

GNOSTIC BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: HOW JEWISH WERE THE GNOSTICS?

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Since the discovery of the ancient codices at Nag Hammadi in 1945, the study of Gnosticism has changed dramatically. As new research is being conducted, the hypothesis that Gnosticism began in a Jewish *milieu* is becoming more plausible. Several scholars are of the opinion that any Christian elements within Gnostic literature are purely secondary additions to the basic Gnostic creation myth by a Christian scribe. In fact, many of the Gnostic codices found at Nag Hammadi have no basic Christian elements.¹ One of the most essential features of Gnosticism is that saving *gnosis* comes through revelation from a transcendent realm. This revelation must be mediated by a revealer who has come from the Pleroma in order to awaken people to knowledge of God and knowledge of the true nature of the human self. Gnostics can only be called Christians when they perceive Jesus Christ as being the divine revealer or bearer of saving *gnosis*. Usually, Jesus is understood to be the biblical figure Seth; literally, Seth puts on Jesus.² Gnostics also possess a different interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus. For example, because of their soteriology they see the divine revealer leaving the earthly Jesus on the cross. If Jesus is understood to be the Seth from Genesis then perhaps there

is a strong Jewish connection which would explain how the Gnostics came to adopt such biblical figures. The texts found at Nag Hammadi provide a new world of information and even more questions concerning this group who allegedly “invented myriad ways of evil.”³

The heresiologists, such as Irenaeus, Epiphanius, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Pseudo-Tertullian, described the Gnostics in ways that do not always directly correspond to what is found in the Nag Hammadi Codices. The Church fathers were polemicizing against the Gnostics, and until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, this was the only information that scholars had concerning the issue of the identity of Gnostics and their place in the history of Early Christianity. Therefore, the only conclusions and definitions of Gnostics that could be made were based on these second to fourth-century writings. This information was not always reliable since the Church fathers wrote for a particular reason: to purify and protect the emerging proto-Orthodox Church from any Gnostic influences. The Nag Hammadi discovery gives scholars the opportunity to redefine the role and identity of Gnostics in the first centuries of Christianity. One

¹ For example, the *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VIII, 5); *Marsanes* (NHC X, 1); the *Thought of Norea* (NHC IX, 2); the *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V, 5); *Allogenes* (NHC XI, 3).

² Seth is the third son of Adam and Eve, Genesis 4:25.

³ The Gnostics According to St. Epiphanius, “Against the Gnostics also known as Borborites, 25.2.1”, Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday Press, 1995, 202.

hypothesis concerning the origins of Gnosticism is to understand it as a deviant form of Christianity. This definition was one of the first to be supported by scholars. It was strongly influenced by the heresiologists. Elaine Pagels explains that “some [scholars] reasoned that since these [Gnostic] gospels were heretical, they must have been written later than the gospels of the New Testament.”⁴ There are many challenges to this thesis, since Gnostic thought can be seen as being highly influenced by other systems, most which predate Christianity. This includes Greek philosophy, Hellenistic mystery cults, Oriental connections (Iran, Babylonia, and Egypt), and Judaism. The most convincing argument is that Judaism is the *topos* for the emergence of Gnosticism. A close examination of the Church fathers can provide pieces of the puzzle. For example, Irenaeus wrote in his work *Against Heresies* 1.24.6: “The multitude, however, cannot understand these matters, but only one out of a thousand, or two out of ten thousand. They declare that they are no longer Jews, and that they are not yet Christians; and that it is not at all fitting to speak openly of their mysteries, but right to keep them secret by preserving silence.” Such a statement seems to indicate that Gnosticism was in alienation and revolt against Judaism, and did not begin within Christianity.

There are several more factors involved in determining if Gnosticism can be considered to originate from Jewish traditions. One example from Irenaeus is simply not enough evidence. In this article, it will first be argued that the Hellenistic-Roman world, in which Diaspora Jews found themselves, provided the most opportune locale for the beginnings of Gnosticism. This will then be confirmed by the presence of

Jewish motifs and traditions which appear in Gnostic literature. The *Apocryphon of John*, the *Testimony of Truth*, and *Melchizedek*, all of which come from the Nag Hammadi Library, will be examined in order to demonstrate how Gnostics used Jewish themes to create their own theology, cosmology, anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology.

