
GNOSTIC ORIGINS AND THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN

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Identifying the Gnostics

Traditionally, Gnosticism is regarded as a second century Christian heresy; however, to declare Gnosticism as a heresy is to presume that it can only be understood in relation to the Christian Church. Indeed, many think of Gnosticism as a form of Hellenized Christian thought that added elements from other religious traditions; however, the attempt to unravel the real events in any certain historical sense is extremely challenging. First of all, it is difficult to ascribe set characteristics and practices to Gnostic thought because of the variety of texts and interpretations. Majella Franzmann explains that by the time the thoughts of the founders of the early Christian movements were written down, several crises had already permanently altered the records, which exhibit evidence of internal squabbles and external pressures.¹ This includes internal clashes between different groups, resistance from those opposed to movement beyond the religious boundaries of the founding community, early challenges to leadership and authority, and external persecution. Discussing the dynamics of early religious movements, Franzmann continues stating that

Inevitably as a religious movement moves from stories and simple sayings or statements of belief to more complex doctrines, the potential for disagreement among members and larger groupings increases. As more rules are made about behaviour and ritual, further room for disagreement arises. Rules are as much about defining what is left out as much as what should be kept in, and at this [early] stage of settling down and increasing institutionalism, various Christian groups became more concerned about who was a member and who was not a member. At this stage, the labels of orthodoxy and heterodoxy become important for the purposes of making a clear distinction between groups.²

Contemporary research on Gnosticism, particularly since the Nag Hammadi discovery, strongly suggests that the heterodox have been treated unfairly within the histories of mainstream Christianity. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy are relative to where one stands, and very difficult to determine in the early stages of religious movements. It is important to note that Gnosticism existed as part of early Christianity, but also independently from it. As Christianity spread, it converted Christians from increasingly different backgrounds and worldviews.

¹ M. Franzmann, "A Complete History of Early Christianity: Taking the 'Heretics' Seriously," *JRH* 29 (2005): 117.

² *Ibid.*, 118.

The Gnostic version of early Christianity drew from the Gnostic movement in Greco-Roman society, the latter being older and more commonly widespread at the time. In contrast, Proto-Orthodox Christians drew from a different heritage. Proto-Orthodox groups (later identified as mainstream) labelled Gnostic Christian groups as heretical, and Gnostic Christian groups in turn labelled Proto-Orthodox Christians as heretics.

One of the primary differences between the two groups is that, in contrast to Judeo-Christian developments, Gnostic thought does not focus on knowledge of God and his agency throughout history (i.e., the Jewish covenantal promises). Rather Gnosticism focuses on knowledge of a higher transcendent realm, as well as the nature and origin of the soul and its reunification with God. From the Gnostic perspective, salvation is highly individualized and relies on self-knowledge of who one is, where one comes from, and to where one is going. Furthermore, the earthly person of Jesus (his life and death) is relatively insignificant. Even though the Gnostics were not as concerned with the human Jesus, they were willing to accept him as the ascended Christ figure who reveals salvific knowledge.³

The principle accounts of early Gnostic thought come from the heresiological reports of the early Church Fathers (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Rome, Hippolytus, etc.) and from the Gnostics themselves. The heresiological reports vary significantly in their treatment of the early Gnostics. Notably, all the reports from the early church heresy hunters see Gnostic systems as a threat to the Christianity they espoused. Franzmann points out that there is a distinct

disadvantage in depending on the apologists for information, since it is the nature of such writings to describe opponents in a derogatory way.⁴ Indeed, subsequent accounts from the Church Fathers become increasingly hostile. The earliest reports come from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Justin Martyr comments on Simon Magus (circa 150 CE), who is also mentioned in the Book of Acts (8:9-24). In the biblical account, Simon is portrayed as a charismatic charlatan who wants to bribe Peter and John for the power to "lay hands." He is also portrayed as a Samaritan, which means he would have been familiar with Judaism. It is important to note, however, that Simon is not a Christian.

Additional heresiological verification of Simon as a Gnostic comes from Irenaeus' account in *Against Heresies* (circa 185 CE). Therein, he gives a detailed summary of a myth that Simon espouses, which is very similar to the Gnostic myth found in the *Apocryphon of John*. It is noteworthy that, in his apology, Irenaeus also reports of Gnostics claiming to be "no longer Jews, nor yet are they Christians" (*Against Heresies* 1.24.6). This might suggest that Gnostics had somehow abandoned their traditional Jewish heritage, and did not embrace the "Christian" message. While it is apparent that Irenaeus and Justin Martyr did not know the Gnostic myth in its final form as found in the *Apocryphon of John*, it is clear from their writings that some of the main structural characteristics of Gnostic thought existed as a non-Christian system, circa 185 CE.⁵

⁴ Franzmann, "A Complete History of Early Christianity," 120.

