same time limited its role. Both support and restriction fell away with the loss of statehood. The release of the religion from a political function was an uprooting comparable to the territorial uprooting of Israel. The fate of

process in some ways analogous to the contemporary creation of the Talmud. Thus in the homeland and in the diaspora as well the changing conditions produced a similar result: the transformation of traditional religion into a theological system whose characteristics approach those of a rational doctrine.

We may suppose comparable processes to have taken place throughout the East, processes by which originally national and local beliefs were fitted to become elements of an international exchange of ideas. The general direction of these processes was toward dogmatization, in the sense that a principle was abstracted from the body of tradition and unfolded into a coherent doctrine. Greek influence, furnishing both incentive and logical tools, everywhere brought this process to maturity; but as we have just tried to show, the East itself had on the eve of Hellenism already initiated it in significant instances. The three we have mentioned were chosen with particular intent: Jewish monotheism, Babylonian astrology, and Iranian dualism were probably the three main spiritual forces that the East contributed to the configuration of Hellenism, and they increasingly influenced its later course.

So much for what we called "preconditions." We may just pause to note the fact that the first cosmopolitan civilization known to history, for so we may regard the Hellenistic, was made possible by catastrophes overtaking the original units of regional culture. Without the fall of states and nations, this process of abstraction and interchange might never have occurred on such a scale. This is true, though less obviously, even for the Greek side, where the political decline of the polis, this most intensive of particularistic formations, provided a comparable negative precondition. Only in the case of Egypt, which we omitted in our survey, were conditions entirely different. In the main, however, it was from Asia, whether Semitic or Iranian, that the forces issued that were actively operative in the Hellenistic synthesis together with the Greek heritage: thus we can confine our sketch to the Asiatic conditions.

The East Under Hellenism

Having dealt with the preconditions, we must briefly consider the destiny of the East under the new dispensation of Hellenism. The first thing we note is that the East became silent for several

centuries and was all but invisible in the overpowering light of the Hellenic day. With regard to what followed from the first century A.D. onward, we may call this opening stage the period of latency of the oriental mind and derive from this observation a division of the Hellenistic age into two distinct periods: the period of manifest Greek dominance and oriental submersion, and the period of reaction of a renascent East, which in its turn advanced victoriously in a kind of spiritual counterattack into the West and reshaped the universal culture. We are speaking of course in terms of intellectual and not of political events. In this sense, Hellenization of the East prevails in the first period, orientalization of the West in the second, the latter process coming to an end by about 300 A.D. The result of both is a synthesis which carried over into the Middle Ages.

The Submersion of the East. About the first period we can be brief. It was the age of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms, particularly characterized by the efflorescence of Alexandria. Hellenism triumphed throughout the East and constituted the general culture whose canons of thought and expression were adopted by everyone who wished to participate in the intellectual life of the age. Only the Greek voice was heard: all public literary utterance was in its idiom. In view of what we said about the entering of orientals into the stream of Greek intellectual life, the muteness of the East cannot be construed as a lack of intellectual vitality on the part of its individuals: it consists rather in its not speaking for itself, in its own name. Anyone who had something to say had no choice but to say it in Greek, not only in terms of language but also in terms of concept, ideas, and literary form, that is, as ostensibly part of the Greek tradition.

To be sure, the Hellenistic civilization, wide open and hospitable, had room for creations of the oriental mind once they had assumed the Greek form. Thus the formal unity of this culture covered in fact a plurality, yet always as it were under the official Greek stamp. For the East, this situation engendered a kind of mimicry which had far-reaching consequences for its whole future. The Greek mind on its part could not remain unaffected: it was the recognition of the difference in what was called "Greek" before and after Alexander that prompted Droysen to introduce the term "Hellenistic" in distinction to the classical "Hellenic." "Hellenistic" was intended to denote not just the enlargement of the polis culture to a cosmopolitan culture and the transformations inherent in this process alone but also the change of character following from the reception of oriental influences into this enlarged whole.

However, the anonymity of the Eastern contributions makes these influences in the first period hard to identify. Men like Zeno, whom we mentioned before, wished to be nothing but Hellenes, and their assimilation was as complete as any such can be. Philosophy generally ran on very much in the tracks laid down by the native Greek schools; but toward the end of the period, about two centuries after Zeno, it too began to show significant signs of change in its hitherto autonomous development. The signs are at first by no means unambiguous. The continuing controversy about Poseidonius of Apameia (about 135-50 B.C.) well illustrates the difficulty of any confident attribution of influences and in general the uncertainty as to what in this period is genuinely Greek and what tinged with orientalism. Is the fervent astral piety that pervades his philosophy an expression of the Eastern mind or not? Both sides can be argued, and probably will continue to be, though there can be no doubt that, whether or not he was Greek by birth, to his own mind his thought was truly Greek. In this case, so in the general picture: we cannot demand a greater certainty than the complex nature of the situation admits. Faced with the peculiar anonymity, we might even say pseudonymity, that cloaks the oriental element, we must be content with the general impression that oriental influences in the broadest sense were at work throughout this period in the domain of Greek thought.

A clearer case is presented by the growing literature on "the wisdom of the barbarians" that made its appearance in Greek letters: in the long run it did not remain a matter of merely antiquarian interest but gradually assumed a propagandist character. The initiative of Greek authors in this field was taken up in the old centers of the East, Babylon and Egypt, by native priests, who turned to composing accounts of their national histories and cultures in the Greek language. The very ancient could always count on a respectful curiosity on the part of the Greek public, but as this was increasingly accompanied by a receptivity toward the spiritual con-

tents themselves, the antiquarians were encouraged imperceptibly to turn into teachers and preachers.

The most important form, however, in which the East contributed at this time to the Hellenistic culture was in the field not of literature but of cult: the religious *syncretism* which was to become the most decisive fact in the later phase begins to take shape in this first period of the Hellenistic era. The meaning of the term "syncretism" may be extended, and usually is, to cover secular phenomena as well; and in this case the whole Hellenistic civilization may be called syncretistic, in that it increasingly became a mixed culture. Strictly speaking, however, syncretism denotes a religious phenomenon which the ancient term "theocrasy," i.e., mixing of gods, expresses more adequately. This is a central phenomenon of the period and one to which we, otherwise familiar with the intermingling of ideas and cultural values, have no exact parallel in our contemporary experience. It was the ever-growing range and depth of just this process that eventually led over from the first to the second, the religious-oriental, period of Hellenism. The theocrasy expressed itself in myth as well as in cult, and one of its most important logical tools was allegory, of which philosophy had already been making use in its relation to religion and myth. Of all the phenomena noted in this survey of the first period of Hellenism, it is in this religious one that the East is most active and most itself. The growing prestige of Eastern gods and cults within the Western world heralded the role which the East was to play in the second period, when the leadership passed into its hands. It was a religious role, whereas the Greek contribution to the Hellenistic whole was that of a secular culture.

In sum, we may state of the first half of Hellenism, which lasts roughly until the time of Christ, that it is in the main characterized by this Greek secular culture. For the East, it is a time of preparation for its re-emergence, comparable to a period of incubation. We can only guess from its subsequent eruption at the profound transformations that must have occurred there at this time under the Hellenistic surface. With the one great exception of the Maccabaean revolt, there is hardly any sign of oriental self-assertion within the Hellenistic orbit in the whole period from Alexander to Caesar. Beyond the borders, the founding of the Parthian kingdom and the

revival of Mazdaism parallel the Jewish case. These events do little to disturb the general picture of Hellas as the assimilating and the East as the assimilated part during this period.

Greek Conceptualization of Eastern Thought. Nevertheless, this period of latency was of profound significance in the life history of the East itself. The Greek monopoly of all forms of intellectual expression had for the oriental spirit simultaneously the aspects of suppression and of liberation: suppression because this monopoly deprived it of its native medium and forced a dissimulation upon the expression of its own contents; liberation because the Greek conceptual form offered to the oriental mind an entirely new possibility of bringing to light the meaning of its own heritage. We have seen that the lifting of generally communicable spiritual principles out of the mass of popular tradition was under way on the eve of Hellenism; but it was with the logical means provided by the Greek spirit that this process came to fruition. For Greece had invented the *logos,* the abstract concept, the method of theoretical exposition, the reasoned system—one of the greatest discoveries in the history of the human mind. This formal instrument, applicable to any content whatsoever, Hellenism made available to the East, whose self-expression could now benefit from it. The effect, delayed in its manifestation, was immeasurable. Oriental thought had been non-conceptual, conveyed in images and symbols, rather disguising its ultimate objects in myths and rites than expounding them logically. In the rigidity of its ancient symbols it lay bound; from this imprisonment it was liberated by the vivifying breath of Greek thought, which gave new momentum and at the same time adequate tools to whatever tendencies of abstraction had been at work before. At bottom, oriental thought remained mythological, as became clear when it presented itself anew to the world; but it had learned in the meantime to bring its ideas into the form of *theories* and to employ rational concepts, instead of sensuous imagery alone, in expounding them. In this way, the definite formulation of the systems of dualism, astrological fatalism, and transcendent monotheism came about with the help of Greek conceptualization. With the status of metaphysical doctrines they gained general currency, and their message could address itself to all. Thus the Greek spirit delivered Eastern thought from the bondage of its own symbolism

and enabled it in the reflection of the *logos* to discover itself. And it was with the arms acquired from the Greek arsenal that the East, when its time came, launched its counteroffensive.

The Eastern "Underground." Inevitably the blessings of a development of this kind are not unmixed, and the dangers inherent in it for the genuine substance of oriental thought are obvious. For one thing, every generalization or rationalization is paid for with the loss of specificity. In particular, the Greek ascendancy naturally tempted oriental thinkers to profit from the prestige of everything Greek by expressing their cause not directly but in the disguise of analogues gleaned from the Greek tradition of thought. Thus, for instance, astrological fatalism and magic could be clothed in the garments of the Stoic cosmology with its doctrines of sympathy and cosmic law, religious dualism in the garment of Platonism. To the mentality of assimilation this was certainly a rise in the world; but the mimicry thus initiated reacted upon the further growth of the Eastern mind and presents peculiar problems of interpretation to the historian. The phenomenon which Oswald Spengler called, with a term borrowed from mineralogy, "pseudomorphosis" will engage our attention as we go on (see below, Ch. 2, *d*).

There was another, perhaps still profounder, effect which Greek ascendancy had upon the inner life of the East, an effect which was to become manifest only much later: the division of the oriental spirit into a surface and a sub-surface stream, a public and a secret tradition. For the force of the Greek exemplar had not only a stimulating but also a repressive effect. Its selective standards acted like a filter: what was capable of Hellenization was passed and gained a place in the light, that is, became part of the articulate upper stratum of the cosmopolitan culture; the remainder, the radically different and unassimilable, was excluded and went underground. This "other" could not feel itself represented by the conventional creations of the literary world, could not in the general message recognize its own. To oppose its message to the dominant one it had to find its own language; and to find it became a process of long toil. In the nature of things it was the most genuine and original tendencies of the spirit of the East, those of the future rather than of the past, that were subjected to this condition of subterranean existence. Thus the spiritual monopoly of Greece caused the growth

of an invisible East whose secret life formed an antagonistic undercurrent beneath the surface of the public Hellenistic civilization. Processes of profound transformation, far-reaching new departures, must have been under way in this period of submergence. We do not know them, of course; and our whole description, conjectural as it is, would be without foundation were it not for the sudden eruption of a new East which we witness at the turn of the era and from whose force and scale we can draw inferences as to its incubation.

The Re-emergence of the East

What we do witness at the period roughly coinciding with the beginnings of Christianity is an explosion of the East. Like long-pent-up waters its forces broke through the Hellenistic crust and flooded the ancient world, flowing into the established Greek forms and filling them with their content, besides creating their own new beds. The metamorphosis of Hellenism into a religious oriental culture was set on foot. The time of the breakthrough was probably determined by the coinciding of two complementary conditions, the maturing of the subterranean growth in the East, which enabled it to emerge into the light of day, and the readiness of the West for a religious renewal, even its deeply felt need of it, which was grounded in the whole spiritual state of that world and disposed it to respond eagerly to the message of the East. This complementary relation of activity and receptivity is not unlike the converse one which obtained three centuries earlier when Greece advanced into the East.

The Novelty of Revived Eastern Thought. Now it is important to recognize that in these events we are dealing, not with a reaction of the *old* East, but with a novel phenomenon which at that crucial hour entered the stage of history. The "Old East" was dead. The new awakening did not mean a classicist resuscitation of its time-honored heritage. Not even the more recent conceptualizations of earlier oriental thought were the real substance of the movement. Traditional dualism, traditional astrological fatalism, traditional monotheism were all drawn into it, yet with such a peculiarly new twist to them that in the present setting they subserved the representation of a novel spiritual principle; and the same is true of the

use of Greek philosophical terms. It is necessary to emphasize this fact from the outset because of the strong suggestion to the contrary created by the outer appearances, which have long misled historians into regarding the fabric of thought they were confronted with, except for its Christian part, as simply made up of the remnants of older traditions. They all do in fact appear in the new stream: symbols of old oriental thought, indeed its whole mythological heritage; ideas and figures from Biblical lore; doctrinal and terminological elements from Greek philosophy, particularly Platonism. It is in the nature of the syncretistic situation that all these different elements were available and could be combined at will. But syncretism itself provides only the outer aspect and not the essence of the phenomenon. The outer aspect is confusing by its compositeness, and even more so by the associations of the old names. However, though these associations are by no means irrelevant, we can discern a new spiritual center around which the elements of tradition now crystallize, the unity behind their multiplicity; and this rather than the syncretistic means of expression is the true entity with which we are confronted. If we acknowledge this center as an autonomous force, then we must say that it makes use of those elements rather than that it is constituted by their confluence; and the whole which thus originated will in spite of its manifestly synthetic character have to be understood not as the product of an uncommitted eclecticism but as an original and determinate system of ideas.

Yet this system has to be elicited as such from the mass of disparate materials, which yield it only under proper questioning, that is, to an interpretation already guided by an anticipatory knowledge of the underlying unity. A certain circularity in the proof thus obtained cannot be denied, nor can the subjective element involved in the intuitive anticipation of the goal toward which the interpretation is to move. Such, however, is the nature and risk of historical interpretation, which has to take its cues from an initial impression of the material and is vindicated only by the result, its intrinsic convincingness or plausibility, and above all by the progressively confirmatory experience of things falling into their place when brought into contact with the hypothetical pattern.

Major Manifestations of the Oriental Wave in the Hellenistic World. We have now to give a brief enumeration of the phenomena in which the oriental wave manifests itself in the Hellenistic world from about the beginning of the Christian era onward. They are in the main as follows: the spread of Hellenistic Judaism, and especially the rise of Alexandrian Jewish philosophy; the spread of Babylonian astrology and of magic, coinciding with a general growth of fatalism in the Western world; the spread of diverse Eastern mystery-cults over the Hellenistic-Roman world, and their evolution into spiritual mystery-religions; the rise of Christianity; the efflorescence of the gnostic movements with their great system-formations inside and outside the Christian framework; and the transcendental philosophies of late antiquity, beginning with Neopythagoreanism and culminating in the Neoplatonic school.

All these phenomena, different as they are, are in a broad sense interrelated. Their teachings have important points in common and even in their divergences share in a common climate of thought: the literature of each can supplement our understanding of the others. More obvious than kinship of spiritual substance is the recurrence of typical patterns of expression, specific images and formulas, throughout the literature of the whole group. In Philo of Alexandria we encounter, besides the Platonic and Stoic elements with which the Jewish core is overlaid, also the language of the mystery-cults and the incipient terminology of a new mysticism. The mystery-religions on their part have strong relations to the astral complex of ideas. Neoplatonism is wide open to all pagan, and especially Eastern, religious lore having a pretense to antiquity and a halo of spirituality. Christianity, even in its "orthodox" utterances, had from the outset (certainly as early as St. Paul) syncretistic aspects, far exceeded however in this respect by its heretical offshoots: the gnostic systems compounded everything—oriental mythologies, astrological doctrines, Iranian theology, elements of Jewish tradition, whether Biblical, rabbinical, or occult, Christian salvation-eschatology, Platonic terms and concepts. Syncretism attained in this period its greatest efficacy. It was no longer confined to specific cults and the concern of their priests but pervaded the whole thought of the age and showed itself in all provinces of literary expression. Thus, none of the phenomena we have enumerated can be considered apart from the rest.

Yet the syncretism, the intermingling of given ideas and

images, i.e., of the coined currencies of the several traditions, is of course a formal fact only which leaves open the question of the mental content whose external appearance it thus determines. Is there a one in the many, and what is it? we ask in the face of such a compound phenomenon. What is the organizing force in the syncretistic matter? We said before by way of preliminary assertion that in spite of its "synthetic" exterior the new spirit was not a directionless eclecticism. What then was the directing principle, and what the direction?

The Underlying Unity: Representativeness of Gnostic Thought. In order to reach an answer to this question, one has to fix one's attention upon certain characteristic mental attitudes which are more or less distinctly exhibited throughout the whole group, irrespective of otherwise greatly differing content and intellectual level. If in these common features we find at work a spiritual principle which was not present in the given elements of the mixture, we may identify this as the true agent of it. Now such a novel principle can in fact be discerned, though in many shadings of determinateness, throughout the literature we mentioned. It appears everywhere in the movements coming from the East, and most conspicuously in that group of spiritual movements which are comprised under the name "gnostic." We can therefore take the latter as the most radical and uncompromising representatives of a new spirit, and may consequently call the *general principle,* which in less unequivocal representations extends beyond the area of gnostic literature proper, by way of analogy the "gnostic principle." Whatever the usefulness of such an extension of the meaning of the name, it is certain that the study of this particular group not only is highly interesting in itself but also can furnish, if not *the* key to the whole epoch, at least a vital contribution toward its understanding. I personally am strongly inclined to regard the whole series of phenomena in which the oriental wave manifests itself as different refractions of, and reactions to, this hypothetical gnostic principle, and I have elsewhere argued my reasons for this view.[3] However far such a view may be granted, it carries in its own meaning the qualification that what can be thus identified as a common denomi-

[3] H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist,* I and II, 1, *passim;* see especially the introduction to vol. I, and Ch. 4 of vol. II, 1.