The Historical Context: Gnosticism and Judaism

The origin of Gnosticism is a hotly debated issue. In the Nag Hammadi Library many texts explicitly demean Jewish Scripture. This may cause some to wonder if a Jewish sect could be responsible for the negative reinterpretations of Jewish Scripture found within Gnostic literature. There are good reasons to answer in the affirmative, even though Gnosticism is an apostasy to the Jewish faith. Many connections between Gnosticism and Judaism can be established.⁵ The Jewish origin of Gnosticism is an important hermeneutical key to understanding some of the Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt.

At the time of the Roman occupation of Egypt (circa 37 BCE), Alexandria was the home to approximately 500,000 to 1,000,000 Jews. The Ptolemaic monarchy was dismantled. Due to this new leadership there was a major shift in the socio-economic, political, and religious state of affairs which contributed to the emergence of Gnosticism among Diaspora Jews. The Jews lost many of their secular rights and privileges as the state changed from Ptolemaic rule to Roman rule. The society was more individualistic in nature, and Judaism was being viewed as an impediment from

⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), xvi-xvii.

⁵ Francis T. Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth: Jewish Elements in Gnostic Creation Myths* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 2. Fallon believes that there is a connection between Judaism and Gnosticism.

within. Especially in the higher social circles, being a Jew under Roman rule was a negative aspect and an encumbrance to one's way of life. Therefore, it can be argued that it is from this social condition that Gnosticism began to develop among Diaspora Jews. There was a radical change of consciousness primarily due to the new individualistic element within the society. Considering the high level of innovative reinterpretation of Jewish biblical traditions, allegorical interpretations, incorporation of Greek mythology and philosophy (Middle-Platonism), into their ideology of theogony, cosmogony, anthropogony, soteriology, and eschatology, it was most likely a higher class of educated Jews who developed Gnostic thought in its early stages. This provided the foundation for the community who used the texts of the Nag Hammadi Library approximately three centuries later.

These Jews sought to reinterpret their own sacred texts, as well as the cultural influences of the Hellenistic society in which they lived, in order to make sense of their particular negative situation. The Torah leaves many unanswered questions which could not always be satisfied by Jewish extra-biblical literature. They did not totally abandon their religious beliefs as Jews but adapted them to their new circumstances. Gnosticism was mainly brought about by interior conflicts. It was no longer favourable to be a Jew within their society, and for some this provided the perfect environment to re-evaluate their religious beliefs. The multicultural environment of Alexandria supplied their influences and inspirations for reinterpretations.

What are Scholars Saying About Gnosticism?

Birger A. Pearson has been a scholar of Gnosticism for decades. He supports the idea that Gnosticism has Jewish origins. In his work, Pearson states "Gnosticism originated in a Jewish environment. The earliest attested mythological systems of "Sethian" or "Classic" Gnosticism are made up of innovative reinterpretations of biblical and Jewish traditions."⁶ Pearson critiques the work of Moritz Friedlander, as he can be considered the first to suggest that Gnosticism originated in Judaism.⁷ Pearson agrees with most of the ideas put forth by Friedlander, but highlights his disadvantage of writing prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library. Pearson's most prominent critique of Friedlander's work is his choice of sources. Pearson astutely makes suggestions for the improvement of Friedlander's arguments. According to Pearson, this important section from Philo's *On the Confusion of Tongues 2f* can be used to prove that a class of antinomian Jews was clearly present in Alexandria:

Those who are disgusted with their ancestral institutions and are always taking pains to criticize and find fault with the Laws use these and similar passages (Genesis 11:1-9) as excuses for their godlessness. These impious people say, "Do you still regard with solemnity the commandments as though they contained canons of truth itself? Look, your so-called holy books also contain myths such as those you ridicule whenever you hear them recited by others. Indeed, what is the need to collect the numerous examples

⁶ Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 3.