⁵ B. A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 26-33. See also Frederik Wisse, translation and introduction to "The Apocryphon of John," *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson (2d ed.; The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1988; repr., New York: HarperOne, 1990), 104.

³ J. A. Grassi, "The Gnostic View of Jesus and the Teacher Today," *RE* 77 (1982): 337.

In contrast, turning to the Gnostic writings reveals a complex picture of different groups with diverse theologies and organization. The earliest Gnostic Christian systems, otherwise known as "Sethian" or "Classic" Gnosticism, developed in relative proximity to Judaism, likely in Alexandria and around the Eastern Mediterranean. It should be noted that the word "Sethian" is an overarching term used to categorize various subgroups that shared common elements—most notably the reference to the character of Seth. Another particularly evident characteristic of Sethian Gnosticism is the revelation of gnosis, or salvific knowledge, through the construction of elaborate myths. Gnostic myth is largely concerned with beginning and end times, and includes themes of theosophy, cosmogony, anthropogony, and soteriology.⁶ Furthermore, the myths serve a purpose and are used polemically. John Painter examines the presentation of history in the ancient texts, which he uses as criteria to isolate and identify the Gnostic from Proto-Orthodox developments. He argues that in contrast to Proto-Orthodox perspectives, which emphasize the priority of history, Sethian Gnosticism rejects history by focusing attention on myths on the beginning and the end, with no valid place for history in the middle. Furthermore, any historical events adopted into the systems are treated as myths that give symbolic explanations of the nature of man in the world.⁷

Another element that scholars emphasize as having heavily influenced the Sethian Gnostic worldview—particularly the sharp metaphysical dualism between the immaterial and material worlds—is Platonism. Pearson notes that Plato's work *Timaeus* (5th century BCE) reflects a cosmological structure that posits that the real being of things is appropriated through knowledge of a metaphysical structure that is the truer reality supporting what we perceive and experience in the physical world.⁸ Furthermore, understanding this structure influences people to a right ethic and puts them in line with the cosmic order. Gnostics, however, reinterpreted Platonist elements in non-Platonist directions. From the Gnostic view, metaphysical reality is explained in mythological terms, particularly through the Gnostic Sophia myth. In the Gnostic cosmogony, the physical world is perceived as an error, or a rift between higher and lower realms, which traps the true self from reuniting with God. As a result, Sethian Gnostic systems emphasize the dualistic split between the spiritual and physical, which underscores the sharp dichotomy between good and evil.

PHEME PERKINS reminds us that in the ancient world knowledge and education were associated with an elite upper class, yet the majority of people were still illiterate and relied on oral traditions.⁹ For

evident by Paul's dealings with the Gnostics in the New Testament. It is clear that these perspectives lived side-by-side and intermingled to the extent that they may have attended the same congregations. While there are many core differences, the interaction between early Christians is not unlike the way different denominations are juxtaposed in modern times. In the process, they created texts and interpretations that drew from different authoritative sources and influences, which they used as apologetic defenses in the struggle for definition.

⁶ Ibid, 14-15.

⁷ J. Painter, "Gnosticism: An Ancient Problem Raises Contemporary Questions," *JTSA* 1 (1972): 45. Painter brings up many points that deserve further qualification, such as whether the rejection of history is part of the social conscious makeup of the Gnostic, or if it is an intentional rejection of tradition. What he shows is that Gnostic Christians were clearly coming from a different historical and mythic vantage point, and interpreting Christianity in a different way than that of the Proto-Orthodox Christians. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that two perspectives did not occupy the same space, as

⁸ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 15-16.

⁹ P. Perkins, *Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (Theological Inquiries; ed Lawrence Boadt et al.; Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980), 8-11, 21.

these people, old myths, formulae, writing, and philosophical terms carried weight and authority. Perkins associates the Gnostic movement with members of the growing literate middle class who sought an authority equivalent to educated discourse without having made the conversion to analytic thought, and further claims that, while instructional, the philosophic dialogue tradition could not have been a direct source of Gnostic composition. To emphasize this point she calls attention to the fact that Gnostic writings do not argue in the analytic terms established by the philosophical schools. Rather, they tell stories which mix archaic myth, biblical exegesis, and philosophical terminology.