Chapter 2. *The Meaning of Gnosis and the Extent of the Gnostic Movement*

(*a*) SPIRITUAL CLIMATE OF THE ERA

At the beginning of the Christian era and progressively throughout the two following centuries, the eastern Mediterranean world was in profound spiritual ferment. The genesis of Christianity itself and the response to its message are evidence of this ferment, but they do not stand alone. With regard to the environment in which Christianity originated, the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls have added powerful support to the view, reasonably certain before, that Palestine was seething with eschatological (i.e., salvational) movements and that the emergence of the Christian sect was anything but an isolated incident. In the thought of the manifold *gnostic* sects which soon began to spring up everywhere in the wake of the Christian expansion, the spiritual crisis of the age found its boldest expression and, as it were, its extremist representation. The abstruseness of their speculations, in part intentionally provocative, does not diminish but rather enhances their symbolic representativeness for the thought of an agitated period. Before narrowing down our investigation to the particular phenomenon of Gnosticism, we must briefly indicate the main features that characterize this contemporary thought as a whole.

First, all the phenomena which we noted in connection with the "oriental wave" are of a decidedly *religious* nature; and this, as we have repeatedly stated, is the prominent characteristic of the second phase of Hellenistic culture in general. Second, all these currents have in some way to do with *salvation:* the general religion of the period is a religion of salvation. Third, all of them exhibit an exceedingly *transcendent* (i.e., transmundane) conception of God and in connection with it an equally transcendent and other-worldly idea of the goal of salvation. Finally, they maintain a radical *dualism* of realms of being—God and the world, spirit and matter, soul and body, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death—and

Simon Magus). Modern research has progressively broadened this traditional range by arguing the existence of a *pre-Christian Jewish* and a *Hellenistic pagan* Gnosticism, and by making known the *Mandaean* sources, the most striking example of Eastern Gnosticism outside the Hellenistic orbit, and other new material. Finally, if we take as a criterion not so much the special motif of "knowledge" as the dualistic-anticosmic spirit in general, the religion of *Mani* too must be classified as gnostic.

(*c*) THE ORIGIN OF GNOSTICISM

Asking next the question where or from what historical tradition Gnosticism originated, we are confronted with an old crux of historical speculation: the most conflicting theories have been advanced in the course of time and are still in the field today. The early Church Fathers, and independently of them Plotinus, emphasized the influence upon a Christian thinking not yet firmly consolidated of *Plato* and of misunderstood Hellenic philosophy in general. Modern scholars have advanced in turn Hellenic, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Iranian origins and every possible combination of these with one another and with Jewish and Christian elements. Since in the material of its representation Gnosticism actually is a product of syncretism, each of these theories can be supported from the sources and none of them is satisfactory alone; but neither is the combination of all of them, which would make Gnosticism out to be a mere mosaic of these elements and so miss its autonomous essence. On the whole, however, the oriental thesis has an edge over the Hellenic one, once the meaning of the term "knowledge" is freed from the misleading associations suggested by the tradition of classical philosophy. The recent Coptic discoveries in Upper Egypt (see below, sec. *e*) are said to underline the share of a heterodox occultist Judaism, though judgment must be reserved pending the translation of the vast body of material.[1] Some connection of Gnosticism with the beginnings of the *Cabbala* has in any case to be assumed, whatever the order of cause and effect. The violently anti-Jewish bias of the more prominent gnostic systems is by itself not incompatible with Jewish heretical origin at some distance. Inde-

[1] Nothing so far presented has to my mind proven the Judaistic thesis.

pendently, however, of who the first Gnostics were and what the main religious traditions drawn into the movement and suffering arbitrary reinterpretation at its hands, the movement itself transcended ethnic and denominational boundaries, and its spiritual principle was new. The Jewish strain in Gnosticism is as little the orthodox Jewish as the Babylonian is the orthodox Babylonian, the Iranian the orthodox Iranian, and so on. Regarding the case made out for a preponderance of Hellenic influence, much depends on how the crucial concept of "knowledge" is to be understood in this context.

(*d*) THE NATURE OF GNOSTIC "KNOWLEDGE"

"Knowledge" is by itself a purely formal term and does not specify *what* is to be known; neither does it specify the psychological manner and subjective significance of possessing knowledge or the ways in which it is acquired. As for *what* the knowledge is about, the associations of the term most familiar to the classically trained reader point to *rational* objects, and accordingly to natural reason as the organ for acquiring and possessing knowledge. In the gnostic context, however, "knowledge" has an emphatically religious or supranatural meaning and refers to objects which we nowadays should call those of faith rather than of reason. Now although the relation between faith and *knowledge* (*pistis* and *gnosis*) became a major issue in the Church between the gnostic heretics and the orthodox, this was not the modern issue between faith and *reason* with which we are familiar; for the "knowledge" of the Gnostics with which simple Christian faith was contrasted whether in praise or blame was not of the rational kind. *Gnosis* meant pre-eminently knowledge *of God,* and from what we have said about the radical transcendence of the deity it follows that "knowledge of God" is the knowledge of something naturally unknowable and therefore itself not a natural condition. Its objects include everything that belongs to the divine realm of being, namely, the order and history of the upper worlds, and what is to issue from it, namely, the salvation of man. With objects of this kind, knowledge as a mental act is vastly different from the rational cognition of philosophy. On the one hand it is closely bound up with revelationary experience, so that *reception* of the truth either

through sacred and secret lore or through inner illumination replaces rational argument and theory (though this extra-rational basis may then provide scope for independent speculation); on the other hand, being concerned with the secrets of salvation, "knowledge" is not just theoretical information about certain things but is itself, as a modification of the human condition, charged with performing a function in the bringing about of salvation. Thus gnostic "knowledge" has an eminently practical aspect. The ultimate "object" of gnosis is God: its event in the soul transforms the knower himself by making him a partaker in the divine existence (which means more than assimilating him to the divine essence). Thus in the more radical systems like the Valentinian the "knowledge" is not only an instrument of salvation but itself the very form in which the goal of salvation, i.e., ultimate perfection, is possessed. In these cases knowledge and the attainment of the known by the soul are claimed to coincide—the claim of all true mysticism. It is, to be sure, also the claim of Greek *theoria,* but in a different sense. There, the object of knowledge is the universal, and the cognitive relation is "optical," i.e., an analogue of the visual relation to objective form that remains unaffected by the relation. Gnostic "knowledge" is about the particular (for the transcendent deity is still a particular), and the relation of knowing is mutual, i.e., a being known at the same time, and involving active self-divulgence on the part of the "known." There, the mind is "informed" with the forms it beholds and while it beholds (thinks) them: here, the subject is "transformed" (from "soul" to "spirit") by the union with a reality that in truth is itself the supreme subject in the situation and strictly speaking never an object at all.

These few preliminary remarks are sufficient to delimitate the gnostic type of "knowledge" from the idea of rational theory in terms of which Greek philosophy had developed the concept. Yet the suggestions of the term "knowledge" as such, reinforced by the fact that Gnosticism produced real thinkers who unfolded the contents of the secret "knowledge" in elaborate doctrinal systems and used abstract concepts, often with philosophical antecedents, in their exposition, have favored a strong tendency among theologians and historians to explain Gnosticism by the impact of the Greek ideal of knowledge on the new religious forces which came to the

tolian") branch. Of its Italic branch Epiphanius has preserved an entire literary document, Ptolemaeus' *Letter to Flora.* In the case of such complete, or almost complete, renderings of the subject of the attack (among which may be counted also Hippolytus' reports on the Naassenes and on the book *Baruch*), our distinction between secondary and primary sources of course becomes blurred. It is in the nature of the case that all the originals preserved through this medium, whether whole or in part (the latter is the rule), were Greek. Taken together, these patristic sources give information about a large number of sects, all of them at least nominally Christian, though in some cases the Christian veneer is rather thin. A unique contribution from the pagan camp concerning this group is the treatise of Plotinus, the Neoplatonic philosopher, *Against the Gnostics, or against those who say that the Creator of the World is evil and that the World is bad* (*Enn.* II. 9). It is directed against the teachings of one particular Christian gnostic sect which cannot be definitely identified with any individual one named in the patristic catalogues but clearly falls into one of their major groupings.

2. After the third century the anti-heretical writers had to concern themselves with the refutation of *Manichaeism.* They did not consider this new religion as part of the gnostic heresy, which in its narrower sense had by then been disposed of; but by the broader criteria of the history of religion it belongs to the same circle of ideas. Of the very extensive Christian literature we need name only the *Acta Archelai,* the works of Titus of Bostra (Greek), of St. Augustine (Latin), and of Theodore bar Konai (Syriac). Here too a philosophically trained pagan author, Alexander of Lycopolis (in Egypt), writing one generation after Mani, supplements the Christian chorus.

3. In a qualified way, some of the *mystery-religions* of late antiquity also belong to the gnostic circle, insofar as they allegorized their ritual and their original cult-myths in a spirit similar to the gnostic one: we may mention the mysteries of Isis, Mithras, and Attis. The sources in this case consist of reports by contemporary Greek and Latin, mostly pagan, writers.

4. A certain amount of veiled information is scattered in *rabbinical* literature, though on the whole, unlike the Christian prac-

an abstraction. The leading Gnostics displayed pronounced intellectual individualism, and the mythological imagination of the whole movement was incessantly fertile. Non-conformism was almost a principle of the gnostic mind and was closely connected with the doctrine of the sovereign "spirit" as a source of direct knowledge and illumination. Already Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* I. 18. 1) observed that "Every day every one of them invents something new." The great system builders like Ptolemaeus, Basilides, Mani erected ingenious and elaborate speculative structures which are original creations of individual minds yet at the same time variations and developments of certain main themes shared by all: these together form what we may call the simpler "basic myth." On a less intellectual level, the same basic content is conveyed in fables, exhortations, practical instructions (moral and magical), hymns, and prayers. In order to help the reader to see the unity of the whole field before entering into the detailed treatment, we shall outline this "basic myth" that can be abstracted from the confusing variety of the actual material.

(*f*) ABSTRACT OF MAIN GNOSTIC TENETS

Theology

The cardinal feature of gnostic thought is the radical dualism that governs the relation of God and world, and correspondingly that of man and world. The deity is absolutely transmundane, its nature alien to that of the universe, which it neither created nor governs and to which it is the complete antithesis: to the divine realm of light, self-contained and remote, the cosmos is opposed as the realm of darkness. The world is the work of lowly powers which though they may mediately be descended from Him do not know the true God and obstruct the knowledge of Him in the cosmos over which they rule. The genesis of these lower powers, the Archons (rulers), and in general that of all the orders of being outside God, including the world itself, is a main theme of gnostic speculation, of which we shall give examples later. The transcendent God Himself is hidden from all creatures and is unknowable by natural concepts. Knowledge of Him requires supranatural

revelation and illumination and even then can hardly be expressed otherwise than in negative terms.

Cosmology

The universe, the domain of the Archons, is like a vast prison whose innermost dungeon is the earth, the scene of man's life. Around and above it the cosmic spheres are ranged like concentric enclosing shells. Most frequently there are the seven spheres of the planets surrounded by the eighth, that of the fixed stars. There was, however, a tendency to multiply the structures and make the scheme more and more extensive: Basilides counted no fewer than 365 "heavens." The religious significance of this cosmic architecture lies in the idea that everything which intervenes between here and the beyond serves to separate man from God, not merely by spatial distance but through active demonic force. Thus the vastness and multiplicity of the cosmic system express the degree to which man is removed from God.

The spheres are the seats of the Archons, especially of the "Seven," that is, of the planetary gods borrowed from the Babylonian pantheon. It is significant that these are now often called by Old Testament names for God (Iao, Sabaoth, Adonai, Elohim, El Shaddai), which from being synonyms for the one and supreme God are by this transposition turned into proper names of inferior demonic beings—an example of the pejorative revaluation to which Gnosticism subjected ancient traditions in general and Jewish tradition in particular. The Archons collectively rule over the world, and each individually in his sphere is a warder of the cosmic prison. Their tyrannical world-rule is called *heimarmene,* universal Fate, a concept taken over from astrology but now tinged with the gnostic anti-cosmic spirit. In its physical aspect this rule is the law of nature; in its psychical aspect, which includes for instance the institution and enforcement of the Mosaic Law, it aims at the enslavement of man. As guardian of his sphere, each Archon bars the passage to the souls that seek to ascend after death, in order to prevent their escape from the world and their return to God. The Archons are also the creators of the world, except where this role is reserved for their leader, who then has the name of *demi-*

urge (the world-artificer in Plato's *Timaeus*) and is often painted with the distorted features of the Old Testament God.

Anthropology

Man, the main object of these vast dispositions, is composed of flesh, soul, and spirit. But reduced to ultimate principles, his origin is twofold: mundane and extra-mundane. Not only the body but also the "soul" is a product of the cosmic powers, which shaped the body in the image of the divine Primal (or Archetypal) Man and animated it with their own psychical forces: these are the appetites and passions of natural man, each of which stems from and corresponds to one of the cosmic spheres and all of which together make up the astral soul of man, his "psyche." Through his body and his soul man is a part of the world and subjected to the *heimarmene*. Enclosed in the soul is the spirit, or "pneuma" (called also the "spark"), a portion of the divine substance from beyond which has fallen into the world; and the Archons created man for the express purpose of keeping it captive there. Thus, as in the macrocosm man is enclosed by the seven spheres, so in the human microcosm again the pneuma is enclosed by the seven soul-vestments originating from them. In its unredeemed state the pneuma thus immersed in soul and flesh is unconscious of itself, benumbed, asleep, or intoxicated by the poison of the world: in brief, it is "ignorant." Its awakening and liberation is effected through "knowledge."

Eschatology

The radical nature of the dualism determines that of the doctrine of salvation. As alien as the transcendent God is to "this world" is the pneumatic self in the midst of it. The goal of gnostic striving is the release of the "inner man" from the bonds of the world and his return to his native realm of light. The necessary condition for this is that he *knows* about the transmundane God and about himself, that is, about his divine origin as well as his present situation, and accordingly also about the nature of the world which determines this situation. As a famous Valentinian formula puts it,

> What liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.
> (*Exc. Theod.* 78. 2)

This knowledge, however, is withheld from him by his very situation, since "ignorance" is the essence of mundane existence, just as it was the principle of the world's coming into existence. In particular, the transcendent God is unknown in the world and cannot be discovered from it; therefore revelation is needed. The necessity for it is grounded in the nature of the cosmic situation; and its occurrence alters this situation in its decisive respect, that of "ignorance," and is thus itself already a part of salvation. Its bearer is a messenger from the world of light who penetrates the barriers of the spheres, outwits the Archons, awakens the spirit from its earthly slumber, and imparts to it the saving knowledge "from without." The mission of this transcendent savior begins even before the creation of the world (since the fall of the divine element preceded the creation) and runs parallel to its history. The knowledge thus revealed, even though called simply "the knowledge of God," comprises the whole content of the gnostic myth, with everything it has to teach about God, man, and world; that is, it contains the elements of a theoretical system. On the practical side, however, it is more particularly "knowledge of the way," namely, of the soul's way out of the world, comprising the sacramental and magical preparations for its future ascent and the secret names and formulas that force the passage through each sphere. Equipped with this *gnosis,* the soul after death travels upwards, leaving behind at each sphere the psychical "vestment" contributed by it: thus the spirit stripped of all foreign accretions reaches the God beyond the world and becomes reunited with the divine substance. On the scale of the total divine drama, this process is part of the restoration of the deity's own wholeness, which in pre-cosmic times has become impaired by the loss of portions of the divine substance. It is through these alone that the deity became involved in the destiny of the world, and it is to retrieve them that its messenger intervenes in cosmic history. With the completion of this process

of gathering in (according to some systems), the cosmos, deprived of its elements of light, will come to an end.

Morality

In this life the *pneumatics,* as the possessors of gnosis called themselves, are set apart from the great mass of mankind. The immediate illumination not only makes the individual sovereign in the sphere of knowledge (hence the limitless variety of gnostic doctrines) but also determines the sphere of action. Generally speaking, the pneumatic morality is determined by hostility toward the world and contempt for all mundane ties. From this principle, however, two contrary conclusions could be drawn, and both found their extreme representatives: the ascetic and the libertine. The former deduces from the possession of gnosis the obligation to avoid further contamination by the world and therefore to reduce contact with it to a minimum; the latter derives from the same possession the privilege of absolute freedom. We shall deal later with the complex theory of gnostic libertinism. In this preliminary account a few remarks must suffice. The law of "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not" promulgated by the Creator is just one more form of the "cosmic" tyranny. The sanctions attaching to its transgression can affect only the body and the psyche. As the pneumatic is free from the *heimarmene,* so he is free from the yoke of the moral law. To him all things are permitted, since the pneuma is "saved in its nature" and can be neither sullied by actions nor frightened by the threat of archontic retribution. The pneumatic freedom, however, is a matter of more than mere indifferent permission: through intentional violation of the demiurgical norms the pneumatic thwarts the design of the Archons and paradoxically contributes to the work of salvation. This antinomian libertinism exhibits more forcefully than the ascetic version the *nihilistic* element contained in gnostic acosmism.

Even the reader unfamiliar with the subject will realize from the foregoing abstract that, whatever heights of conceptualization gnostic theory attained to in individual thinkers, there is an indissoluble mythological core to gnostic thought as such. Far remote from the rarefied atmosphere of philosophical reasoning, it moves

to exaggerate the importance of the Mandaeans in the general picture of Gnosticism.

(*a*) THE "ALIEN"

"In the name of the great first alien Life from the worlds of light, the sublime that stands above all works": this is the standard opening of Mandaean compositions, and "alien" is a constant attribute of the "Life" that by its nature is alien to this world and under certain conditions alien within it. The formula quoted speaks of the "first" Life "that stands above all works," where we have to supply *"of creation,"* i.e., above the world. The concept of the alien Life is one of the great impressive word-symbols which we encounter in gnostic speech, and it is new in the history of human speech in general. It has equivalents throughout gnostic literature, for example Marcion's concept of the "alien God" or just "the Alien," "the Other," "the Unknown," "the Nameless," "the Hidden"; or the "unknown Father" in many Christian-gnostic writings. Its philosophic counterpart is the "absolute transcendence" of Neoplatonic thought. But even apart from these theological uses where it is one of the predicates of God or of the highest Being, the word "alien" (and its equivalents) has its own symbolic significance as an expression of an elemental human experience, and this underlies the different uses of the word in the more theoretical contexts. Regarding this underlying experience, the combination "the alien life" is particularly instructive.

The alien is that which stems from elsewhere and does not belong here. To those who do belong here it is thus the strange, the unfamiliar and incomprehensible; but their world on its part is just as incomprehensible to the alien that comes to dwell here, and like a foreign land where it is far from home. Then it suffers the lot of the stranger who is lonely, unprotected, uncomprehended, and uncomprehending in a situation full of danger. Anguish and homesickness are a part of the stranger's lot. The stranger who does not know the ways of the foreign land wanders about lost; if he learns its ways too well, he forgets that he is a stranger and gets lost in a different sense by succumbing to the lure of the alien world and becoming estranged from his own origin. Then he has

particularized and at the same time demonized, did the concept "world" come to admit of plurality. We might also say that "world" denotes a collective rather than a unity, a demonic family rather than a unique individual. The plurality denotes also the labyrinthine aspect of the world: in the worlds the soul loses its way and wanders about, and wherever it seeks an escape it only passes from one world into another that is no less world. This multiplication of demonic systems to which unredeemed life is banished is a theme of many gnostic teachings. To the "worlds" of the Mandaeans correspond the "aeons" of Hellenistic Gnosticism. Usually there are seven or twelve (corresponding to the number of the planets or the signs of the zodiac), but in some systems the plurality proliferates to dizzying and terrifying dimensions, up to 365 "heavens" or the innumerable "spaces," "mysteries" (here used topologically), and "aeons" of the *Pistis Sophia*. Through all of them, representing so many degrees of separation from the light, "Life" must pass in order to get out.

> You see, O child, through how many bodies [elements?], how many ranks of demons, how many concatenations and revolutions of stars, we have to work our way in order to hasten to the one and only God.
> (*C.H.* IV. 8)

It is to be understood even where it is not expressly stated that the role of these intervening forces is inimical and obstructive: with the spatial extent they symbolize at the same time the anti-divine and imprisoning power of this world. "The way that we have to go is long and endless" (G 433);[1] "How wide are the boundaries of these worlds of darkness!" (G 155);

> Having once strayed into the labyrinth of evils,
> The wretched [Soul] finds no way out . . .
> She seeks to escape from the bitter chaos,
> And knows not how she shall get through.
> (Naassene Psalm, Hippol. V. 10. 2)

Apart from all personification, the whole of space in which life finds itself has a malevolently spiritual character, and the "demons"

[1] Mandaean quotations are based on the German translation by M. Lidzbarski, "G" standing for *Ginza: Der Schatz oder das Grosse Buch der Mandäer*, Göttingen, 1925, "J" for *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, Giessen, 1915. Numbers after the letter indicate pages of these publications.

themselves are as much spatial realms as they are persons. To overcome them is the same thing as to pass through them, and in breaking through their boundaries this passage at the same time breaks their power and achieves the liberation from the magic of their sphere. Thus even in its role as redeemer the Life in Mandaean writings says of itself that it "wandered through the worlds": or as Jesus is made to say in the Naassene Psalm, "All the worlds shall I journey through, all the mysteries unlock."

This is the spatial aspect of the conception. No less demonized is the time dimension of life's cosmic existence, which also is represented as an order of quasi-personal powers (e.g., the "Aeons"). Its quality, like that of the world's space, reflects the basic experience of alienness and exile. Here too we meet the plurality we observed there: whole series of ages stretch between the soul and its goal, and their mere number expresses the hold which the cosmos as a principle has over its captives. Here again, escape is achieved only by passing through them all. Thus the way of salvation leads through the temporal order of the "generations": through chains of unnumbered generations the transcendent Life enters the world, sojourns in it, and endures its seemingly endless duration, and only through this long and laborious way, with memory lost and regained, can it fulfill its destiny. This explains the impressive formula "worlds and generations" which constantly occurs in Mandaean writings: "I wandered through worlds and generations," says the redeemer. To the unredeemed soul (which may be that of the redeemer himself), this time perspective is a source of anguish. The terror of the vastness of cosmic spaces is matched by the terror of the times that have to be endured: "How long have I endured already and been dwelling in the world!" (G 458).

This twofold aspect of the cosmic terror, the spatial and the temporal, is well exhibited in the complex meaning of the gnostically adapted Hellenistic concept of "Aeon." Originally a time-concept purely (duration of life, length of cosmic time, hence eternity), it underwent personification in pre-gnostic Hellenistic religion—possibly an adaptation of the Persian god Zervan—and became an object of worship, even then with some fearsome associations. In Gnosticism it takes a further mythological turn and becomes a class-name for whole categories of either divine, semi-

mos) = darkness" is in fact independent of and more basic than the particular theory of origins just exemplified, and as an expression of the given condition admits of widely divergent types of derivation, as we shall see later. The equation as such is symbolically valid for Gnosticism in general. In the Hermetic Corpus we find the exhortation, "Turn ye away from the dark light" (*C.H.* I. 28), where the paradoxical combination drives home the point that even the light so called in this world is in truth darkness. "For the cosmos is the fulness of evil, God the fulness of good" (*C.H.* VI. 4); and as "darkness" and "evil," so is "death" a symbol of the world as such. "He who is born of the mother is brought forth into death and the cosmos: he who is reborn of Christ is transported into life and the Eight [i.e., removed from the power of the Seven]" (*Exc. Theod.* 80. 1). Thus we understand the Hermetic statement quoted in Macrobius (*In somn. Scip.* I. 11) that the soul "through as many deaths as she passes spheres descends to what on earth is called life."

(*f*) "MIXTURE," "DISPERSAL," THE "ONE," AND THE "MANY"

To return once more to the Iranian conception, the idea of two original and opposite entities leads to the metaphor of "mixture" for the origin and composition of this world. The mixture is, however, an uneven one, and the term essentially denotes the tragedy of the portions of the Light separated from its main body and immersed in the foreign element.

> I am I, the son of the mild ones [i.e., the beings of Light]. Mingled am I, and lamentation I see. Lead me out of the embracement of death.
> (Turfan fragment M 7)

They brought living water[9] and poured it into the turbid water;[9] they brought shining light and cast it into the dense darkness. They

of darkness [etc.]" (J 55). Logically speaking, this is inconsistent; but symbolically it is more genuinely gnostic than Mani's abstraction, since the principle of "darkness" is here from the outset *defined* as that of the "world" from whose gnostic experience it had first been conceived. "World" is determined by darkness, and "darkness" solely by world.

[9] See Glossary at end of chapter.

the "restoring of Unity" and the "engulfing of Matter" mean no less than the actual dissolution of the whole lower world, i.e., sensible nature as such—not by an act of external force but solely by an inner event of mind: "knowledge" on a transcendental scale. We shall see later (Ch. 8) by what speculative principle the Valentinians established this objective and ontological efficacy of what at first sight seems to be a merely private and subjective act; and how their doctrine justified the equating of individual unification with the reuniting of the universe with God.

Both the universal (metaphysical) and the individual (mystical) aspects of the idea of unity and its opposites became abiding themes of succeeding speculation as it moved even farther away from mythology. Origen, whose proximity to gnostic thought is obvious in his system (duly anathematized by the Church), viewed the whole movement of reality in the categories of the loss and recovery of metaphysical Unity.[18] But it was Plotinus who in his speculation drew the full mystical conclusions from the metaphysics of "Unity versus Plurality." Dispersal and gathering, ontological categories of total reality, are at the same time action-patterns of each soul's potential experience, and unification within *is* union with the One. Thus emerges the Neoplatonic scheme of the inner ascent from the Many to the One that is ethical on the first rungs of the ladder, then theoretical, and at the culminating stage mystical.

> Endeavor to ascend into thyself, gathering in from the body all thy members which have been dispersed and scattered into multiplicity from that unity which once abounded in the greatness of its power. Bring together and unify the inborn ideas and try to articulate those that are confused and to draw into light those that are obscured.
>
> (Porphyr. *Ad Marcell.* x)

It was probably through the writings of Porphyry that this Neoplatonic conception of unification as a principle of personal life came to Augustine, in whose intensely subjective manner the emphasis at last shifts from the metaphysical aspect entirely to the moral one.

[18] See Jonas, *Gnosis,* II, 1, pp. 175-223.

Since through the iniquity of godlessness we have seceded and dissented and fallen away from the one true and highest God and dissipated ourselves into the many, split up by the many and cleaving to the many: it was necessary that . . . the many should have joined in clamor for the coming of One (Christ) . . . and that we, disencumbered from the many, should come to One . . . and, justified in the justice of One, be made One.

(*Trin.* IV. 11)

By continence we are collected into the One from which we have declined to the many.

(*Confess.* X. 14; cf. *Ord.* I. 3)

The "dispersal" has finally received what we should nowadays call an existentialist meaning: that of the soul's "distraction" by the manifold concerns and lures of the world acting through the senses of the body; that is, it has been turned into a psychological and ethical concept within the scheme of individual salvation.

(*g*) "FALL," "SINKING," "CAPTURE"

For the manner in which life has got into its present plight there are a number of expressions, most of them describing the process as a passive one, some giving it a more active turn. "The tribe of souls[14] was transported here from the house of Life" (G 24); "the treasure of Life which was fetched from there" (G 96), or "which was brought here." More drastic is the image of falling: the soul or spirit, a part of the first Life or of the Light, fell into the world or into the body. This is one of the fundamental symbols of Gnosticism: a pre-cosmic fall of part of the divine principle underlies the genesis of the world and of human existence in the majority of gnostic systems. "The Light fell into the darkness" signifies an early phase of the same divine drama of which "the Light shone in the darkness" can be said to signify a later phase. How this fall originated and by what stages it proceeded is the subject of greatly divergent speculations. Except in Manichaeism and related Iranian types, where the whole process is initiated by the powers of darkness, there is a voluntary element in

[14] See Glossary at end of chapter.

the downward movement of the divine: a guilty "inclination" of the Soul (as a mythical entity) toward the lower realms, with various motivations such as curiosity, vanity, sensual desire, is the gnostic equivalent of original sin. The fall is a pre-cosmic one, and one of its consequences is the world itself, another the condition and fate of the individual souls in the world.

The Soul once turned toward matter, she became enamored of it, and burning with the desire to experience the pleasures of the body, she no longer wanted to disengage herself from it. Thus the world was born. From that moment the Soul forgot herself. She forgot her original habitation, her true center, her eternal being.[15]

Once separated from the divine realm and engulfed by the alien medium, the movement of the Soul continues in the downward direction in which it started and is described as "sinking": "How long shall I sink within all the worlds?" (J 196). Frequently, however, an element of violence is added to this description of the fall, as in the metaphors relating to captivity, of which we shall see more when we study the Manichaean system. Here some Mandaean examples will suffice. "Who has carried me into captivity away from my place and my abode, from the household of my parents who brought me up?" (G 323). "Why did ye carry me away from my abode into captivity and cast me into the stinking body?" (G 388).[16]

The term "cast" or "thrown" occurring in the last quotation requires some comment. Its use, as we have seen before, is not confined to the metaphor of captivity: it is an image in its own right and of very wide application—life has been cast (thrown) into the world and into the body. We have met the expression associated with the symbolism of the "mixture," where it is used for the origin of the cosmos as well as for that of man: "Ptahil[17] threw the form which the Second [Life] had formed into the world of darkness. He made creations and formed tribes outside the Life" (G 242). This passage refers to the cosmogonic activity of the demiurge: in the anthropogony the image is repeated, and it is there that it has

[15] El Châtibî on the Harranites: for continuation, see Ch. 7 (*b*) "The Union of Man with Nature."

[16] Prison, ball and chain, bond, and knot are frequent symbols for the body.

[17] See Glossary at end of chapter.

its main significance. "Ptahil took a hidden Mana which was given to him from the house of Life, brought it hither and threw it into Adam and Eve" (*ibid.*). This is the constantly recurring expression for the ensouling of man by his unauthorized creator. That this is not an event planned in the scheme of Life but a violence done to it and to the divine order is evident from the remorse which the demiurge feels afterwards. "Who has stultified me, so that I was a fool and cast the soul into the body?" (G 393).[18] Even in the Valentinian formula quoted before (see p. 45), though it belongs to a branch of Gnosticism inclined to categories more of internal motivation than of external force to expound the prehistory of the Soul, we encountered the expression "whereinto we have been thrown." The jarring note which this concrete term introduces into the series of abstract and neutral verbs preceding it in the formula (forms of "to be" and "to become") is certainly intended. The impact of the image has itself a symbolic value in the gnostic account of human existence. It would be of great interest to compare its use in Gnosticism with its use in a very recent philosophical analysis of existence, that of Martin Heidegger.[19] All we wish to say here is that in both cases "to have been thrown" is not merely a description of the past but an attribute qualifying the given existential situation as determined by that past. It is from the gnostic experience of the present situation of life that this dramatic image of its genesis has been projected into the past, and it is part of the mythological expression of this experience. "Who has cast me into the affliction of the worlds, who transported me into the evil darkness?" (G 457) asks the Life; and it implores, "Save us out of the darkness of this world into which we are thrown" (G 254). To the question the Great Life replies, "It is not according to the will of the Great Life that thou hast come there" (G 329): "That house in which thou dwellest, not Life has built it" (G 379): "This world was not created according to the wish of the Life" (G 247). We

[18] The remorse of the creator is also encountered in Christian Gnosticism. In the *Book of Baruch* we even see him pleading—unsuccessfully—with the supreme God, "Lord, let me destroy the world which I made, for my spirit [*pneuma*] is fettered into the human beings and I will deliver it thence" (Hippol. V. 26. 17).

[19] For *Geworfenheit* see his *Sein u. Zeit*, Halle, 1927, pp. 175 ff. A parallel between gnostic and existentialist views has been worked out in my article "Gnosticism and modern nihilism" in *Social Research*, XIX 4 (1952), pp. 430 ff.

abridged. For the reader unfamiliar with Mandaean mythology we may just explain that Ruha is the demonic mother of the Planets and as the evil spirit of this world the main adversary of the sons of light.[25]

Ruha and the Planets began to forge plans and said, "We will entrap Adam and catch him and detain him with us in the Tibil. When he eats and drinks, we will entrap the world. We will practise embracing in the world and found a community in the world. We will entrap him with horns and flutes, so that he may not break away from us. . . . We will seduce the tribe of life and cut it off with us in the world . . . [G 113 f.]. Arise, let us make a celebration: arise, let us make a drinking-feast. Let us practise the mysteries of love and seduce the whole world! . . . The call of Life we will silence, we will cast strife into the house, which shall not be settled in all eternity. We will kill the Stranger. We will make Adam our adherent and see who then will be his deliverer. . . . We will confound his party, the party that the Stranger has founded, so that he may have no share in the world. The whole house shall be ours alone. . . . What has the Stranger done in the house, that he could found himself a party therein?" They took the living water and poured turbid [water] into it. They took the head of the tribe and practised on him the mystery of love and of lust, through which all the worlds are inflamed. They practised on him seduction, by which all the worlds are seduced. They practised on him the mystery of drunkenness, by which all the worlds are made drunken. . . . The worlds are made drunk by it and turn their faces to the Suf-Sea.[26] (G 120 ff.)

We have only a few remarks to add to this powerful scene. The main weapon of the world in its great seduction is "love." Here we encounter a widespread motif of gnostic thought: the mistrust of sexual love and sensual pleasure in general. It is seen as the eminent form of man's ensnarement by the world: "The

[25] Ruha, literally "spirit." The perversion of this term to denote the highest personification of evil is an interesting episode in the history of religion, all the more paradoxical in view of the fact that the full title of this anti-divine figure is Ruha d'Qudsha, i.e., "the Holy Spirit." But this very paradox indicates the cause: the violent hostility to Christian doctrine, whose Founder according to Mandaean tradition had stolen and falsified the message of his master, John the Baptist. But an ambivalence in the figure of the "Holy Spirit," understood as female, is noticeable also in Christian Gnosticism, as will be seen when we deal with the Sophia speculation.

[26] See Glossary at end of chapter.

Accordingly, the first effect of the call is always described as "awaking," as in the gnostic versions of the story of Adam (see next section). Often the merely formal exhortation, "Wake from your slumber" (or "from drunkenness," or, less frequently, "from death"), with metaphorical elaboration and in different phrasings, constitutes the sole content of the gnostic call to salvation. However, this formal imperative implicitly includes the whole speculative framework within which the ideas of sleep, drunkenness, and waking assume their specific meanings; and as a rule the call makes this framework explicit as part of its own content, that is, it connects the command to awake with the following doctrinal elements: the *reminder* of the heavenly origin and the transcendent history of man; the *promise* of redemption, to which also belongs the redeemer's account of his own mission and descent to this world; and finally the practical *instruction* as to how to live henceforth in the world, in conformity with the newly won "knowledge" and in preparation for the eventual ascent. Now, these three elements contain in a nutshell the complete gnostic myth, so that the gnostic call of awakening is a kind of abbreviation of gnostic doctrine in general. The gnosis transmitted by the message and compressed in it into a few symbolic terms is the total cosmogonic-soteriological myth within whose narrative the event of this message itself constitutes one phase, in fact the turning point with which the total movement is reversed. This compendious "knowledge" of the theoretical whole has its practical complement in the knowledge of the right "way" to liberation from the captivity of the world. In the numerous literary versions of the call, one or the other of these aspects may preponderate or be expressed exclusively: the reminder of origin, the promise of salvation, the moral instruction.

We shall quote some of these calls of awakening from gnostic literature, beginning with Manichaean examples. The first of such calls in the rigidly constructed Manichaean world-drama occurs before the beginning of our world and is addressed to the Primal Man, who is lying unconscious in the depths after being defeated and swallowed up in the first pre-cosmic contest of light and darkness. The following scene is from the Syriac account of Theodore bar Konai.

Then the Living Spirit called with a loud voice; and the voice of the Living Spirit became like to a sharp sword and laid bare the form of the Primal Man. And he spoke to him:

> Peace be unto thee, good one amidst the wicked,
> luminous one amidst the darkness,
> God who dwells amidst the beasts of wrath
> who do not know his[80] honor.

Thereupon Primal Man answered him and spoke:

> Come for the peace of him who is dead,
> come, oh treasure of serenity and peace!

and he spoke further to him:

> How is it with our Fathers,
> the Sons of Light in their city?

And the Call said unto him: It is well with them. And Call and Answer joined each other and ascended to the Mother of Life and to the Living Spirit. The Living Spirit put on the Call and the Mother of Life put on the Answer, her beloved son.[81]

Here the call apparently has the form of a simple salutation. As such, however, it includes the *reminder* of the divine origin of the one saluted, that is, the reawakening of the knowledge of himself, lost through the poison of the darkness, and at the same time the *promise* of his salvation: the address "Good one amidst the wicked," etc., represents the reminder, the salutation "Peace be unto thee" the promise. The touching inquiry of the Primal Man about the sons of light in their city must be understood in connection with

[80] Text: their.