Perkins explains further that the allegorical esotericism espoused by Gnosticism emphasized the transcendence of the individual, and groups generally followed an unstructured form of association that had little in the way of fixed dogma. Unlike Judaism or Proto-Orthodox Christians, which focused on God's agency in history and covenantal plans for humanity, Gnostic Christians were free from ties to particular events or places (such as the crucifixion). Furthermore, Perkins claims that Gnostics were more concerned about participation in individual cults than association with a holy person or larger group. The inconsistency that resulted from one group to another led to diverse views and disputes between the different Gnostics perspectives. Perkins points out, however, that despite a lack coherency between groups, there are two distinguishing characteristics that can generally be applied to early Christian Gnostics: (1) they interpreted the Bible by using a different myth of the soul's origin and destiny, while also incorporating the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic urgency; and (2) they have a distinctive reaction *against* Jewish and biblical traditions.

Perkins identifies similar hostilities found in the Johannine community, and indicates the end of the first century where circumstances were ripe for such polarizing ambivalence to have occurred.

Adding to this, Franzmann summarizes some of the contemporary scholarship that paints a marginalized picture of the early Gnostic Christians by emphasizing that they were politically and culturally on the periphery in the Greco-Roman world.¹⁰ This is arguably because they were situated between the East and Rome and, as such, existed between Jewish and Hellenic thought. Although not all Gnostics had a Jewish heritage, it is presumed that many Gnostic Christians were essentially Gnostic Jews who converted to the Christian message, thus they understood some things about Jewish teachings, doctrines and belief systems.¹¹ They had also absorbed a great deal of Hellenic philosophy and culture.

The Apocryphon of John

The *Apocryphon of John* is understood as a Sethian work from among similar texts from the Nag Hammadi tractates, the "Untitled Text" of the Bruce Codex, and two writings from the Codex Tchacos. Key characteristics of Sethian texts include a focus on Seth as a savior figure and ancestor of the elect; a divine triad of a Father, Mother, and Son; light beings and other supernatural entities; the evil Yaldabaoth who tries to destroy the seed of Seth; three descents of the Savior that lead to salvation; and rituals of baptism

¹⁰ Franzmann, "A Complete History of Early Christianity," 125-126.

¹¹ K. Rudolph, "Zur Soziologie, soziologischen 'Verortung' und Rolle der Gnosis in der Spätantike," *Studien zum Menschenbild in Gnosis und Manichäismus* (ed. P. Nagel; Wissenschaftliche Beiträge: Martin-Luther-Universität, 1979), 19–29. Quoted in Franzmann, "A Complete History of Early Christianity," 125-126.

and ascent.¹² This being said, not all the texts exhibit all the markers. Moreover, some texts show no Christian influence, while others show varying degrees of Christianization. Still, even texts outside the corpus reflect Sethian mythological elements, which underscore the significance of the Sethian brand of Gnosticism.

Four copies of the *Apocryphon of John* exist, but there are variations between the texts. The work can be divided into three sections: an apocalyptic framework (1,1-2,26; 31,25-32,9), revelation discourse (2,26-13,13), and a commentary on Genesis 1-7 (13,13-31,25) that was modified into a dialogue. The Nag Hammadi Codex (III,1) and the Berlin Codex (BG,2) represent independent translations into Coptic of a short Greek rendering, while Nag Hammadi Codices II,1 and IV,1 are copies of the same Coptic translation of a long Greek version. Pearson points out that the longer version contains material that is missing from the shorter version, such as the hymn of Pronoia (30,11-31,25), and references from the "Book of Zoroaster" (19,10).¹³ The longer version also has Christ revealing to Adam and Eve the knowledge from the forbidden tree, whereas in the shorter version it is Epinoia—who is a manifestation of Sophia. Pearson notes further that the various versions emphasize that the Christian parts are secondary additions. Once one strips away the apocalyptic framework at the beginning and end of the text, the dialogue between Christ and John, and the few Christian glosses throughout, the remaining text stands

independently without any Christian references.¹⁴

Frederik Wisse states that *The Apocryphon of John* deals largely with the origin of evil and salvation.¹⁵ As a revelatory dialogue between the risen Christ and the Apostle John, son of Zebedee,¹⁶ the text reveals apocalyptic secrets and a salvific historiography. Wisse explains that the highest deity, or Father, is conceived as an ultimate and transcendent perfection that excludes all anthropocentrism and involvement in the world. Only the Father is self-existing—everything else emanates from him. This deity directly emanates a series of luminous beings, including Christ and Sophia, who, in turn, create other beings who are ultimately responsible for the creation of the material world. The cosmic order is divided into two: a higher heavenly realm and a lower heavenly realm. The beings in the higher heavenly realm are characterized as "luminaries" and "Aeons," who personify God's virtues like Truth, Understanding and Love. The "perfect Man" or "Adamas" also exists in this realm, and can be seen as a heavenly projection of Adam. A heavenly figure of Seth also exists, who is the son of the "perfect Man." Seth is placed below his father and Seth's seed or "the immovable race" is placed below him. Thus, Sethian Gnostics identify with the immovable race, and trace their origins back to the heavenly realm through the mythical lineage of Seth.

Contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition, evil occurs when Sophia desires to create without the consent of the Father. Consequently, what she ends up

¹² Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 60. See also T. Rasimus, "Ophite Gnosticism, Sethianism and the Nag Hammadi Library," VC 59 (2004): 249.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61-64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

¹⁵ Frederik Wisse, translation and introduction to "The Apocryphon of John." *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson (2d ed.; The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1988; repr., New York: HarperOne, 1990), 104.

¹⁶ See Mark 3:17.

producing is the monstrous creator-god Yaldabaoth, who is essentially the god of the Hebrew Bible (9,25-10,19). Yaldabaoth uses his power to create a lower heavenly cosmos with angels, humans and the physical world (10,20-19,20). The supernatural beings in this lower realm are called "Archons," but their existence is perceived as an error and a "counterfeit" rendition that mimics the higher heavenly realm. Sophia tricks Yaldabaoth to breathe life into humans, and when he does he is stripped of the light power he received from his mother, which he greedily wants to retrieve and keep for himself (19,16-20,9). The evil powers of Yaldabaoth and his minions work to keep people in ignorance of their true source so that he can devise a way to steal it back, but Christ is sent from the higher heavenly realm to remind people of their true origins and the soul's way back to God (20,10-32,9). Only those who possess this knowledge can return to the higher heavenly realm, while the rest remained trapped and are reincarnated until they come to the saving knowledge.

The myth in the *Apocryphon of John* is complicated because characters are depicted at multiple levels. According to Pearson, Sophia is cast as (1) Barbelo—the higher wisdom that originates from God and through whom God begets the Christ (4,27-6,33); (2) the lower Aeon Sophia—who creates Yaldabaoth and inadvertently the world (9,25-20,9); (3) the restored Mother Sophia (23,20-23,26); (4) Epinoia—who resides in Adam and in who's image woman is created (20,15-20,28); and (5) Christ as the Pronoia—who brings about the final salvation of the Gnostic elect (30,11-32,5).¹⁷ Similarly, many other characters have a counterparts: Yaldabaoth is clearly an imitation of the true transcendent God (10,20-11,22); as mentioned Adam is

connected to "Adamas" or the "perfect Man" (8,30-9,1); and the biblical figures of Cain, Abel, and Seth are also named as beings in the heavenly realm (10,34-36). Notably, Jesus plays a minor role compared to other figures in the *Apocryphon of John*, particularly compared to Sophia; although the two are linked. In fact, while it is clear that it is the Christ who appears and is the revealer of saving gnosis, there are arguably only three references to Jesus. This includes the mention of the "Nazarene" (1,14) and the "Savior" (31,33), and the ending colophon that mentions "Jesus Christ".

As a Sethian revelation dialogue, the *Apocryphon of John* shares many characteristics with other revelation dialogues in the Gnostic corpus. A characteristic of the revelation dialogue is the perplexities and troubling questions of the recipients just before the appearance of a heavenly revealer. In the *Apocryphon of John*, Christ appears to John when the disciple is in a desert place, pondering over such questions as: Why was the Savior sent into the world? Who is his Father, and of what nature is "the aeon to which we shall go" (1,17-29)? Gerard Lutikhuijzen remarks that in many revelation dialogues the role of the ignorant recipient is played by a disciple, and further attempts to answer (1) what the lack of knowledge means considering that the disciple purportedly attended the teaching savior during his earthly existence, and (2) how Gnostic revelations are the related to the savior's earlier teachings.¹⁸ He states:

We cannot presume *a priori* that these Gnostic evaluations of the teaching of the "earthly" Jesus are at the same time evaluations of the New Testament

¹⁸ G. P. Lutikhuijzen, "The Evaluation of the Teaching of Jesus in Christian Gnostic Revelation Dialogues," *NT 30* (1988): 158-159.