[81] To explain the last sentence: the Mother of Life had created the Primal Man, whom the "Answer" now represents as the expression of his awakened true Self. The Living Spirit for his part had sent out the "Call" like a messenger. Both are now put on like garments by those from whom they originated, i.e., they are reunited with their source. As mentioned before, the personification of "Call" and "Answer" is a feature of Manichaean speculation (Jackson renders "Appellant" and "Respondent"). Thus, just as in the passage quoted from Theodore bar Konai, the hymn fragment in M 33 from Turfan relates how the primal Father abandons the "Spirit" (here equivalent to the Primal Man) to the enemies, the Mother of Life intercedes with him for their captive Son, the god Chroshtag ("Call") is sent to him, the freed god as "Answer" ascends, and the Mother welcomes the Son home. (Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*, p. 8.)

Sometimes the call of awakening is immediately connected with the summons to leave the world: it is at the same time the message of death, and is then followed by the ascent of the soul, as in the following example.

The savior approached, stood at Adam's pillow, and awakened him from his sleep. "Arise, arise, Adam, put off thy stinking body, thy garment of clay, the fetter, the bond . . . for thy time is come, thy measure is full, to depart from this world. . . ."

(G 430)

Sometimes the whole content of the call is concentrated in the one admonition to be watchful of oneself:

I sent a call out into the world: Let every man be watchful of himself. Whosoever is watchful of himself shall be saved from the devouring fire.

(G 58)

The typical formula of awakening has passed also into the New Testament, where it occurs in Eph. 5:14 as an anonymous quotation:

Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.

In conclusion we quote from the *Poimandres* the Hellenistic rendering of the call of awakening, which has become detached from the myth and is used as a stylistic device of religious-ethical exhortation.

tribes. Tell them . . . ," and now follows a collection of the most various exhortations, warnings, and commandments, held together by their anti-cosmic attitude: here are a few examples: "[95] Love ye not gold and silver and the possessions of this world. For this world perishes and passes away. . . . [103] With truthfulness and faith and pure speech of the mouth ransom ye the soul from darkness to light, from error to truth, from unbelief to belief in your Lord. He who ransoms a soul is worth to me generations and worlds. [134] When someone passes from the body, weep not nor raise lamentation over him. . . . [135] Go, ye poor, miserable and persecuted, weep for yourselves; for so long as ye are in the world, your sins increase upon you. [155] Mine elect, put no trust in the world in which ye live, for it is not yours. Put your trust in the fair works that ye perform. [163] Exalt not the Seven and the Twelve, the rulers of the world . . . for they lead astray the tribe of souls that was transported hither from the house of life." The collection concludes with the words, "This is the first teaching which Adam the head of the living tribe received." (The bracketed numbers indicate paragraphs in Lidzbarski's edition.)

devour, consumed by them that consume, eaten by the dogs, mingled and bound in all that is, imprisoned in the stench of darkness. He raised him up and made him eat of the tree of life. Then Adam cried and lamented: terribly he raised his voice like a roaring lion, tore [his dress], smote his breast, and spoke: "Woe, woe unto the shaper of my body, unto those who fettered my soul, and unto the rebels that enslaved me!"

A similar though more muted tone of lamentation met us in the preceding section as first response to the call (in the Turfan fragment M 7 and in the Mandaean passage J 57).

More primitively human is Adam's reaction in the Mandaean text G 430 f., whose beginning we quoted on p. 85. There, as we saw, the call of awakening coincides with the message of death, and the continuation shows the earthbound soul terrified at the prospect of having to depart and clinging desperately to the things of this world:

When Adam heard this, he lamented his fate and wept. [He argues his indispensability in the world:] "Father! If I come with thee, who will be guardian in this wide Tibil? . . . Who will harness the oxen to the plow, and who will guide the seed into the soil? . . . Who will clothe the naked, . . . who settle the strife in the village?" [The messenger of Life:] "Have no regret, Adam, for this place in which thou dwelledst, for this place is desolate. . . . The works shall be wholly abandoned and shall not come together again. . . ." [Then Adam begs that his wife Eve, his sons and his daughters may accompany him on the way. The messenger informs him that in the house of Life there is no body nor kinship. Then he instructs him about the way:] "The way that we have to go is long and endless. . . . Overseers are installed there, and watchmen and toll-collectors sit beside it. . . . The scales stand prepared, and of thousands they choose one soul that is good and enlightened." Thereupon Adam departed from his body [he turns back once more and regrets his body], then he began his journey through the ether. [Even here the dialogue continues; again Adam laments his body, once more he asks for Eve—although he has known that he "would have to depart alone, to settle his strife alone." Finally he is told:] "Calm thyself and be silent, Adam, and the peace of the good enfold thee. Thou goest and risest up to thy place, and thy wife Eve shall rise up after thee. Then all the generations shall come to an end and all creatures perish."

If a person has the Gnose, he is a being from on high. If he is called, he hears, replies, and turns towards Him who calls him, in order to reascend to Him. And he knows what he is called. Having the Gnose, he performs the will of Him who called him. He desires to do that which pleases Him, and he receives repose. [Each?] one's name comes to him. He who thus possesses the Gnose, knows whence he is come and where he is going.[87]

(Gosp. of Truth, p. 22. 3-15)

Joy to the man who has rediscovered himself and awakened!

(*ibid.*, p. 30. 13 f.)

We often meet in this context the sequence of "hearing" and "believing" so familiar from the New Testament:

Adam heard and *believed*. . . . Adam received *Truth*. . . . Adam gazed upwards full of *hope* and ascended. . . .

(J 57)

Here we have the triad faith, knowledge, and hope as response to the hearing of the call. Elsewhere love is mentioned in the same context: "Adam felt *love* for the Alien Man whose speech is alien and estranged from the world" (G 244). "For each one loves Truth, since Truth is the Mouth of the Father; His Tongue is the Holy Ghost . . ." (Gosp. of Truth, p. 26. 33-36). The Christian reader is of course familiar with St. Paul's triad of faith, hope, and charity (I Cor. 13:13), which, not without reason and perhaps with intent, omits knowledge and extols love as the greatest of them all.

Mandaean poetry gives wonderful expression to the gratefully believing acceptance of the message and the ensuing conversion of the heart and renewal of life. Some examples may conclude this account.

From the day when we beheld thee,
from the day when we heard thy word,
our hearts were filled with peace.
We believed in thee, Good One,
we beheld thy light and shall not forget thee.
All our days we shall not forget thee,
not one hour let thee from our hearts.

[87] Cf. the fuller version of this Valentian formula in *Exc. Theod.* 78. 2; see above p. 45.

For our hearts shall not grow blind,
these souls shall not be held back.

(G 60)

From the place of light have I gone forth,
from thee, bright habitation . . .
An Uthra from the house of Life accompanied me.
The Uthra who accompanied me from the house of the Great Life
held a staff of living water in his hand.
The staff which he held in his hand
was full of leaves of excellent kind.
He offered me of its leaves,
and prayers and rituals sprang complete from it.
Again he offered me of them,
and my sick heart found healing
and my alien soul found relief.
A third time he offered me of them,
and he turned upwards the eyes in my head
so that I beheld my Father and knew him.
I beheld my Father and knew him,
and I addressed three requests to him.
I asked him for mildness in which there is no rebellion.
I asked him for a strong heart
to bear both great and small.
I asked him for smooth paths
to ascend and behold the place of light.

(G 377 f.)

From the day when I came to love the Life,
from the day when my heart came to love the Truth,
I no longer have trust in anything in the world.
In father and mother
I have no trust in the world.
In brothers and sisters
I have no trust in the world . . .
In what is made and created
I have no trust in the world.
In the whole world and its works
I have no trust in the world.
After my soul alone I go searching about,
which to me is worth generations and worlds.
I went and found my soul—

what are to me all the worlds? . . .
I went and found Truth
as she stands at the outer rim of the worlds . . .

(G 390 f.)

(*o*) GNOSTIC ALLEGORY

This account of gnostic imagery and symbolic language would be incomplete without some remarks on the peculiar use of allegory in gnostic writings. Allegory, probably an invention of the philosophers, was widely used in Greek literature as a means of making the tales and figures of mythical lore conform to enlightened thought. By taking the concrete entities and episodes of classical myth as symbolic expressions of abstract ideas, such time-honored elements of tradition and popular belief could be so conceptualized that a general consensus of truth seemed to unite the most advanced intellectual insight with the wisdom of the past. Thus Zeus became equated with the cosmic "reason" of the Stoics, and other Olympic gods with particular manifestations of the universal principle. Arbitrary as the method was, it could claim to elicit the true meaning of the ancient lore and in the conceptual translation to present it stripped of the symbolic cloak. At the same time it bestowed upon contemporary ideas the prestige of venerable antiquity. Thus the tendency was a harmonizing one, and with all boldness of interpretation in the individual cases conservative, essentially respectful of tradition: one homogeneous heritage of knowledge about the highest things was seen to comprehend oldest and newest and to teach the same things under different forms. In consequence, the myth, however freely handled, was never contradicted nor were its own valuations controverted. In the first century A.D., that is, at the time when the gnostic movement was gathering momentum, Philo of Alexandria put allegory, hitherto chiefly an instrument for adapting myth to philosophy, into the service of religion itself in his effort to establish a congruency between his Jewish creed and his Platonizing philosophy. The system of scriptural allegory evolved in his school was bequeathed as a model to the early Fathers of the Church. Here again the purpose is that of integration and synthesis.

Gnostic allegory, though often of this conventional type, is in

its most telling instances of a very different nature. Instead of taking over the value-system of the traditional myth, it proves the deeper "knowledge" by reversing the roles of good and evil, sublime and base, blest and accursed, found in the original. It tries, not to demonstrate agreement, but to shock by blatantly subverting the meaning of the most firmly established, and preferably also the most revered, elements of tradition. The rebellious tone of this type of allegory cannot be missed, and it therefore is one of the expressions of the revolutionary position which Gnosticism occupies in late classical culture. Of the three examples we shall discuss, two concern subjects from the Old Testament, which supplied the favorite material for gnostic perversions of meaning, and the third uses a motif from Greek mythology.

Eve and the Serpent

We have met before (secs. *i, n*) with the gnostic interpretation of Adam's sleep in Eden, which implies a very unorthodox conception of the author of this sleep and of the garden in which it takes place. The recently published Apocryphon of John spells out this comprehensive revision of the Genesis tale in what purports to be a revelation of the Lord to John the disciple. About the garden:

> The first Archon (Ialdabaoth) brought Adam (created by the Archons) and placed him in paradise which he said to be a "delight" [38] for him: that is, he intended to deceive him. For their (the Archons') delight is bitter and their beauty is lawless. Their delight is deceit and their tree was hostility. Their fruit is poison against which there is no cure, and their promise is death to him. Yet their tree was planted as "tree of life": I shall disclose to you the mystery of their "life"—it is their Counterfeit Spirit,[39] which originated from them so as to turn him away,[40] so that he might not know his perfection.
>
> (55. 18-56. 17, Till)

About the sleep:

> Not as Moses said "He made him sleep," but he enshrouded his perception with a veil and made him heavy with unperceptiveness—as he said himself through the prophet (Is. 6:10): "I will make heavy

[38] Translation of *Eden*.
[39] A perverting imitation of the genuine, divine Spirit.
[40] From the Light.

> the ears of their hearts, that they may not understand and may not see."
>
> (58. 16-59. 5)

Now in the same oppositional vein is the gnostic view of the *serpent* and its role in inducing Eve to eat of the tree. For more than one reason, not the least of which was the mention of "knowledge," the biblical tale exerted a strong attraction upon the Gnostics. Since it is the serpent that persuades Adam and Eve to taste of the fruit of knowledge and thereby to disobey their Creator, it came in a whole group of systems to represent the "pneumatic" principle from beyond counteracting the designs of the Demiurge, and thus could become as much a symbol of the powers of redemption as the biblical God had been degraded to a symbol of cosmic oppression. Indeed, more than one gnostic sect derived its name from the cult of the *serpent* ("Ophites" from the Gk. *ophis;* "Naassenes" from the Heb. *nahas*—the group as a whole being termed "ophitic"); and this position of the serpent is based on a bold allegorizing of the biblical text. This is the version found in the ophitic summary of Irenaeus (I. 30. 7): the transmundane Mother, Sophia-Prunikos, trying to counteract the demiurgic activity of her apostatical son Ialdabaoth, sends the serpent to "seduce Adam and Eve into breaking Ialdabaoth's command." The plan succeeds, both eat of the tree "of which God [i.e., the Demiurge] had forbidden them to eat. But when they had eaten, they knew the power from beyond and turned away from their creators." It is the first success of the transcendent principle against the principle of the world, which is vitally interested in preventing knowledge in man as the inner-worldly hostage of Light: the serpent's action marks the beginning of all *gnosis* on earth which thus by its very origin is stamped as opposed to the world and its God, and indeed as a form of rebellion.

The Peratae, sweepingly consistent, did not even shrink from regarding the historical *Jesus* as a particular incarnation of the "general serpent," i.e., the serpent from Paradise understood as a principle (see below). In the barbelo-gnostic (non-ophitic) Apocryphon of John this identification, made almost inevitable in the course of its argument, is only narrowly evaded by playing on the difference between the "tree of life" and the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil": of the latter Christ indeed causes man to eat

against the Archon's commandment, while the serpent, acting for the other tree and identified with Ialdabaoth, is left in its traditional role of corrupter (this, none too convincingly, in reply to the disciple's startled question, "Christ, was it not the serpent who taught her?"). Thus, with the merging of the figures just avoided, part of the serpent's function has passed over to Christ. The Valentinians, on the other hand, though not involving Jesus in the Paradise action itself, drew an allegorical parallel between him and the *fruit* from the tree: by being affixed to a "wood," [41] he "became a Fruit of the Knowledge of the Father, which did *not,* however, bring perdition upon those who ate it" (Gosp. of Truth, 18. 25 f.). Whether the denial simply contrasts the new to the old event (after the manner of St. Paul) or is meant to rectify the Genesis account itself must in this instance be left undecided. But the latter is clearly the case elsewhere and very much the gnostic fashion (cf. the repeated, blunt "not as Moses said" in the Apocryphon of John).

By Mani's time (third century) the gnostic interpretation of the Paradise story and Jesus' connection with it had become so firmly established that he could simply put Jesus in the place of the serpent with no mention of the latter: "He raised [Adam] up and made him eat of the tree of life" (see above, sec. *n*). What was once a conscious boldness of allegory had become itself an independent myth that could be used without a reference to (and perhaps even a memory of) the original model. The revolutionary genesis of the motif is probably forgotten at this stage. This goes to show that, unlike the allegory of the Stoics or of syncretistic literature in general, gnostic allegory is itself the source of a new mythology: it is the revolutionary vehicle of its emergence in the face of an entrenched tradition, and since it aims at subverting the latter, the principle of this allegory must be paradox and not congruency.

Cain and the Creator

Also to the ophitic circle belongs the next example, taken from Hippolytus' account of the Peratae (*Refut.* V. 16. 9 f.):

> This general Serpent is also the wise Word of Eve. This is the mystery of Eden: this is the river that flows out of Eden. This is also

[41] ξύλον as a translation of Heb. *ēts* = "tree," and its matter, "wood": so that the phrase could also mean "hung on a tree"; cf. Acts 10:40; Deut. 21:22.

> the mark that was set on Cain, whose sacrifice the god of this world did not accept whereas he accepted the bloody sacrifice of Abel: for the lord of this world delights in blood. This Serpent is he who appeared in the latter days in human form at the time of Herod. . . .

The elevation of Cain, prototype of the outcast, condemned by God to be "a fugitive and a vagabond" on earth, to a pneumatic symbol and an honored position in the line leading to Christ is of course an intentional challenge to ingrained valuations. This opting for the "other" side, for the traditionally infamous, is a heretical method, and much more serious than a merely sentimental siding with the underdog, let alone mere indulgence in speculative freedom. It is obvious that allegory, normally so respectable a means of harmonizing, is here made to carry the bravado of non-conformity. Perhaps we should speak in such cases, not of allegory at all, but of a form of polemics, that is, not of an exegesis of the original text, but of its tendentious rewriting. Indeed, the Gnostics in such cases hardly *claimed* to bring out the correct meaning of the original, if by "correct" is meant the meaning *intended* by its author—seeing that this author, directly or indirectly, was their great adversary, the benighted creator-god. Their unspoken claim was rather that the blind author had unwittingly embodied something of the truth in his partisan version of things, and that this truth can be brought out by turning the intended meaning upside down.

The figure of Cain, after which a gnostic sect called itself (for the Cainites, see Iren. I. 31. 2), is only the most prominent example of the working of the method. In the construction of a complete series of such countertypes, stretching through the ages, a rebels' view of history as a whole is consciously opposed to the official one. The siding with Cain extends consistently to all the "rejected" among Scriptural figures: the passage quoted above continues with a like elevation of Esau, who "did not receive the blind blessing but became rich outside without accepting anything from the blind one" (*loc. cit.* 9); and Marcion, whose hate of the Old Testament creator-god led him to the most radical conclusions in all respects, taught that Christ descended into hell solely to redeem Cain and Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Esau, and all nations which did not acknowledge the God of the Jews, while Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and

so on, because they served the creator and his law and ignored the true God, were left down below (cf. Ch. 6, note 11).

Prometheus and Zeus

The third example is added mainly to show that we are dealing here with a general principle of gnostic allegory and not with a particular attitude toward the Old Testament alone. It is true that the blasphemous degrading of the Most High of former religion to a demonic power and the consequent revision of status of his friends and foes found its preferred material in the Jewish tradition: there alone the prestige of the sacred original, the gravity of its claims, the devotion of its believers, gave to the gnostic reversal that flavor of provocation and scandal which was an intended effect of the novel message. With the Olympians literary fancy could play much more freely without outrage to pious feelings. They were taken less seriously, even by their conventional believers, and on the whole the Gnostics ignored them: yet the position of *Zeus* as the highest god of the pantheon was reverend enough to make *his* degradation a grave matter, and so he can occasionally be subjected to the same treatment as we saw accorded the biblical Lord of Creation. The alchemist Zosimos in his treatise *Omega* (paras. 3 f., p. 229, lines 16 ff., Berthelot) divides mankind into those "under" and those "over" the *heimarmene,* and calls the latter "the tribe of the philosophers":[42] these, he says, are "over the heimarmene in that they neither are gladdened by its happiness, for they master their pleasures, nor are cast down by its misfortunes . . . , nor do they even accept the fair gifts it offers." Of the others he says that they "follow in the procession of the heimarmene" and are "in every respect its acolytes." Then he continues with an allegory: for this reason Prometheus advises Epimetheus in Hesiod (*Erga* I. 86 f.) " 'never to accept a gift from Olympian Zeus, but to send it back': thus he teaches his brother through philosophy to refuse the gifts of Zeus, i.e. of the heimarmene." It is the identification of Zeus with the heimarmene that makes of the Hesiod quotation a gnostic

[42] "Philosopher" here means what in gnostic terminology is more normally called "pneumatic"; through this use it comes to be a term for the true alchemist, who has the mystical power to transform the base elements into noble ones: hence "the philosophers' stone."

allegory. The identification implies the parallel one of Prometheus, his challenger and victim, with the type of the "spiritual" man whose loyalty is not to the god of this world but to the transcendent one beyond. Thus in a paradoxical way the status of Zeus as the highest principle of the cosmos is taken over from tradition, but with reversed values: because the opponent of Prometheus is this cosmic ruler, the interpreter takes the rebel's side and makes the latter the embodiment of a principle superior to the whole universe. The victim of the older mythology becomes the bearer of the gospel in the new. Here again the allegory consciously shocks the piety of a whole religious culture powerfully entrenched in the Hellenistic environment. It must be noted that to identify the *Jupiter summus exsuperantissimus* of imperial religion with the heimarmene is not really to misjudge him, for the necessity of cosmic destiny was a legitimate aspect of his divine power. The point is that the gnostic revaluation of the cosmos as such (for which "heimarmene" had come to stand as the repulsive symbol) brought down along with it its highest divinity, and it is precisely his cosmic power which now makes Zeus an object of contempt. If we wished to speak mythologically ourselves, we might say that Zeus now suffers the fate to which he condemned his own predecessors and that the revolt of the Titans against his own rule achieves a belated victory.

Appendix to Chapter 3: Glossary of Mandaean Terms

Anosh (or **Enosh**). "Man," one of the Uthras, eternal but temporarily exiled in the world of darkness.

Firmly grounded, steadied. Almost identical with "blessed," predicated mainly of the highest and faultless Uthras.

Kushta. Truth, truthfulness, the true faith; also faithfulness and sincerity in the dealings of the believers with the highest Being and with one another. To "pass Kushta" means to exchange the handclasp of brotherhood. Sometimes personified.

Living water. Flowing water, which is of sublime origin and flows in streams, all of which the Mandaeans called "Jordans" (possibly an indication of the geographical origin of the Mandaean community). This alone can be used ritually, i.e., for the frequent baptisms which are a main feature of the Mandaean cult. For this reason the Mandaeans can only settle close to rivers. The expression "living water"

I am God (or a son of God, or a divine Spirit). And I have come. Already the world is being destroyed. And you, O men, are to perish because of your iniquities. But I wish to save you. And you see me returning again with heavenly power. Blessed is he who has worshipped me now! But I will cast everlasting fire upon all the rest, both on cities and on country places. And men who fail to realize the penalties in store for them will in vain repent and groan. But I will preserve for ever those who have been convinced by me.[2]

A singular feature of Simon's terrestrial journey was that he took about with him a woman called Helena whom he said he had found in a brothel in Tyre and who according to him was the latest and lowliest incarnation of the fallen "Thought" of God, redeemed by him and a means of redemption for all who believed in them both. The following exposition will explain the doctrinal meaning of this piece of showmanship; the picturesqueness and effrontery of the exhibition should be savored by itself.[3]

The developed Simonian doctrine, whether it was his own work or that of his school, has been preserved by a number of later writers beginning with Justin Martyr (who himself grew up in the district of Samaria) and including Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius. A source of great value is the writings entitled *Recognitions* and *Homilies,* purporting to be by Clement of Rome and therefore called the "Clementines" or "Pseudo-Clementines." We shall give here a synthesis of all these accounts, only occasionally indicating the particular source.

"There is one Power, divided into upper and lower, begetting itself, increasing itself, seeking itself, finding itself, being its own mother, its own father . . . , its own daughter, its own son . . . , One, root of the All." This One, unfolded, "is he who stands, stood and shall stand: he stands above in the unbegotten Power; he stood

[2] Celsus continues: "Having brandished these threats they then go on to add incomprehensible, incoherent and utterly obscure utterances, the meaning of which no intelligent person could discover; for they are meaningless and nonsensical, and give a chance for any fool or sorcerer to take the words in whatever sense he likes." (Origen, *Contra Celsum* VII. 9, tr. Chadwick, pp. 402-3).

[3] Simon is unjustly, and unnecessarily, robbed of an original and provocative trait if one tries with a recent author to explain the whore away as a slander or misunderstanding of the earliest Christian writers (G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion,* p. 69).

himself his own thought."[4] The manifested Epinoia beholds the Father and hides him as the creative power within herself, and to that extent the original Power is drawn into the Thought, making an androgynous combination: the Power (or Mind) is the upper and the Epinoia the lower element. Though conjoined in a unity, they are at the same time ranged opposite each other, and in their duality make apparent the distance between. The upper principle, the great Power, is in this combination the Mind of the All, governing everything and male: the lower principle, the great Thought, is the one bringing forth everything and female.[5]

From here on—turning now to the more authentic sources—the hypostatized and personified female figure of the Epinoia (or, alternatively, Ennoia), who has absorbed into herself the generative power of the Father, is the subject of the further divine history, which has been set in motion by the first act of reflection. This history is one of *creation* or a series of creations, and the specifically gnostic feature of the process is that it is one of progressive *deterioration* (alienation) in which the Epinoia, the bearer of the creative powers separated from their source, loses control over her own creations and more and more falls victim to their self-assertive forces. It is with the fall, suffering, degradation, and eventual redemption

[4] Nearest to this description of the first step of divine self-multiplication come certain Mandaean ones and, in the Greek area, that in the Apocryphon of John (preserved in Coptic translation). "He 'thought' His own likeness when He saw it in the pure Light-water that surrounded Him. And His Thought [*ennoia*] became efficacious and made herself manifest. Out of the splendor of the Light she stood herself before Him: this is the Power-before-the-All which became manifest; this is the perfect Forethought of the All, the Light that is the image of the Light, the likeness of the Invisible. . . . She is the first Ennoia, His likeness" (Apocr. of John, 27. 1 ff., Till).

[5] Summarized from Hippol. VI. 18. In the original the account is much longer and much more involved, and it goes on to an elaborate physical theory of the universe. The Great Exposition is certainly not by Simon himself, and perhaps Hippolytus was even mistaken in ascribing it to the Simonian sect at all. Actually the only connecting link with the Simonian doctrine as related everywhere else is the female "Thought" of God, who is here, however, not subjected to the degradations of the Helena story. If I have nevertheless included this opening speculation of the Great Exposition in the account of "Simon," it was because this typical example of gnostic half-mythical play with highly abstract concepts had to be presented somewhere, and Hippolytus' ascription, right or wrong, is an excuse for doing it here.

of this female hypostasis of the divine that the older reports on Simon are alone concerned. Apparently with nothing in their source like the conceptual deduction of the Great Exposition they introduce the female entity with the simple statement that she is "the first Thought of His (the divine) mind, the universal mother through whom He in the beginning had it in mind to create angels and archangels." The account goes on: "This Ennoia, springing forth from Him[6] and perceiving her Father's intention, descended to the lower regions and, anticipating Him, generated angels and powers, by whom this world was then made. After she had brought them forth, she was detained by them out of envy because they did not want to be thought someone else's progeny. The Father was totally unknown to them: his Thought, however, was detained by those angels and powers who had emanated from her and was dragged down from the highest heavens into the cosmos. And she suffered all manner of abuse from them, that she might not return upward to her Father, and this went so far that she was even enclosed in human flesh and migrated for centuries as from vessel to vessel into different female bodies. And since all the Powers contended for her possession, strife and warfare raged among the nations wherever she appeared. Thus she was also that Helen about whom the Trojan war was fought, and in this manner Greeks and barbarians beheld a phantasm of the truth. Migrating from body to body, suffering abuse in each, she at last became a whore in a brothel, and this is the 'lost sheep.' "[7] For her sake God descended in the person of Simon; and a main point of the latter's gospel consisted precisely in declaring that the whore from Tyre traveling around with him was the fallen Ennoia of the highest God, i.e., of himself, and that world salvation was bound up with her redemption by him. We must here add to the account quoted from Irenaeus (*et al.*) that every "He" or "His" referring to the divine Father was "I" etc. in Simon's own words; that is, he declared *himself* to be the God of the absolute beginning, "He who

[6] A recollection of the myth describing the birth of Pallas Athena from the head of Zeus.

[7] Iren. I. 23. 2, with some insertions from the parallel accounts in the *Homilies* (II.25), Hippolytus (VI. 19), and Tertullian (*De animo* Ch. 34).

stands," and recounted the begetting of the Ennoia, the creation of the angels through her, and indirectly even the unauthorized creation of the world by them, as his own deeds.

"Therefore [he says] he came, first to raise up her and release her from her bonds, and then to bring salvation to all men through knowledge of him. For since the angels ruled the world evilly, because each of them coveted the mastery, he has come to set things right, and has descended, transforming and assimilating himself to the virtues and powers and angels, so that (eventually) among men he appeared as a man, though he was not one, and was thought to have suffered in Judaea, though he did not suffer." (The relation to Jesus is more specifically defined in Simon's statement that he, himself the highest power, appeared in Judaea as Son, in Samaria as Father and in other nations as Holy Spirit.) The transformation of the savior in his descent through the spheres is a widespread motif in gnostic eschatology, and Simon himself according to Epiphanius describes it thus:

> In every heaven I took on a different form, according to the form of the beings in each heaven, that I might remain concealed from the ruling angels and descend to the Ennoia, who is called also Prunikos[8] and Holy Spirit, through whom I created the angels, who then created the world and man.
>
> (*Haer.* XXI. 2. 4)

To continue Irenaeus' account: "The prophets uttered their prophecies inspired by the angels that made the world; wherefore those who placed their hope in himself and his Helena need no longer heed them and might freely do what they liked. For by his grace men were saved, not by righteous deeds. For works are not in their nature good [or bad], but by external dispensation: the angels who made the world decreed them as such, by precepts of this kind to bring men into servitude. Wherefore he promised that the world should be dissolved and that his own should be liberated from the dominion of those who made the world" (Iren. *Adv. Haer.* I. 23. 2-3). Simon's Helena was also called *Selēnē* (Moon), which suggests the mythological derivation of the figure from the ancient

[8] "The prurient"—usually in gnostic texts in the connection "Sophia-Prunikos," about whom we shall have to say more when we deal with the Valentinian speculation.

also at the imperial court at Rome and met a bad end there while attempting to fly.[11] It is of interest, though in a context far removed from ours, that in Latin surroundings Simon used the cognomen *Faustus* ("the favoured one"): this in connection with his permanent cognomen "the Magician" and the fact that he was accompanied by a Helena whom he claimed to be the reborn Helen of Troy shows clearly that we have here one of the sources of the Faust legend of the early Renaissance. Surely few admirers of Marlowe's and Goethe's plays have an inkling that their hero is the descendant of a gnostic sectary, and that the beautiful Helen called up by his art was once the fallen Thought of God through whose raising mankind was to be saved.[12]

[11] According to at least one source, however, this was an attempted ascension meant as the end and consummation of his terrestrial mission and announced in these words: "Tommorrow I shall leave you impious and wicked ones and shall repair above to God whose power I am, even if become weak. Whereas ye have fallen, behold, I am He-who-stands. And I ascend to the Father and shall tell him: me too, thy Son the Standing, they wished to cause to fall, but I had no dealings with them but returned to myself" (*Actus Vercellensis* 31). Peter then by a prayer really "caused him to fall" from mid-air, thus bringing his career to an end.

[12] Cf. E. M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus*, Cambridge University Press, 1948; *The Fortunes of Faust*, Cambridge University Press, 1952.

an impressive vision of the Man who flies up "from the heart of the sea." The fish symbolism of early Christianity must also be noted in this connection.

Egypt as a symbol for the material world is very common in Gnosticism (and beyond it). The biblical story of Israel's bondage and liberation lent itself admirably to spiritual interpretation of the type the Gnostics liked. But the biblical story is not the only association which qualified Egypt for its allegorical role. From ancient times Egypt had been regarded as the home of the cult of the dead, and therefore the kingdom of Death; this and other features of Egyptian religion, such as its beast-headed gods and the great role of sorcery, inspired the Hebrews and later the Persians with a particular abhorrence and made them see in "Egypt" the embodiment of a demonic principle. The Gnostics then turned this evaluation into their use of Egypt as a symbol for "this world," that is, the world of matter, of ignorance, and of perverse religion: "All ignorant ones [i.e., those lacking gnosis] are 'Egyptians,' " states a Peratic dictum quoted by Hippolytus (V. 16. 5).

We noted before that generally the symbols for world can serve also as symbols for the body and vice versa; this is true also for the three just treated: "sea" and "dragon" occasionally denote the body in Mandaean writings, and regarding "Egypt" the Peratae, to whom it is otherwise "the world," also said that "the body is a little Egypt" (Hippol. V. 16. 5; similarly the Naassenes, *ibid.* 7. 41).

The Impure Garment

That the stranger puts on the garments of the Egyptians belongs to the widespread symbolism of the "garment" which we treated in Ch. 3 (*d*). The purpose stated here, that of remaining incognito to the Egyptians, connects that symbolism with a theme found throughout Gnosticism in numerous variations: the savior comes into the world unknown to its rulers, taking on by turns their various forms. We met the doctrine in Simon Magus, connected with the passage through the spheres. In a Mandaean text we read, "I concealed myself from the Seven, I compelled myself and took on bodily form" (G 112). In fact this theme combines two different ideas, that of the ruse by which the Archons are out-

son with his garment. This fascinating symbol requires special comment.

The Heavenly Garment; the Image

In the Mandaean Liturgies for the Dead we read the standard formula: "I go to meet my image and my image comes to meet me: it caresses and embraces me as if I were returning from captivity" (e.g., in G 559). The conception is derived from an Avesta[9] doctrine according to which after the death of a believer "his own religious conscience in the form of a fair maiden" appears to his soul and replies to his question as to who she is,

> I am, O youth of good thoughts, good words, good deeds, good conscience, none other than thine own personal conscience. . . . Thou hast loved me . . . in this sublimity, goodness, beauty . . . in which I now appear unto thee.
>
> (*Hādōkht Nask* 2. 9 ff.)

The doctrine was taken over by the Manichaeans: cf. F 100 of the Turfan fragments, where it is said that the soul after death is met by the garment, the crown (and other emblems) and "the virgin like unto the soul of the truthful one." And in the Coptic-Manichaean genealogy of the gods we find among the divine emanations the "figure of light that comes to meet the dying," also called "the angel with the garment of light." In our narrative the garment has become this figure itself and acts like a person. It symbolizes the heavenly or eternal self of the person, his original idea, a kind of double or *alter ego* preserved in the upper world while he labors down below: as a Mandaean text puts it, "his image is kept safe in its place" (G 90). It grows with his deeds and its form is perfected by his toils.[10] Its fullness marks the fulfillment of his task and therefore his release from exile in the world. Thus the encounter with this divided-off aspect of himself, the recognition of it as his own image, and the reunion with it signify the real moment of his salvation. Applied to the messenger or savior as it is here and elsewhere, the conception leads to the interesting

[9] Avesta is the canon of Zoroastrian writings as redacted in the Sassanian period.

[10] Cf. the reverse of this idea in *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

theological idea of a twin brother or eternal original of the savior remaining in the upper world during his terrestrial mission. Duplications of this kind abound in gnostic speculation with regard to divine figures in general wherever their function requires a departure from the divine realm and involvement in the events of the lower world. For the interpretation of our text, these considerations strongly suggest that the Second ("next in rank") repeatedly mentioned as staying with his parents, and together with whom the King's Son is to be heir in his Father's house, is another such duplication, and in fact the same as the garment: he is actually no longer mentioned where otherwise we should most expect him to be mentioned, namely, after the stranger's triumphant return. In the latter's reunion with his own garment, the figure of the brother seems to have been reabsorbed into a unity.

The Transcendental Self

The double of the savior is as we have seen only a particular theological representation of an idea pertaining to the doctrine of man in general and denoted by the concept of the Self. In this concept we may discern what is perhaps the profoundest contribution of Persian religion to Gnosticism and to the history of religion in general. The Avesta word is *daena,* for which the orientalist Bartholomae lists the following meanings: "1. religion, 2. inner essence, spiritual ego, individuality; often hardly translatable."[11]

In the Manichaean fragments from Turfan, another Persian word is used, *grev,* which can be translated either by "self" or by "ego." It denotes the metaphysical person, the transcendent and true subject of salvation, which is not identical with the empirical soul. In the Chinese Manichaean treatise translated by Pelliot, it is called "the luminous nature," "our original luminous nature," or "inner nature," which recalls St. Paul's "inner man"; Manichaean hymns call it the "living self" or the "luminous self." The Mandaean "Mana" expresses the same idea and makes particularly clear the identity between this inner principle and the highest godhead; for "Mana" is the name for the transmundane Power of Light, the first deity, *and* at the same time that for the transcendent,

[11] See Reitzenstein, *Hellenistische Mysterienreligionen,* 3rd ed., 1927, p. 409.

non-mundane center of the individual ego.[12] The same identity is expressed in the Naassene use of the name "Man" or "Adam" for the highest God and for his sunken counterpart.

In the New Testament, especially in St. Paul, this transcendent principle in the human soul is called the "spirit" (*pneuma*), "the spirit in us," "the inner man," eschatologically also called "the new man." It is remarkable that Paul, writing in Greek and certainly not ignorant of Greek terminological traditions, never uses in this connection the term *"psyche,"* which since the Orphics and Plato had denoted the divine principle in us. On the contrary, he *opposes,* as did the Greek-writing Gnostics after him, "soul" and "spirit," and "psychic man"[13] and "pneumatic man." Obviously the Greek meaning of *psyche,* with all its dignity, did not suffice to express the new conception of a principle transcending all natural and cosmic associations that adhered to the Greek concept. The term *pneuma* serves in Greek Gnosticism generally as the equivalent of the expressions for the spiritual "self," for which Greek, unlike some oriental languages, lacked an indigenous word. In this function we find it also in the so-called Mithras Liturgy with adjectives like "holy" and "immortal," contrasted with the *psyche* or the "human psychical power." The alchemist Zosimos has "our luminous *pneuma,*" "the inner pneumatic man," etc. In some of the Christian Gnostics it is called also the "spark" and the "seed of light."