¹⁷ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 69.

accounts of this teaching... But we have also to reckon with the possibility that Christian Gnostic writers of the second or third century made *indirect* use of New Testament texts. Instances of this can be suspected in the...*Apocryphon of John*. In [it] we find an allusion to the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (28:20)...[where] the actual revelation to John is preceded by the statement, "I am the one who is with you (plur.) forever... The echoes of Matthew 28:20 in the *Apocryphon of John* are remarkable because of the fact that...further parallels with particular New Testament passages are very rare, if not wholly absent.¹⁹

Luttikhuisen concludes that there is a chronological distinction between incomplete or provisional teaching—what Jesus said before his death and resurrection, and a full and definitive teaching—the secret teaching of the resurrected Christ. Furthermore, the *Apocryphon of John* is not a Gnostic clarification of the earlier words of Jesus, but rather it conveys new revelations, which were quite possibly meant to surpass if not to replace the teachings of the "earthly" Jesus.²⁰

Comparative Analyses

Context

To better understand the *Apocryphon of John*, it is necessary to know where it is situated in the Gnostic corpus. Most of the Gnostic texts defend groups against external pressures. Returning once again to Perkins, she outlines three contexts in which Gnostic polemic is addressed.²¹ The first category, to which the *Apocryphon of John* belongs, is conversion. The texts used in conversion of both

Christians and non-Christians, present fairly extensive surveys of Gnostic teachings without overtly direct attacks on other doctrines. According to Perkins, the *Apocryphon of John* represents the most systematic exposition of gnosis, which seems to have been aimed at persuading fellow Christians. The second category of texts is concerned with asceticism. For Perkins, the content of the Gnostic revelation dialogues reveals that the majority of them insist on some form of asceticism.²² The *Testimony of Truth* provides explicit examples of this tradition, which criticizes both Proto-Orthodox Christians and Gnostics who do not renounce the world and enslaving passions. Scholars refer to the overtly ascetic Gnostic texts as the "Thomas" tradition. The third and final category of texts is concerned with defense of the Gnostic tradition. According to Perkins, these texts attempt to demonstrate the truth of a Gnostic tradition, which derived from a particular Christology and conception of the Savior, against the growing strength of the Proto-Orthodox tradition.²³ It should also be noted that compared to some of the other texts, which exist in incomplete and incomprehensible fragments, the *Apocryphon of John* has remained largely intact.²⁴

Poimandres and the Gospel of Truth

John Painter attempts to demonstrate a common basis for Christian and pagan Gnosticism by comparing the *Poimandres* tractate of the Hermetica to the *Gospel of Truth*.²⁵ The content of both texts serve as comparative sources for the *Apocryphon of John*. He maintains that in order to determine a pre-Christian source for

²² Ibid,99.

²³ Ibid,159.

²⁴ For an example of a Gnostic text that is incomplete and fragmented see *Melchizedek*.

²⁵ Painter, "Gnosticism," 48.

¹⁹ Ibid,164-165.

²⁰ Ibid,162.

²¹ Perkins, *Gnostic Dialogue*, 157-162.

Gnosticism it is necessary to demonstrate three things: (1) a unified attitude that is not derived from Christian sources; (2) that this attitude can be found in documents where there is no evidence of Christian influence; (3) and that this attitude is both central and unified to both pagan and Christian forms of Gnosticism. Central to his analysis is the claim that the common element uniting these writings is a particular understanding of humans and their place in the universe, which is alien to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Written in Egypt in the second century CE, *Poimandres* is a non-Christian, Hellenic-Gnostic document belonging to the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The understanding of humans is set in a cosmological backdrop, in which creation is brought about by the will of God through the Logos, or Mind, who begets the Demiurge, and who in turn creates the physical world. Humans are created by the "Mind" of the Father and are like him. The physical world, however, is problematic because it brings about ignorance of God and death. Ignorance of God means ignorance of the true nature of humans, the remedy of which is to rediscover one's true nature and origin. This knowledge is conveyed from the Father to humans through the Logos, and concerns the nature of humans and their divine origin, rather than knowledge of God.