It is between this hidden principle of the terrestrial person and its heavenly original that the ultimate recognition and reunion takes place. Thus the function of the garment in our narrative as the celestial form of the invisible because temporarily obscured self is one of the symbolic representations of an extremely widespread and, to the Gnostics, essential doctrine. It is no exaggeration to say that the discovery of this transcendent inner principle in man and the supreme concern about its destiny is the very center of gnostic religion.

[12] The Mandaeans, incidentally, sometimes connect the phrase "the hidden Adam" with the term "Mana" when used in relation to man.

[13] The Authorized Version renders *psychikos* by "natural."

of the divine self—even of his own self, only not in the sense pertaining to an individual person. If, then, there is this metaphysical, though not numerical, identity between the messenger and the Pearl, every hearer of the tale can legitimately, without confounding personal identities, recognize in the adventures of the messenger the story of his own earthbound soul, see his own fate as part *and* analogue of the deity's, yet at the same time also as the latter's object. Thus in the proper perspective the competing interpretations resolve themselves as not really alternative but complementary.[17]

[17] As in the case of Simon Magus, only somewhat more hypothetically, we may point to a possible survival of the Prince-and-Pearl myth in the vastly different environment of mediaeval legend. It has been argued by F. von Suhtschek that the *Perceval* legend was derived from the same Iranian religious myth that also underlies the "Hymn of the Pearl." Perceval's quest of the Grail would thus be another version of the King's Son's quest of the Pearl, and a number of details such as Perceval's humble appearance, his shabby garb, the connection of his errand with the theme of salvation, reinforce the parallel. The thesis is supported mainly by the derivation of proper names, personal and geographical, in the Perceval tradition from Persian roots. (Thus, for instance, "Perce-val" would mean literally "the pure pearl.") Not being competent to judge of the soundness of the linguistic proof, we mention the thesis here as a point of general interest without having a definite view in the matter. Granting the thesis to be correct, it must of course be recognized that important shifts of meaning have occurred on the way from Eastern antiquity to Western Middle Ages. Whatever the Grail symbolizes, it certainly cannot be the primordial Soul lost in the world. On the other hand, even in gnostic symbolism the Pearl sometimes stands for things other than the Soul, such as the Word of God or the secret of Life.

opposed original principles could be brought within the scope of the Syrian-Egyptian scheme of divine guilt and error.[1]

It might be argued that for the existing state of things and the concern of salvation based upon it, which was after all the chief concern of gnostic religion, it made no appreciable difference whether one or the other kind of prehistory was adopted, for both led essentially to the same result: whether it is the demiurgical angels "ruling the world evilly," or the demons of primordial Darkness, that hold the souls in captivity, "salvation" means salvation from their power and the savior has to overcome them as his enemies. This is true, and if it were otherwise the two theoretical types could not both be expressions of the gnostic spirit, for which the negative evaluation of the cosmos is fundamental. Yet it is by no means religiously irrelevant whether the world is regarded as the expression of an inferior principle or whether its substance is seen as outright devilish. And it is the Syrian-Egyptian type which, with its subtler and more intriguing deductive task, is not only more ambitious speculatively and more differentiated psychologically than the rigid Iranian type of dualism but also the one of the two which can do full systematic justice to the redemptional claim of *gnosis* so central to gnostic religion: this because its opposite, "ignorance" as a *divine* event, is accorded a metaphysical role in the very origination of the cosmos and in sustaining the dualistic situation as such. We shall have to say more about this aspect when dealing with the Valentinian system. Even at this stage it is obvious that the Syrian-Egyptian scheme allows the greater speculative variety, and that, once the character of this world and of its immediate lords and creators was established, as it was in the general gnostic view almost as a matter of course, the theoretical center of gravity would shift to the elaboration of the *mediate* stages between these cosmocratic deities and the primary godhead from which they had sprung: the tendency would then be to multiply figures and lengthen the genealogy—for the sake of spiritual differentiation no less than for the sake of widening the distance between

[1] A version of this kind is even reported as a variant of the Manichaean doctrine, which by the overwhelming evidence of the sources is the classical representative of the Iranian type, describing the kingdom of Darkness as the first aggressor and the history of the world as the prolonged struggle between the two principles (see Jonas, *Gnosis*, I, p. 301).

enemy of those angels and the god of the Jews"—a kind of private feud within the camp of the lower powers (*loc. cit.* 24. 1-2).

The larger systems on the other hand, as has been indicated, elaborate the descendance of the lower order from the highest principle in extensive and increasingly complicated genealogies—a kind of metaphysical "devolution" ending in the decadence that is this world. Thus, for instance, *Basilides* stretches the line of descent into an enormous chain which, via a number of spiritual figures like Nous, Logos, etc., leads through 365 successively generated heavens with their angelic populations, the last of which is the one we see, inhabited by the angels who made this world. Their leader is the god of the Jews. Here too the unnameable Father sends Christ, the eternal Nous, to liberate those who believe in him from the domination of the makers of the world. His passion was a deception, Simon of Cyrene dying on the cross in his shape (*loc. cit.* 24. 3-4; of the two other prominent examples of this type, the Barbeliotes and the Valentinians, we shall hear later).

In all these cases, the powers which are responsible for the world and against which the work of salvation is directed are more contemptible than sinister. Their badness is not that of the arch-enemy, the eternal hater of the Light, but that of ignorant usurpers who, unaware of their subaltern rank in the hierarchy of being, arrogate lordship to themselves and in the combination of feeble means with envy and lust for power can achieve only a caricature of true divinity. The world, created by them in illegitimate imitation of divine creativeness and as a proof of their own godhead, in fact proves their inferiority in both its constitution and its governance.

One recurring feature is the assertion that the prophecies and the Mosaic Law issued from these world-ruling angels, among whom the Jewish god is prominent.[3] This bespeaks a particular antagonism toward the Old Testament religion and toward its God, the reality of whom is by no means denied. On the contrary, after he had first in astrology lent his *names* to four of the seven planetary archons,[4] whom the Gnostics then promoted to world-

[3] Saturninus went so far as to say that the prophecies were spoken partly by the world-makers, partly by Satan.

[4] Iao, Sabaoth, Adonaios, Elohim; more rarely also Esaldaios = El-shaddai.

creators, his polemically drawn likeness emerged with increasing pre-eminence from their number as an unmistakeable caricature of the biblical God—not venerable indeed, but none the less formidable. Of the Seven, it is mostly Ialdabaoth who draws to himself this eminence and this likeness. In the system of the Ophites as related by Irenaeus, he is the firstborn of the lower Sophia or Prunikos and begets out of the waters a son called Iao, who in turn in the same way generates a son, Sabaoth, and so on to seven. Thus Ialdabaoth is mediately the father of them all and thereby of the creation. "He boasted of what was taking place at his feet and said, 'I am Father and God, and there is none above me' " (after the pattern of certain Old Testament formulas, such as Is. 45:5, "I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me"); to which his mother retorts, "Do not lie, Ialdabaoth: there is above thee the Father of all, the *First Man,* and *Man* the Son of Man" (*loc. cit.* 30. 4-6).

The theme of the demiurgical conceit is frequent in gnostic literature, including the Old Testament allusions. "For there ruled the great Archon, whose dominion extends to the firmament, who believes that he is the only God and that there is nothing above him" (Basilides, in Hippol. VII. 25. 3, cf. 23. 4 f.). One step further in defamation of character goes the Apocryphon of John, where Ialdabaoth, for the sake of dominion, cheats his own angels by what he grants and what he withholds in their creation, and where his jealousy is taken to betray a knowledge rather than ignorance of the higher God:

> He apportioned to them some of his fire, which is his own attribute, and of his power; but of the pure Light of the power which he had inherited from his Mother he gave them none. For this reason he held sway over them, because of the glory that was in him from the power of the Light of the Mother. Therefore he let himself be called "the God," renouncing the substance from which he had issued. . . . And he contemplated the creation beneath him and the multitude of angels under him which had sprung from him, and he said to them "I am a jealous god, besides me there is none"—thereby already indicating to the angels beneath him that there is another God: for if there were none, of whom should he be jealous?
>
> (42. 13 ff.; 44. 9 ff., Till).

Mandaean speculations about the beginnings abound with the same theme, though here without manifest reference to the Old Testament God: "B'haq-Ziva regarded himself as a mighty one, and forsook the name which his Father had created [for him]. He said, 'I am the father of the Uthras, who have created sh'kinas for them.' He pondered over the turbid water and said, 'I will create a world' " (G 97 f.).

Typical also is the retort from on high which puts the creator in his place.[5] But even more humiliating is the same reprimand coming from the ascending soul of the pneumatic which flaunts its higher origin in the face of the lord, or lords, of the world:

> I am a vessel more precious than the woman that made ye. Your mother does not know her origin, but I know myself and know whence I come. I invoke the incorruptible Sophia who dwells in the Father and is the mother of your mother. . . . But a woman born of woman brought ye forth, without knowing her own mother and believing that she was from herself: but I invoke her mother.
>
> (Iren. I. 21. 5)

Such formulas, of which there are many, forcibly express the confidence of the gnostic elect and his sovereign contempt for those lower powers even though they are the rulers of this world. This does not exclude a feeling of dread, which we find curiously blended with the daring of provocation. The soul's main concern is to *escape* the terrible archons, and rather than meet them face to face she likes to slip by them unnoticed if she can. Accordingly, the task of the sacraments is sometimes said to be that of making the souls in their future ascent invisible to the archons who would block their way, and especially to their prince, who in the role of judge

[5] E. g., the Ialdabaoth-Sabaoth of the "Gnostics" in Epiphanius is treated to exactly the same rebuke by his mother Barbelo (as the Sophia is called in that system) as was the Ialdabaoth of the Ophites in Irenaeus (Epiph. *Haer.* XXVI. 2. 3 f.). Basilides lets the correction issue, in the less harsh form of an enlightenment, from the "Gospel of the Sonship," which also finds a more satisfactory response than is elsewhere ascribed to the demiurge: "and the Archon learned that he was not the universal God but was begotten and had above him the treasure of the ineffable and nameless 'Non-Existent' [Basilides' paradoxical name for the First Cause] and of the Sonship; and he turned and was afraid, perceiving in what ignorance he had been . . . and he confessed the sin which he had committed in magnifying himself" (Hippol. VII. 26. 1-3). Cf. above Ch. 3 (*g*) on the "remorse of the creator."

would make them answerable for their deeds under his law. Since the gist of this law is "justice," the Gnostic's intended escape from its sanctions is part of the general antinomian attitude and expresses the repudiation of the Old Testament God in its moral aspect. We shall return to the subject in connection with gnostic libertinism; the relation to the Pauline antithesis of law and grace will come up presently.

In some of the Christian Gnostics, the figure of one world-god entirely absorbs the plurality of angels or archons and becomes, as he was represented in the Bible, the sole symbol of the creation and its law, so that the whole issue of salvation is narrowed down to one between him and the unknown God beyond. Of this quasi-monotheistic development, as far as the cosmic realm is concerned, we have several examples.[6] *Cerinthus* taught that "the world was made, not by the first God, but by a power which was far removed and separated from the source of being and did not even know of the God who is exalted above all things": Christ was the first to preach the unknown Father in the world (Iren. I. 26. 1).[7] In the same vein, *Cerdon* maintained that "the God whom Moses and the prophets preached is not the Father of Jesus Christ: the one is knowable, the other not, the one merely just, the other good" (*loc. cit.* 27. 1). Cerdon's doctrine, of which we possess nothing but this brief summary, leads into the closest neighborhood of *Marcion*, the greatest teacher of this group.

[6] Already the "Baruch" of Justin contrasts the one demiurgical *Elohim* with the supreme *Good* one, but has in the female *Edem* a third and still lower principle which is the cause of evil, though not plain evil in herself.

[7] As main Scriptural support for the doctrine of the Unknown Father first and solely revealed by Christ served Matt. 11:25-27 = Luke 10:21-22. In his general account of the Valentinians, Irenaeus relates: "As keystone of their thesis they adduce the following passage: 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of the heavens [sic] and the earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes . . . no one knows the Father but the Son, nor the Son but the Father and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal [this]' [thus quoted in slight deviation from our N.T. text]. With these words, they say, he has explicitly taught that the 'Father of Truth' newly invented by them had never been known to anybody before his [Christ's] appearance; and they wish to make out that the creator and maker of the world had always been known by all: those words, therefore,—they say—the Lord has spoken about the Unknown-to-all Father whom they proclaim" (*adv. haer.* I. 20. 3).

(*b*) THE GOSPEL OF MARCION

Marcion of Sinope in Pontus occupies a unique position in gnostic thought, as well as in the history of the Christian Church. In the latter respect, he was the most resolutely and undilutedly "Christian" of the Gnostics, and for this very reason his was the greatest challenge to Christian orthodoxy; or more precisely, his challenge more than that of any other "heresy" led to the formulation of the orthodox creed itself. Within gnostic thought, the uniqueness of his position is such that his classification with the whole movement has been rejected by no less a student of Marcion than Harnack.

Marcion's Unique Position in Gnostic Thought

He is indeed the exception to many gnostic rules. He alone of them all took the passion of Christ seriously, although the interpretation he put on it was unacceptable to the Church; his teaching is entirely free of the mythological fantasy in which gnostic thought reveled; he does not speculate about the first beginnings; he does not multiply divine and semi-divine figures; he rejects allegory in the understanding of both Old and New Testaments; he does not claim possession of a superior, "pneumatic" knowledge or the presence in man generally of that divine element which could be its source or recipient; he bases his doctrine entirely on what he claims to be the literal meaning of the gospel; in this rigorous restriction he is entirely free of the syncretism so characteristic of Gnosticism in general; and lastly, like Paul, who was to him *the* apostle, he makes faith and not knowledge the vehicle of redemption. The last circumstance would seem to put Marcion squarely outside the gnostic area, if this is defined by the concept of gnosis. Yet the anti-cosmic dualism as such, of which Marcion is the most uncompromising exponent, the idea of the unknown God opposed to that of the cosmos, the very conception of an inferior and oppressive creator and the consequent view of salvation as liberation from his power by an alien principle are so outstandingly gnostic that anyone who professed them in this historical environment must be counted as one of the Gnostics, not merely by way of classification

but in the sense that the gnostic ideas that were abroad had actually shaped his thinking. The same concept, however, that so strongly connects Marcion with the general gnostic stream, that of the "Alien," received in his teaching an entirely new twist.

In its briefest formulation, Marcion's gospel[8] was that "of the alien and good God, the Father of Jesus Christ, who redeems from heavy bonds to eternal life wretched mankind, who *yet are entire strangers to him.*" The concept of the *alienness* of the true God Marcion shares with Gnosticism in general: that he is alien even to the objects of his salvation, that men even in their souls or spirits are strangers to him, is entirely his own. It actually cancels out one of the basic tenets of gnostic religion: that men are strangers in this world, that therefore their assumption into the divine realm is a return to their true home, or that in saving mankind the supreme God saves his own. According to Marcion, man in his complete constitution like all nature is a creature of the world-god and prior to the advent of Christ his rightful and unrestricted property, body and soul alike.[9] "Naturally," therefore, no part of him is alien in the world, while the Good God is alien in the absolute sense to him as to everything created. There is no sense in which the deity that saves from the world has anything to do with the existence of the world, not even the sense in which throughout gnostic speculation some part of it was drawn into the creation either by defection or by violence. Consequently no genealogy, or history of any kind, *connects* the demiurge with the Good God. The former is a divinity in his own right, expressing his nature in the visible universe his creation, and he is the antithesis to the Good God not as evil but as "just." Thus, however unsympathetically depicted, he is not the Prince of Darkness. In the elaboration of the antithesis between these two gods on the one

[8] The most extensive source is Tertullians' work in five parts, *Adversus Marcionem*. Of the comprehensive polemic of Origen, the other great critic of Marcion in the third century, only fragments are preserved. For the rest, all the heresiologists, beginning with the first of them, Justin Martyr (second century), dealt with Marcion or his followers, and the polemic continued into the fifth century, when whole Marcionitic communities, remnants of the church which Marcion had founded, were still extant in the East. In our summary of Marcion's teaching, we shall only occasionally indicate the particular source.

[9] Marcion accepts the Genesis account of the creation of man, with the consequence to him that the Good God had no hand in it at all.

hand and of the meaning of the redemption through Christ on the other consists the originality of Marcion's teaching.

Redemption According to Marcion

To begin with the second aspect, Harnack states: "The question as to what Christ saved us from—from the demons, from death, from sin, from the flesh (all these answers were given from the earliest days)—, Marcion answers radically: He has saved us from the world and its god in order to make us children of a new and alien God."[10] This answer prompts the question, What reason had the Good God for concerning himself in the destiny of man? To this the answer is, None except his goodness. He does not gather lost children from exile back into their home but freely adopts strangers to take them from their native land of oppression and misery into a new father's house. Accordingly, since they are not his but the world-god's original property, their salvation is a "buying free" on the part of Christ. Marcion here invokes Gal. 3:13, "Christ has purchased us" (and incidentally, by a change of two letters, read also Gal. 2:20, "purchased [ἠγώρησε] me" for "loved [ἠγάπησε] me"—one of the textual emendations characteristic of Marcion), and argues, "evidently as strangers, for no-one ever purchases those who belong to him." The purchase price was Christ's blood, which was given not for the remission of sins or the cleansing of mankind from guilt or as a vicarious atonement fulfilling the Law—not, in brief, for any reconciliation of mankind with God—but for the cancellation of the creator's claim to his property. The legality of this claim is acknowledged, as is also the validity of the Law, to which as subjects of the world-lord, and as long as they are so, men owe obedience. In this sense Marcion understands the Pauline argument concerning the Law and generally interprets all those utterances of the apostle, otherwise inconvenient to his position, which stress the validity of the Old Testament revelation. This Marcion indeed acknowledges *qua* the authentic document of the world-god, and in its interpretation he sides with the Jewish exegesis against his Christian contemporaries in insisting on the

[10] Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, Leipzig, 1921, p. 31, n. 1. Harnack's book is a classic, by far the best monograph on any individual chapter of Gnosticism.

The Two Gods

His *theology* Marcion elaborated in the form of "antitheses": this was the title of one of his lost books. Most of these antitheses were in terms of attributes of the two gods. One is "the craftsman" (*demiurgos*), the "God of creation" (or "generation"), the "ruler of this aeon," "known" and "predicable"—the other is "the hidden" God, "unknown," "unperceivable," "unpredicable," "the strange," "the alien," "the other," "the different," and also "the new." *Known* is the creator-God from his creation, in which his nature lies revealed. The world betrays not only his existence but also his character, and this as one of pettiness. One need only look at his pitiable product: "turning up their noses the utterly shameless Marcionites take to tearing down the work of the Creator: 'Indeed,' they say, 'a grand production, and worthy of its God, is this world!'" (Tertullian, *Contra Marc.* I. 13.) Elsewhere Tertullian mentions the expressions "these miserable elements" and "this puny cell of the Creator."[12] The same "pettinesses and weaknesses and inconsistencies" as in his creation show themselves in his dealings with mankind and even with his own chosen people. For this Marcion adduces evidence from the Old Testament, which is to him "true" in the sense indicated. His most revealing self-revelation is the Law, and this brings us to the final and to Marcion most important antithesis: that of the *"just"* God and the *"good"* God. From the Christian point of view this is the most dangerous aspect of Marcion's dualism: it sunders and distributes to two mutually exclusive gods that polarity of justice and mercy whose very togetherness in one God motivates by its tension the whole dialectic of Pauline theology. To Marcion, a lesser mind and therefore more addicted to the neatness of formal consistency, justice and goodness are contradictory and therefore cannot reside in the same god: the

[12] Generally Marcion determines the character of the world-god after that of the world, "for the made must be like unto the maker" (Hippol. *Refut.* X. 19. 2); his wisdom is identical with the "wisdom of this world" in the pejorative sense of transcendental religion. In the exegesis of certain passages in St. Paul, Marcion simply identifies the creator with the world, taking what is said of the latter as applying to the former; and according to him he finally perishes with the world by a kind of self-destruction, which shows that in the last analysis he is not genuinely a god but nothing but the spirit of this world.

concept of each god, certainly that of the true God, must be unequivocal—the fallacy of all theological dualism. The just god is that "of the Law," the good god that "of the Gospel." Marcion, here as elsewhere oversimplifying St. Paul, understands the "justice" of the Law as merely formal, narrow, retributive, and vindictive ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"): this justice, not outright evilness, is the cardinal property of the creator-god. Thus the god whom Christ has put in the wrong is not the Persian Ahriman, not absolute darkness—Marcion left the devil in existence as a separate figure within the domain of the creator—nor matter, but simply the world-god such as the Law and the prophets had taught. Moral goodness under the Law, though by inner-worldly standards preferable to licentiousness, is irrelevant from the point of view of transcendent salvation.

As the creator-god is known, obvious, and "just," so the true God is unknown, alien, and good. He is unknown because the world can teach nothing about him. As he had no share in creation, there is no trace in all nature from which even his existence could be suspected. As Tertullian sums up: "the God of Marcion, *naturally* unknown and never except in the Gospel revealed" (*op. cit.* V. 16). Being not the author of the world, including man, he is also the alien. That is, no natural bond, no pre-existing relationship, connects him with the creatures of this world, and there is no obligation on his part to care for the destiny of man. That he takes no hand in the physical government of the world is self-evident for Marcion: he had to eliminate from the gospel as Judaistic interpolation such of the Lord's sayings as that about the Father's being mindful of sparrows and of each hair on one's head. The Father whom Jesus Christ proclaimed could not have been concerned with what is nature's affair or that of its god. This does away with the whole idea of a divine providence within the world. Only with one activity does the Good God intervene in the world, and this is his sole relation with it: sending down his Son to redeem man from the world and its god: "This *one* work suffices *our* God, that he has liberated man by his supreme and superlative goodness, which is to be preferred to all grasshoppers[18]" (Tertullian *op.*

[18] Used as a contemptible symbol of the creation (or a reference to one of the Egyptian plagues?).

cit. I. 17). We see that the goodness of the Good God is connected with his alienness in that the latter removes all other grounds for his concern with man. The goodness of his saving deed is the better for his being alien and dealing with aliens: "Man, this *work of the creator-god,* that better God chose to love, and for his sake he labored to descend from the third heaven into these miserable elements, and on his account he even was crucified in this puny cell of the creator" (*ibid.* 14).

"Grace Freely Given"

Thus the Good God's only relation to the world is soteriological, that is, directed against it and its god. With regard to man, this relation is entirely gratuitously entered into on the part of the alien God and is therefore an act of pure *grace*. Here again Marcion interprets in his own way a Pauline antithesis: that of the "grace freely given" and "justification through works." That the grace is freely given is to both men the whole content of the Christian religion; but whereas the "freely" in Paul means "in the face of human guilt and insufficiency," i.e., in the absence of all human merit, it means in Marcion "in the face of mutual alienness," i.e., in the absence of all obligating bonds. Neither the responsibility nor the fatherly attachment of a creator toward his creatures operates in this case, nor is the Good God in the usual gnostic manner mediately involved in the destiny of the souls (and the world) by the genealogical connections described: so that there is nothing for him to recover or restore. Finally, in the absence of any previous dealings the ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation cannot apply: if men have been sinners before, they certainly could not sin against Him. The point is that the very first relationship between this God and those creatures not his own was established through his act of a grace *without a past,* and the relation continues to exist in this mode entirely. It is for the Christian reader to ponder what has been done here to the Christian concept of divine love and mercy. The call to repent, the imminence of judgment, fear and trembling, atonement—all these are eliminated from the Christian message. But it may be noted here that while Marcion abolished the Pauline paradox of a God who is just *and* good and before whom man is guilty yet beloved, he stressed all

the more the paradox of a grace given inscrutably, unsolicited, with no antecedents to prompt and to prepare it, an irreducible mystery of divine goodness as such. For this reason Marcion must be counted among the great protagonists of paradoxical religion.

Marcion's Ascetic Morality

No less uncompromising than in theological doctrine was Marcion in the precepts for conduct he deduced from it. There could of course be no qualifying for, or supplementing, divine grace through works, even less the perfecting of human nature through virtue in the pagan-classical manner. In principle, all positive morality, as a way of regulating and thereby confirming man's membership in the system of creation, was but a version of that Law through which the creator exercised his hold over man's soul and to which the saved were no longer beholden: to go on practicing it would be to consolidate a belonging to the cosmos which should on the contrary be reduced to the inevitable minimum pending the ultimate removal from its range. This last consideration defines the kind of morality which Marcion did enjoin. Its principle was: not to complete but to reduce the world of the creator and to make the least possible use of it. "By way of opposition to the Demiurge, Marcion rejects the use of the things of this world" (Clem. Alex. *Strom.* III. 4. 25).

The *asceticism* thus prescribed is strictly speaking a matter not of ethics but of metaphysical alignment. Much as the avoidance of worldly contamination was an aspect of it, its main aspect was to obstruct rather than promote the cause of the creator; or even, just to spite him: "[Marcion] believes that he vexes the Demiurge by abstaining from what he made or instituted" (Hippol. *Refut.* X. 19. 4). The "perpetual abstinence" in matters of food is "for the sake of destroying and contemning and abominating the works of the creator" (Jerome *Adv. Jovinian.* II. 16). Especially clear is the purpose of obstructing in the prohibition of sexual intercourse and marriage: "Not wishing to help replenish the world made by the Demiurge, the Marcionites decreed abstention from matrimony, defying their creator and hastening to the Good One who has called them and who, they say, is God in a different sense: wherefore, wishing to leave nothing of their own down here, they turn

abstemious not from a moral principle but from hostility to their maker and unwillingness to use his creation" (Clem. Alex. *loc. cit.*). Here the pollution by the flesh and its lust, so widespread a theme in this age, is not even mentioned; instead (though not to its exclusion: cf. Tertullian, *op. cit.* I. 19, where marriage is called a "filthiness" or "obscenity" [*spurcitiae*]) it is the aspect of *reproduction* which disqualifies sexuality—that very aspect which in the eyes of the Church alone justifies it as its purpose under nature's dispensation. Marcion here voices a genuine and typical *gnostic* argument, whose fullest elaboration we shall meet in Mani: that the reproductive scheme is an ingenious archontic device for the indefinite retention of souls in the world.[14] Thus Marcion's asceticism, unlike that of the Essenes or later of Christian monasticism, was not conceived to further the sanctification of human existence, but was essentially negative in conception and part of the gnostic revolt against the cosmos.

Marcion and Scripture

In using his understanding of St. Paul as a yardstick for what is genuinely Christian and what not, Marcion subjected the New Testament writings to a rigorous sifting process to divide the true from what he had to regard as later falsifications. It was in this way that for the first time not only text-critical work, if in rather a high-handed manner, was applied to the early Christian documents but the very idea of a *canon* was conceived and executed in the Christian Church. The Old Testament canon had been established long before by Jewish theologians, but no body of authoritative or authentic books had been fixed so far as Holy Writ from the floating mass of Christian writings. The canon which Marcion laid down for the Church was understandably meager. That the Old Testament as a whole went by the board goes without saying. Of our present New Testament, only the Gospel according to Luke and the ten Pauline Letters were accepted, though even the latter with some emendations and excisions of what Marcion regarded as

[14] This incidentally provides a conclusive proof, against Harnack, of Marcion's dependence on prior gnostic speculation: for the argument makes real sense only where the souls are lost parts of the godhead to be retrieved—in that case reproduction prolongs divine captivity and by further dispersal makes more difficult the work of salvation as one of gathering-in.

Chapter 7. *The* Poimandres *of Hermes Trismegistus*

Throughout the last chapter we were moving in the Jewish-Christian orbit entirely, if in a highly aberrant sense of it and, as regards the Jewish aspect, related to it mainly by way of rebound. The doctrines concerning the world-creators just reviewed were shaped in particular antagonism to the Old Testament. Although it would be going too far to say that this antagonism was by itself the source of the gnostic tenets, it certainly expressed and colored them most forcefully in that whole group of systems. The subject of this chapter will show that there was abroad in the Hellenistic world gnostic thought and speculation entirely free of Christian connections. The Hermetic writings, composed in Greek from the first, not only are purely pagan but even lack polemical reference to either Judaism or Christianity, though the *Poimandres* treatise for one shows its author's acquaintance with the biblical story of creation which through the Septuagint translation had become widely known in the Greek world. The religion of the "Thrice-greatest Hermes" originated in Hellenistic Egypt, where Hermes was identified with Thoth. Not the whole Corpus can be regarded as a gnostic source: large parts of it breathe the spirit of a cosmic pantheism far removed from the violent denunciation of the physical universe so characteristic of the Gnostics. Other portions are predominantly moral, and their strong dualism of the sensual and the spiritual, of body and mind, though well agreeing with the gnostic attitude, would fit equally well, e.g., into a Christian or Platonic framework, since it expresses the general transcendental mood of the age. There are, however, unmistakably gnostic portions in this syncretistic whole, and especially the first treatise of the corpus, called *Poimandres,* is an outstanding document of gnostic cosmogony and anthropogony independent of the speculations of the Christian Gnostics. The system of the *Poimandres* is centered around the divine figure of Primal Man; his sinking into nature is the dramatic climax of the revelation and is matched by

the ascent of the soul, the description of which concludes the revelation. The antithesis of the creator and the highest God is absent here: the demiurge has been commissioned by the Father, and his creation seems to be (as it was still represented later in Manichaeism) the best way of coping with the existence of a chaotic darkness. Yet the unplanned inclusion of the divine Man in the cosmic system is distinctly tragic; and even the character of the most genuine product of the demiurge, the seven spheres and their governors, turns out to be much more problematic than one would expect from the account of their origin. There are considerable difficulties in integrating the different parts of the composition into a consistent doctrine, and perhaps a certain ambiguity, due to the combination of contradictory material, is of its very substance. We shall deal with these questions after having rendered the main body of the text.

(*a*) THE TEXT

(1) Once, when I had engaged in meditation upon the things that are and my mind was mightily lifted up, while my bodily senses were curbed . . . I thought I beheld a presence of immeasurable greatness that called my name and said to me: "What dost thou wish to hear and see and in thought learn and understand?" (2) I said, "Who art thou?" "I am," he said, "Poimandres, the Nous of the Absolute Power. I know what thou wishest, and I am with thee everywhere." (3) I said, "I desire to be taught about the things that are and understand their nature and know God. . . ." And he replied, "Hold fast in thy mind what thou wishest to learn, and I shall teach thee."

(4) With these words, he changed his form, and suddenly everything was opened before me in a flash, and I behold a boundless view, everything become Light, serene and joyful. And I became enamored with the sight. And after a while there was a Darkness borne downward . . . ,[1] appalling and hateful, tortuously coiled, resembling a serpent. Then I saw this Darkness change into some humid nature, indescribably

[1] "having originated in one part" or ". . . part by part," i.e., gradually (?).

agitated and giving off smoke as from a fire and uttering a kind of sound unspeakable, mournful. Then a roar [or: cry] came forth from it unarticulately, comparable to the voice of a fire. (5) From out of the Light a holy Word [*logos*] came over the nature, and unmixed fire leapt out of the humid nature upward to the height; it was light and keen, and active at the same time; and the air, being light, followed the fiery breath, rising up as far as the fire from earth and water, so that it seemed suspended from it; but earth and water remained in their place, intermingled, so that the earth was not discernible apart from the water; and they were kept in audible motion through the breath of the Word which was borne over them.

(6) Then Poimandres said to me: ". . . That light is I, Nous, thy God, who was before the humid nature that appeared out of the Darkness. And the luminous Word that issued from Nous is the Son of God. . . . By this understand: that which in thee sees and hears is the Word of the Lord, but the Nous [thy nous?] is God the Father: they are not separate from each other, for Life is the union of these. . . . Now then, fix your mind on the Light and learn to know it."

(7) Having said this, he gazed long at me intently, so that I trembled at his aspect; then when he looked up, I behold in my nous[2] the Light consisting in innumerable Powers and become a boundless Cosmos, and the fire contained by a mighty power and under its firm control keeping its place. . . .

(8) He again speaks to me: "Thou hast seen in the Nous the archetypal form, the principle preceding the infinite beginning."[3] . . . "Wherefrom then," I ask, "have the elements of nature arisen?" To which he replies: "From the Will[4] of God, who having received into herself the Word and beheld the beautiful [archetypal] Cosmos, imitated it, fashioning herself into a cosmos [or: ordering herself] according to her own elements and her progeny, i.e., the souls.

"(9) But the divine Nous, being androgynous, existing as Life and Light, brought forth by a word another Nous, the

[2] I.e., "in my own mind" as identical with the absolute Nous.
[3] Or, perhaps, "the infinite principle preceding the beginning"?
[4] *boulé*, a word of feminine gender.

and over the irrational animals bent down through the Harmony[8] and having broken through the vault showed to lower Nature the beautiful form of God. When she beheld him who had in himself inexhaustible beauty and all the forces of the Governors combined with the form of God, she smiled in love; for she had seen the reflection of this most beautiful form of Man in the water and its shadow upon the earth. He too, seeing his likeness present in her, reflected in the water, loved it and desired to dwell in it. At once with the wish it became reality, and he came to inhabit the form devoid of reason. And Nature, having received into herself the beloved, embraced him wholly, and they mingled: for they were inflamed with love. (15) And this is why alone of all the animals on earth man is twofold, mortal through the body, immortal through the essential Man. For though he is immortal and has power over all things, he suffers the lot of mortality, being subject to the Heimarmene; though he was above the Harmony, he has become a slave within the Harmony; though he was androgynous, having issued from the androgynous Father, and unsleeping from the unsleeping one, he is conquered by love and sleep."

[There follows a circumstantial account of the origin of the present race of men (16-19), and a moral instruction (20-23),

[8] I stick to the astrological and dynamic meaning of the term. The most recent interpreters take *harmonia* here in the concrete sense it had in the language of the carpenter: "joint," "fitting together"; thus *Nock* proposes the translation "composite framework," *Festugière* translates *"armature des sphères."* Both these excellent scholars, though tentative as to the most suitable translation, are certain that the word throughout our treatise denotes a particular *material* structure and not, as I understand it, the general essence of a *power* system, viz., the law of the interrelated motions of the macrocosmos represented by the seven planets (the latter, however, considered mainly in their "psychological" aspect, as the subsequent account of the soul's ascent makes clear). Of the reasons I have against the newer interpretation, I indicate only two: that supplied by the phrase "[Man] having in himself the nature of the harmony of the Seven" (16), which makes sense only in connection with the *abstract* meaning first given to "harmony" by the Pythagoreans; and its additional support by the close correlation in which our text repeatedly (15; 19) puts "harmony" to "heimarmene" (destiny). In brief, *harmonia* stands for a totality of forces (the Governors) denoted by its unifying characteristic (the form of their collective government), and not just for a partitioning wall or any more complex entity of that kind, like a scaffolding. Incidentally, the spheric system was fashioned out of fire, which hardly goes well with a framework.

The unknowing ones are left a prey to all the evil passions, whose insatiability is their torment, always augmenting the flame that consumes them.]

[The last part of the instruction (24-26) is devoted to the soul's ascent after death. First at the dissolution of the material body you yield up to the demon your sensuous nature (?)[9] now ineffective, and the bodily senses return each to its source among the elements.] "(25) And thereafter, man thrusts upward through the Harmony, and to the first zone he surrenders the power to grow and to decrease, and to the second the machinations of evil cunning, now rendered powerless, and to the third the deceit of concupiscence, now rendered powerless, and to the fourth the arrogance of dominion, drained of [or: now impotent to achieve] its ambition, and to the fifth the impious audacity and the rashness of impulsive deed, and to the sixth the evil appetites of wealth, now rendered powerless, and to the seventh zone the lying that ensnares. (26) And then denuded of the effects of the Harmony, he enters the nature of the Ogdoas [i.e., the eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars], now in possession of his own power, and with those already there exalts the Father; and those present rejoice with him at his presence, and having become like his companions he hears also certain powers above the eighth sphere exalting God with a sweet voice. And then in procession they rise up towards the Father and give themselves up to the Powers, and having become Powers themselves, enter the Godhead. This is the good end of those who have attained gnosis: to become God."

(*b*) COMMENTARY

The composition of the treatise is clear. Its greatest part (1-26) is a report, in the first person, of a visionary experience and of the teachings conveyed in the course of it. The concluding paragraphs (27-32), omitted in our rendering, describe the subsequent missionary activity of the recipient among his fellow men. In the report of the revelation, with which alone we are dealing here, we discern

[9] The text has *ēthos* = "character," which in its meaning of moral character somehow clashes with the whole sequence, 25-26, as also do other statements in 24.