In comparison, the *Gospel of Truth* is identified as an early Valentinian work. Painter claims that although it lacks a more developed cosmological mythology characteristic of Gnosticism, it nevertheless points out the Gnostic understanding of existence. Reference to Jesus is incidental to the teaching concerning the nature of the created order and the perversion of that order through error. The Gnostic understanding is set against a familiar cosmological backdrop:

only the Father is self-existing—all things exist in him (27,9-11), and from him emanate a son and other beings called "Aeons" (38,7-36). One Aeon in particular concerns the "Word," and is the way of return to the Father (16,34-17,1). The erroneous act occurs when the Aeons become ignorant of the Father, thus creating a deficiency (17,4-36). Furthermore, salvation comes through the knowledge that awakens those to their true origin and reunites the human soul with the Father (18,34-19,17; 21,8-14).²⁶

There are certain undeniable similarities between the texts in question. Interestingly, in neither document is there a redeemer or revealer figure of any significance. Rather the saving knowledge is intrinsic by virtue of humans having the essence of the divine spark within. A central theme is the problem of physical matter, which is brought about by error and which represents a trap that can only be overcome by realizing one's true nature and origin. This teaching is clearly foreign to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Painter concludes that the *possibility* of a non-Christian Gnosticism must be allowed since it can be shown that the Hermetica and second century Christian Gnostic texts share a common idea of knowledge, which is central to their systems, but alien to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Alchemical Traditions

Régine Charron draws attention back to the Egyptian alchemical tradition which clearly exhibits strong similarities to Gnostic texts.²⁷ She also argues that the alchemical tradition is often left out of the discussion, and as a result remains somewhat unknown. The alchemy to

²⁶ Ibid.50-51.

²⁷ R. Charron, "The Apocryphon of John and the Greco-Egyptian Alchemical Literature." *VC* 59 (2005): 438-448.

which Charron refers was practiced in the first few centuries CE in Egypt as a mystical art of transformation, which was applied to the soul as readily as it was to material elements. The principle evidence of Charron's thesis is supported by (1) metaphorical "baptismal" rituals of transformation, and (2) similarities between the Pronoia Hymn in the *Apocryphon of John* and the alchemical teachings of Cleopatra. Charron argues that the authors of Gnostic and alchemical texts display a common intellectual and religious background, as well as the common use of Jewish, Hermetic and Christian philosophical sources. Furthermore, the ultimate goal of both Gnostic and alchemical activities was the achievement of a salvific state of unity and of spiritual perfection. In addition to being a technical operation, Charron argues that alchemy also has a mystical aspect that can be understood as a redemptive process.

One of the most interesting features in the alchemical writings is the use of allegorical language. In their descriptions, the alchemists refer to metallic substance as composed of a body, soul, and spirit that are transformed into a perfected state through a process called dyeing, which comes from the same etymological root as baptism—namely to "dip." Further connection is given to the language in the descent of Pronoia in the *Apocryphon of John* whose third and final descent is meant to bring light and redemption to the dead lying in the prison of darkness in Hades. By comparing the teaching of Cleopatra in the alchemical text to the Pronoia discourse, Charron attempts to establish the similarities in the themes and terminology as follows:

The numerous liturgical terms and motifs shared by both texts are remarkable: the dead lying in Hades (in prison, in darkness), the spirit of darkness, the sleep and call to

awakening, the illuminating and vivifying water coming from above, the "raising up" or resurrection, the sealing and the gift of immortality. In both texts, it is a female figure who "calls" to awakening: the soul (Psychè) in the alchemical writing, and Pronoia in the *Apocryphon of John*... Finally, the achievement of this salvific [task] in both texts is called a "sealing," with the "life-giving water" associated with light from the divine realm.²⁸

Overall, Charron successfully links the two texts, and three things are made clearer: (1) the fact that forms of non-Christian Gnostic traditions coexisted and developed alongside Christian ones; (2) Egypt was a likely place for the origination and development of Gnosticism; and (3) the pseudo-science discipline of classic alchemy mixed a particular mythical understanding of the world with spirituality and mystic formulae, which also exhibits strong similarities to the basic Gnostic teachings.

The Descent Motif

Edwin Yamauchi outlines key arguments in the early twentieth century scholarship that posits the descent of Sophia as a reflection of the Babylonian myth of the descent of Ishtar—which itself was based on the Sumerian descent of Inanna.²⁹ The most obvious parallel is the act of descent itself, in which the female figure goes down to the underworld where she is subjected to abuse. The parallels, however, do not stop there. In the Gnostic text *The Thunder; Perfect Mind*, a female revealer figure, likely Sophia, expresses herself in a series of "I am" statements, and tells a story in a poetic form that mirrors the structure in other

²⁸ Ibid.450.

²⁹ E. M. Yamauchi, "The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Roots of Gnosticism," *TB* (1978): 144-153.

Near Eastern mythology—such as with the descent stories. Additionally, in ancient Babylonian mythology Ishtar was called "The Prostitute," and connection is made to the reference of "Sophia *Prunikos*" or "Wisdom the Whore" in the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*. This also recalls the fallen Sophia embodied in Helen, who was purportedly a prostitute, in the heresiological accounts concerning Simon Magus.

The flow of logic presumes that such Babylonian and Sumerian mythology would have been known in ancient Israel, disseminated in light of the Babylonian Diaspora, and eventually influencing the development of the Gnostic Sophia myth. However, the connections are far-reaching and tenuous at best. Yamauchi points out that apart from the descent and the designation of prostitute "...there are no convincing correlations in the development of the myths as far as the motives, the modes and the results of their descents are concerned."³⁰ Hence we must look elsewhere for the origin of the myth of Sophia's fall.

Jewish Antecedents

In his seminal article, George MacRae reviews points of contact with the Jewish Wisdom Tradition and the Gnostic Sophia myth, such as found in Sethian Gnostic texts, to show how the latter may have developed from the former.³¹ He also argues that the Sethian-Ophite version of the myth demonstrates the more original character by virtue of its occurrence in non-Christian Gnostic contexts. MacRae posits that the Gnostic Sophia myth has its origin in the combination of the Jewish tendency toward the hypostatization of divine

attributes and the widespread ancient myths of the female deity. He gives fifteen parallels: (1) Sophia is personal (*passim* in both literatures); (2) Sophia is joined in intimate union with God (Wis. 7:25-26; Prov. 8:30); (3) Sophia was brought forth from or in the beginning (Prov. 8:22; Sir. 1:4, 24:9); (4) Sophia dwells in the clouds (Sir. 24:4; LXX Bar. 3:29); (5) Sophia attends God's throne or is herself enthroned (Wis. 9:4; 1 Enoch 84:3; Sir. 24:4); (6) Sophia is identified with a (Holy) Spirit (Wis. 7:7, 7:22-23, 9:17); (7) Sophia was at least instrumental in the creation of the world (Prov. 3:19, 8:27-30, etc.); (8) Sophia communicates wisdom and revelation to humans; (9) Sophia descends into the world of humans (1 Enoch 13:2; LXX Bar. 3:37); (10) Sophia re-ascends to her celestial home (1 Enoch 13:12); (11) Sophia protected, delivered and strengthened Adam (Wis. 10:1-2); (12) Sophia is referred to as a "sister" (Prov. 7:4); (13) Sophia is associated with a sevenfold cosmic structure (Prov. 9:1). (14) Sophia is identified with life (Prov. 8:35; LXX Bar. 9:14 etc.); and (15) Sophia is a tree of life (Prov. 3:18 ; 1 Enoch 32:3-6).³²

Interestingly, the main difference between the Jewish Wisdom Tradition and the Gnostic Sophia is in the attitudes toward Wisdom, and MacRae notes further that the Jewish sources do not explain the notion of a *fall* of Sophia. In the Jewish Wisdom Tradition Sophia is a positive figure, whereas in Gnosticism she is at least partly a negative being. MacRae puts forward that the key in the transition (from the Jewish Wisdom Tradition to the Gnostic Sophia myth) may prove to be in the Gnostic attitude toward Judaism. He states that it must arise from the confrontation of religious and philosophical ideas in the syncretistic processes. Furthermore, whatever the

³⁰ Ibid, 150.

³¹ G. W. MacRae, "The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth," *NT* 12 (1970): 86-101.

³² Ibid, 88-94.

precise origin, it is a foreign element that uses forms of Jewish thought and expression to drive it toward what we know as Gnosticism.

MacRae and Yamaguchi maintain that no single form of Jewish tradition can account for the pre-cosmic fall of Sophia, nor indeed can any single line of non-Jewish thought account for it. Some scholars posit that the fall of Sophia myth may go as far back to the Jewish traditions of the fall of celestial beings in Genesis 6, and moreover the fall of Eve in Genesis 3.³³ MacRae argues, however, that while use of the Hebrew Bible in Gnostic texts points to Jewish sources, merely citing the Old Testament does not demonstrate Jewish origin.³⁴ Given such limited use of the Hebrew Bible in Gnostic texts, it is possible that the authors had only a very basic understanding of the Jewish thought. Overall, MacRae's work helps to elucidate the points of contact between the Jewish Wisdom Tradition and the Gnostic Sophia myth. Yamauchi also reminds us that no single source can satisfactorily explain all the facets of a syncretistic religion like Gnosticism. He states that

Hellenism, which was certainly pre-Christian, formed the intellectual climate of the age which viewed the human body with prejudice... Hellenistic philosophy and astrology provided Gnosticism with its anthropology... This anthropology viewed man's spirit/soul as a divine spark imprisoned in the body's tomb—a view prefigured by Plato... we may concur that Judaism provided Gnosticism with its cosmological myth.³⁵

Yamaguchi warns further that in the attempt to explain Gnosticism as the acute Hellenization of Christianity by focusing on the Jewish elements, scholars are in danger of undervaluing the obvious Hellenistic elements of Gnosticism.