Gen. 1 and 2, which were referred to a celestial and a terrestrial Adam respectively, supply a link between biblical and gnostic doctrines concerning the First Man. Certain Zoroastrian teachings, either through the medium of those Jewish speculations or directly, may also have contributed to the conception of this supremely important figure of gnostic theology. The departure from the biblical model (if this really was the starting point of the development, which is much debated among modern scholars) is conspicuous in the following features: God does not "make" Man, but as an androgynous generative principle begets him and brings him forth, so that he is really an emanation of His own substance; he is not formed of clay, but is Life and Light purely; the "likeness" is one not of symbolic similitude but of a full sameness of form, so that in him God contemplates and loves His own adequate representation; he is extra-mundane, while even the Demiurge has his seat within the cosmic system, albeit in its highest and outermost sphere, the eighths; his dimensions are commensurate with those of the physical creation, as his later union with the whole of Nature shows; the mastery given to him is not as in Genesis over the terrestrial fauna merely, but over the astral macrocosmos as well.

The exercise of this power, however, was hardly the original purpose of his production by the Father: it accrued to him with the granting of his wish "himself to create as well." This motivation of divine descent and eventual involvement in the lower world is more often, and more logically, connected with the demiurgical principle itself and is to account for the very existence of the world.[10] But here the world is already created, and it is difficult to

[10] Thus in the Mandaean story of creation contained in the third book of the Right Ginza we read that first from the Great Mana issued the Life: "and this addressed a request to itself; and at its request there came forth the fast-grounded Uthra whom the Life called the Second Life. . . . That Second Life then created Uthras, established sh'kinas. . . . Three Uthras came forth who addressed a request to the Second Life; they *asked permission to create sh'kinas for themselves.* The [Second] Life granted it. . . . Then they said to it, 'Give us of thy splendor and of thy light, and we will go forth and descend beneath the streams of water. We will call forth unto thee sh'kinas, create unto thee a world, and the world be ours and thine.' This pleased [the Second Life], and it said, 'I will grant it to them'; but the Great [Mana] it did not please, and the [First] Life did not approve of it." It is in a countermove to this plan of the Uthras that the Great Mana creates Manda d'Hayye, who in this system most nearly corresponds to Primal Man, and charges him: " 'Do thou mount up above the Uthras and see what they are up to

The expressions make it clear that what attaches itself to the soul on its downward journey has the character of substantial though immaterial entities, and these are frequently described as "envelopments" or "garments." Accordingly the resultant terrestrial "soul" is comparable to an onion with so many layers, on the model of the cosmos itself, only in inverse order: what is outermost there is innermost here, and after the process is completed with incarnation, what is innermost in the spherical scheme of the cosmos, the earth, is as body the outer garment of man. That this *body* is a fatality to the soul had long ago been preached by the Orphics, whose teachings were revived in the era of Gnosticism. But now the *psychical* envelopments too are considered impairments and fetters of the transmundane spirit.

> Looking down from that highest summit and perpetual light, and having with secret desire contemplated the appetence of the body and its "life," so called on earth, the soul by the very weight of this its earthly thought gradually sinks down into the nether world. . . . In each sphere [which it passes] it is clothed with an etherial envelopment, so that by these it is in stages reconciled to the company of this earthen garment. And thus it comes through as many deaths as it passes spheres to what here on earth is called "life."
>
> (Macrobius *In somn. Scip.* II. 11)

Now, what are these foreign accretions? In their sum they are the empirical character of man, comprising all the faculties and propensities by which man relates himself to the world of nature and society; that is, they constitute what would normally be called his "psyche." And what is the original entity overlaid by these accretions? It is the transcendent acosmic principle in man, normally hidden and undiscovered in his earthly preoccupations, or only negatively betraying itself in a feeling of alienness, of not completely belonging, and becoming positive here only through the *gnosis* giving it in the beholding of the divine light an acosmic content of its own and thereby restoring it to its original condition, now obscured. Frequently, as we have learned before, this secret principle is called "pneuma," while the term "psyche" is reserved for its manifest "cosmic" envelopment. The Hermetic writings avoid

theory concerning terrestrial man, which we find explicitly stated as a Hermetic doctrine in a late Neoplatonic work.

> Man has two souls: the one is from the First Mind and also shares in the power of the Demiurge, the other has been put in from the revolution of the heavens, and into this the God-seeing soul enters. Since this is so, the soul that has come down into us from the spheres (lit. "worlds") follows along with the revolutions of the spheres; but the one present in us as mind from the Mind is superior to the motion that works becoming, and it is through it that the liberation from the heimarmene and the ascent to the Intelligible Gods comes about.
>
> (Iamblichus *De myst.* VIII. 6)

To give one more quotation, the Syrian Gnostic Bardesanes says:

> There are hostile powers, stars and signs, a body from the Evil One without resurrection, a soul from the Seven.
>
> (Ephraem, *Hymn.* 53)

We could multiply testimonies for the doctrine of the planetary soul (e.g., from the Mandaean literature and the *Pistis Sophia*), but our selection has made the essentials of the conception clear enough.

The Hermetic quotation from Iamblichus shows with singular distinctness what stands behind this mythological fantasy: not just a rejection of the physical universe in the light of pessimism, but the assertion of an entirely new idea of human freedom, very different from the moral conception of it which the Greek philosophers had developed. However profoundly man is determined by nature, of which he is part and parcel—and plumbing his own inwardness he discovers in layer after layer this dependence—there still remains an innermost center which is not of nature's realm and by which he is above all its promptings and necessities. Astrology is true of natural man, i.e., of every man as member of the cosmic system, but not of the spiritual man within the natural.[14] It is the first time in

[14] This supremacy is extended to the whole person of the Gnostic, in whom the "spirit" has become dominant: "Hermes asserts that those who know God not only are safe from the incursions of the demons but are not even under the power of fate" (Lactantius *Div. inst.* II. 15. 6; cf. Arnobius *Adv. nat.* II. 62—"not subject to the laws of fate"). Christian Gnostics thought similarly: "Prior to baptism fate is real, after it the predictions of the astrologers are no longer true" (*Exc. Theod.* 87. 1).

history that the radical ontological difference of man and nature has been discovered and the powerfully moving experience of it given expression in teachings strange and suggestive. This rift between man and nature was never to close again, and protesting his hidden but essential *otherness* became in many variations an abiding theme in the quest for truth concerning man.

The Union of Man with Nature; the Narcissus Motif

We now come to the other part of the Anthropos drama, the sinking of Man into lower Nature. Here our narrative is wonderfully clear and impressive: the revealing of his divine form from on high to terrestrial Nature is at the same time its mirroring in the lower elements, and by his own beauty thus appearing to him from below he is drawn downward. This use of the Narcissus motif is, at least in this explicitness, an original feature of the *Poimandres* and recurs only in indistinct indications elsewhere in the literature of the era. The Narcissus motif, however, gives merely a particular turn to a mythological idea of much wider currency in gnostic thought, whose original meaning had nothing to do with the Greek legend: the idea that either the cosmogonic process or the sinking of the Soul, or generally the downward movement of a divine principle, was initiated by a reflection of the upper Light in the Darkness below. If we analyze the *Poimandres* version carefully, we see that it adroitly combines three different ideas: that of the Darkness' becoming enamored of the Light and getting possession of a part of it; that of the Light's becoming enamored of the Darkness and voluntarily sinking into it; that of a radiation, reflection, or image of the Light projected into the Darkness below and there held fast. All three ideas have found independent representation in gnostic thought. The first ascribes the initiative toward the eventual intermingling to the nether forces, and this version is most completely expressed in the Manichaean system, with which we shall deal separately. The second version has been exemplified in the Hermetic quotation from Macrobius (p. 158). That it applied not only to the descent of the individual soul but first and foremost to the cos-

him secede from his Mother, and from him they go on to derive the world down to the last of the "images" [16]

(*Enn.* II. 10)

The main difference, and indeed a crucial one, between the Gnostics and Plotinus on this point is that the former deplore the "descent" by image-reflection as the cause of divine tragedy and passion, while Plotinus affirms it as the necessary and positive self-expression of the efficacy of the first source. But the vertical structure of this scale of unfolding, that is, the *downward* direction of all metaphysical generation which therefore cannot be but deterioration, is common to both.

Now, this appearing of the Light from on high in a reflection from down below could also be used as an explanation of divine error. The whole tragedy of the Pistis Sophia, all her wanderings, distress, and repentance in the world of darkness, followed from the one initial fact that she mistook the light she saw below for the "Light of Lights" for which she yearned, and went after it into the depths. We have furthermore, especially in Mani's speculation, the frequent use of a divine likeness as a bait used either by the archons to lure and entrap divine substance or by the messengers of the deity to extract captured light-substance from the hold of the archons. We now see that the Narcissus motif in the love-error of the Anthropos in the *Poimandres* is a subtle variation and combination of several of the enumerated themes. He is not as guilty as that primordial Soul which succumbs to a desire for the pleasures of the body, for it is the beauty of his own divine form, itself the perfect likeness of the highest God, that draws him downward. He is more guilty than the simply deceived Pistis Sophia, for he wished to act independently and could not mistake the reflection down below for the light of the Father from whom he had purposely departed. Yet he is half excused by his error, in that he was ignorant of the true

[16] Cf. the Mandaean passage "Abathur (one of the Uthras plotting the creation of a world) goes into that world [of darkness]. . . . He sees his face in the black water, and his likeness and son is formed unto him out of the black water." This son is Ptahil-Uthra, the actual demiurge of this world (G 173). This example from an area so far removed from the intellectual environment in which Plotinus met *his* Gnostics shows how persistently the act of mirroring is conceived in gnostic literature as the production of an *alter ego*, and at the same time how closely this is connected with cosmogony.

nature of the lower elements, clothed as they were in his own reflection. Thus the projection of his form upon earth and water has lost the character of a substantial event in itself, and in the hands of this Hellenistic author has become a means of motivating rather than constituting the submersion of a divine emanation in the lower world.

The Ascent of the Soul

We come now to the ascent of the knower's soul after death, the main prospect held out to the true Gnostic or pneumatic, in the anticipation of which he conducts his life. After what we have heard about the current doctrines connected with the astral descent of the soul, the description of the ascent in the *Poimandres* requires no further explanation: it is the reversal of the former. But some parallels and variations from other schools of gnostic speculation may emphasize the wide currency and great importance of this theme throughout the whole range of gnostic religion. The celestial journey of the returning soul is indeed one of the most constant common features in otherwise widely divergent systems, and its significance for the gnostic mind is enhanced by the fact that it represents a belief not only essential in gnostic theory and expectation, and expressive of the conception of man's relation to the world, but of immediate *practical* importance to the gnostic believer, since the meaning of *gnosis* is to prepare for this final event, and all its ethical, ritual, and technical instruction is meant to secure its successful completion. Historically there is an even more far-reaching aspect to the ascent doctrines than their literal meaning. In a later stage of "gnostic" development (though no longer passing under the name of Gnosticism) the external topology of the ascent through the spheres, with the successive divesting of the soul of its worldly envelopments and the regaining of its original acosmic nature, could be "internalized" and find its analogue in a psychological technique of inner transformations by which the self, *while still in the body*, might attain the Absolute as an immanent, if temporary, condition: an ascending scale of mental states replaces the stations of the mythical itinerary: the dynamics of progressive spiritual self-transformation, the spatial thrust through the heavenly spheres. Thus could transcendence itself be turned into immanence, the whole process

become spiritualized and put within the power and the orbit of the subject. With this transposition of a mythological scheme into the inwardness of the person, with the translation of its objective stages into subjective phases of self-performable experience whose culmination has the form of ecstasis, gnostic myth has passed into mysticism (Neoplatonic and monastic), and in this new medium it lives on long after the disappearance of the original mythological beliefs.

In the *Poimandres* the ascent is described as a series of progressive subtractions which leaves the "naked" true self, an instance of Primal Man as he was before his cosmic fall, free to enter the divine realm and to become one again with God. We have encountered before an alternative version of the ascent, where not the stripping of the soul but its passage as such is the point of the journey. This version implies that what begins the ascent is already the pure pneuma disengaged from its earthly encumbrances, and furthermore that the rulers of the spheres are hostile powers trying to bar its passage with the aim of detaining it in the world. For both versions there is ample evidence in gnostic writings. Wherever we hear of the doffing of garments, the slipping of knots, the loosing of bonds in the course of the upward journey, we have analogies to the *Poimandres* passage. The sum of these knots, etc., is called "psyche": thus it is the soul that is put off by the pneuma (e.g., Iren. I. 7. 1; 21. 5). In this way the ascent is not only topological but also a qualitative process, that of putting off the worldly nature. It is noteworthy that in certain cults this ultimate process was anticipated by ritual enactments which in the way of sacraments were to effect the transformation provisionally or symbolically already in this life and guarantee its definitive consummation in the next. Thus the mysteries of Mithras had for their initiates the ceremonial of passing through seven gates arranged on ascending steps representing the seven planets (the so-called *klimax heptapylos,* Origen *Contra Celsum* VI. 22); in those of Isis we find a successive putting on and off of seven (or twelve) garments or animal disguises. The result achieved by the whole protracted and sometimes harrowing ritual was called rebirth (*palingenesia*): the initiate himself was supposed to have been reborn as the god. The terminology of "rebirth," "reformation" (metamorphosis), "transfiguration" was

coined in the context of these rituals as part of the language of the mystery cults. The meanings and applications that could be given to these metaphors were wide enough to make them fit into various theological systems, their prima-facie appeal being "religious" in general rather than dogmatically specific. But though by neither origin nor validity bound to the gnostic frame of reference, they were eminently suited to gnostic purposes. In the context of the mystery cult, or in private and spiritualized substitutions for it inspired by its general model, the "celestial journey" might become an actual visionary experience attainable in the brief ecstatic state. The so-called Mithras Liturgy[17] gives a circumstantial description of such an experience, preceded by instructions on how to prepare for and induce the visionary state. (The theological system in this case is cosmic-pantheistic, not dualistic, the aim immortality by union with the cosmic principle, not liberation from the cosmic yoke.) The more specifically gnostic conception of the journey as a gradually subtractive ascent through the spheres had a long mystical and literary afterlife. A thousand years after the *Poimandres,* Omar Khayyám sings

> Up from earth's center through the seventh gate
> I rose, and on the throne of Saturn sate,
> And many a knot unravel'd by the road;
> But not the master-knot of human fate.
>
> There was the door to which I found no key;
> There was the veil through which I might not see:
> Some little talk awhile of Me and Thee
> There was—and then no more of Thee and Me.
> (Rubā'īs 31-32 in Fitzgerald's translation)

The other version of the ascent, less spiritualized, has a more sinister aspect. It is with anxiety and dread that the soul anticipates its future encounter with the terrible Archons of this world bent on preventing its escape. In this case the gnosis has two tasks: on the one hand to confer a magical quality upon the soul by which it becomes impregnable and possibly even invisible to the watchful Archons (sacraments performed in this life may secure this end);

[17] Misleadingly so called since it is a literary product, not an actual cult document.

on the other hand by way of instruction to put man in possession of the names and the potent formulas by which the passage can be forced, and this "knowledge" is one meaning of the term "gnosis." The secret names of the Archons have to be known, for this is an indispensable means of overcoming them—the pagan author Celsus who writes about these beliefs ridicules those who "have wretchedly learned by heart the names of the doorkeepers" (Origen *Contra Celsum* VII. 60). While this part of the "gnosis" is crude magic, the formulas by which the Archons are to be addressed reveal significant aspects of the gnostic theology. We quoted one of them before (Ch. 6, *a*) and add here a few more examples. Epiphanius read in a gnostic Gospel of Philip:

> The Lord revealed to me what the soul must say when ascending into heaven, and how she must answer each of the upper powers: "I have come to know myself, and I have collected myself from everywhere, and I have not sown children to the Archon but have uprooted his roots and have collected the dispersed members, and I know thee who thou art: for I am of those from above." And thus she is released.
>
> (Ephiph. *Haer.* 26. 13)

Origen in his precious account of the Ophites renders their complete list of the answers to be given "at the eternally chained gates of the Archons," of which we translate the following two. To Ialdabaoth, "first and seventh":

> . . . I, being a word of the unmixed Nous, a perfect work to Son and Father, bearing a symbol imprinted with the character of Life—I open the world-gate which thou hast locked with thine aeon, and pass by thy power free again. May grace be with me, yea, Father, be it with me.

To Sabaoth:

> Archon of the fifth power, ruler Sabaoth, advocate of the law of thy creation, now undone by grace that is more powerful than thy fivefold power, behold the symbol impregnable to thine art[18] and let me pass by.
>
> (Origen *Contra Celsum* VI. 31)

[18] Tentative translation; alternatively: "impregnable symbol of thine art" (?).

nature, and give me the strength thereto; and with the same grace enlighten those of the race, my brothers and thy children, who are in ignorance.

Therefore I trust in thee and bear witness that I shall come into life and light. Praised be thou, Father, thy Man desires to be holy [or: do holy work] with thee, as thou hast granted him the full power. (*C.H.* I. 31-32)

(*d*) CONCLUSION: THE UNKNOWN GOD

The beginning and end of the paradox that is gnostic religion is the unknown God himself who, unknowable on principle, because the "other" to everything known, is yet the object of a knowledge and even asks to be known. He as much invites as he thwarts the quest for knowing him; in the failure of reason and speech he becomes revealed; and the very account of the failure yields the language for naming him. He who according to Valentinus is the Abyss, according to Basilides even "the non-being God" (Hippol., *Refut.* VII. 20); whose acosmic essence negates all object-determinations as they derive from the mundane realm; whose transcendence transcends any sublimity posited by extension from the here, invalidates all symbols of him thus devised; who, in brief, strictly defies description—he is yet enunciated in the gnostic message, communicated in gnostic speech, predicated in gnostic praise. The knowledge of him itself is the *knowledge of his unknowability;*[18] the predication upon him as thus known is by negations: thus arises the *via negationis,* the negative theology, whose melody, here first sounded as a way of confessing what cannot be described, hence swells to a mighty chorus in Western piety.

> Thou art the alone infinite
> and thou art alone the depth
> and thou art alone the unknowable
> and thou art he after whom every man seeks
> and they have not found thee
> and none can know thee against thy will
> and none can even praise thee against thy will . . .
> Thou art alone the non-containable

[18] Even to the Aeons of the Pleroma: see the Valentinian teaching, pp. 181 f.