Conclusions

Contemporary scholarship attempts to account for the origins of Gnosticism by examining the closest logical precursors to Gnostic thought. The primary sources of Gnostic thought come from the Gnostics themselves and the heresiological reports against them. But the problem in working with the apologists is obvious: they do not deliver a neutral observation, but rather take the offensive. Furthermore, the problem of heresy becomes even more acute when one considers the possibility of a pre- or non-Christian source for Gnosticism. The evidence strongly suggests that the basic Gnostic myth, as presented in the *Apocryphon of John*, was well known in the early to mid second century CE. Thus, given time for development it is evident that Gnostic thought was already spreading and circulating around the same time as the Christian message, and it is only through syncretism with Christianity that it began to be considered as a heretical threat.

Early Gnostic accounts are partially confirmed by the account of Simon in the Book of Acts (circa 90-100 CE), and the corresponding heresiological reports of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. But the heresiological reports vary so greatly and the reliability of their accounts becomes questionable, particularly where Simon gains supernatural powers, such as the ability to fly. It should also be noted that the biblical account makes no reference of a "Gnostic" Simon or the Gnostic myth for that matter. This being said, it is not unfathomable that Simon was a real person. Either way, he represents

³³ Yamauchi, "The Descent of Ishtar," 151.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 170-173.

someone with a particular religious perspective that was becoming contentious with the Church Fathers.

While it is certain that a type of Sethian Gnosticism existed in a non-Christian form, it is difficult to say with certainty how it existed in a *pre-Christian* form. This is largely because there is no concrete textual evidence that places a version of the basic Sethian mythical structure prior to the second century. This suggests an impetus somewhere around 70-150 CE for the birth of Christian Gnosticism, as it is understood today. Furthermore, it is suggested that the key in understanding the impetus lies in the anti-Jewish attitudes that developed around the same time. The basic Gnostic myth would have needed at least a few decades to develop and be disseminated, which places the origin of the myth as we know it, and the anti-Jewish polemic, around the end of the first century and possibly earlier.

It is likely that Gnosticism developed in or around Alexandria, Egypt, as evident by striking similarities to the alchemical and hermetic texts of the same period. The Christian Gnostics' particular understanding of the world affects what they find valuable and worth theologizing in the Christian message—particularly in regards to Jewish doctrine and tradition, and the significance of Jesus. Gnostics often politicized against each other, but most could accept the Christ as a wisdom figure who came to reveal to humans the saving truth. Although there are undoubtedly core differences, this basic overarching claim is not entirely dissimilar from other Christian perspectives. Gnostics, however, were not that familiar with Jesus and therefore his significance is fairly marginal. This is evident in the *Apocryphon of John* where little mention of the name Jesus is made.

It is undeniable that there are strong Jewish precursors to the Gnostic Sophia myth, and it is plausible to think that the basic Gnostic myth, including the fall of Sophia, began to develop around the end of the first century CE. In addition, the many non-Christian precursors could be traced as far back as the fifth century BCE, approximately five hundred years before the birth of the Christian movement. Furthermore, the negative reinterpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the anti-Jewish polemic could be representative of an earlier revolt within Judaism. Gnostic Christians were likely Gnostic Jews who converted to the Christian message. It is important to note, however, that the differing treatment of Sophia, particularly her fall from grace, does not appear before the first century, which reflects an important shift that scholars have yet to explain conclusively.

It is logically posited that there must have been an impetus for Christian Gnosticism brought about by the clash between Jewish and Christian ideologies, around the end of the first century. The Jewish Wisdom Tradition provides one of the strongest precursors to the basic Gnostic Sophia mythology. When one reads the Classical Gnostic Sophia myth, as found in the *Apocryphon of John*, there is also a clear sense of Hellenic thought that is ontologically foreign to both Judaism and Jewish Christianity. Gnostic texts were clearly formed by people who were influenced by Hellenism, yet who lived in close vicinity to Judaism and who had access to Scripture. Although Gnosticism purportedly "lost" the struggle for orthodoxy, it would be an error to conclude that Gnosticism simply originated and ended with the early Christian Church.

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Airplane Wing

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