⁷ Pearson is referring to Friedlander's book entitled *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus*. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 11-12.

scattered throughout the Law, as we might if we had the leisure to press the charges, when we need only remind you of those examples that are ready at hand?"⁸

Clearly there were Jews within this specific community who were doing more than simply reinterpreting and allegorizing Jewish Scripture in new ways. It is less clear that the group being referred to here by Philo are indeed Gnostics. Such a conclusion would be speculative and needs further confirmation. This passage, however, does help support the hypothesis that the innovative re-interpretations of Jewish Scripture found in Gnostic literature could have originated within Diaspora Judaism. Some Jews were less dogmatic towards Mosaic Law which meant they were critical of their own traditions and willing to be openly critical about discrepancies within their traditions and scriptures. Pearson believes that a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism that existed in Alexandria is plausible. As more texts from the Nag Hammadi Library are studied, the evidence continues to mount that Gnosticism was a Jewish heresy not a Christian heresy when it first began. Pearson finds it impossible to deny that Gnosticism began among Hellenized Jews. The real issue is now to determine if the Gnostic movement was isolated to Alexandria or also included Hellenistic Jews from Palestine or Syria.⁹

Biblical exegesis in Gnostic literature is one of the most essential attributes to Gnosticism. Pearson states that "a close examination of many Gnostic texts will, in fact, show a considerable indebtedness to the Old Testament (and not only to the

Book of Genesis)."¹⁰ Pearson goes on to explain that Gnostic myth contains elements of the Jewish traditions of exegesis, on top of the many references to the Hebrew Bible texts.

Gershom G. Scholem is another scholar who discusses the relationship between Gnostic and Jewish sources.¹¹ He does not find it surprising that Gnostic and Jewish sources can explain each other, and that the Gnostics sought to deliberately change the material that they borrowed.¹² Scholem uses many examples to demonstrate this connection. One of his examples is of particular interest because it reveals how Gnostics reinterpreted a Jewish source describing Lilith mythology. Lilith was a child-devouring female demon who encountered the Prophet Elijah. When they encountered each other, Elijah asked Lilith where she was going. Lilith replied that she was on her way to drink blood and eat children. Scholem explains that even though this encounter is not found in Talmudic and old midrashic sources, it was "used and turned upside down by antinomian Gnostics of the third, or at least the early fourth, century."¹³ Epiphanius provides the evidence for Gnostic perversion of this story. In *Pararion*, Epiphanius quotes a Gnostic apocryphon which tells of how Elijah met "with a female demon who introduces herself to him as his own succubus! Elijah is said by these Gnostics to have come back into the world after his ascent to

⁸ Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 20-21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29. Also see Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), 72. "...Gnostics frequently borrowed Jewish material and deliberately changed it." On the Jewish origin for Gnosticism see Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 253.

¹¹ Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 73.

heaven.”¹⁴ Scholem understands this to be Gnostic corruption of Jewish literature.

Textual Analysis: *What did the Gnostics Say?*

There are several features of *gnosis* that can be identified in the texts that were found at Nag Hammadi. For example, the experience of a distant, other-worldly, different and supreme God is central to Gnostic thought. They believed in the existence of further divine beings (and their separation), who are closer to man than to the supreme God. The idea that the world and matter are evil is present in many of these texts. As a result, the Gnostic feels like a stranger in this world. Since the world is evil it could not have been the creation of the unknowable, supreme God. Gnostics found a disconnection between the “almighty” God of Genesis 1:1 and the “unknowing” God of Genesis 3:9-11. They were skeptical that the “almighty” God would not have known that Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree.¹⁵ Gnostics were unwilling to accept that God is not always all-knowing. Therefore, they believed in the existence of a lower creator God (*Demiurgos*: craftsman, architect).

Some Gnostic texts also contain a mythological drama where the divine element falls from the *Pleroma* into the evil world and inhabits some human beings. Gnostics are a class of individuals who possess this divine spark. The divine element seeks freedom from the evil material world. *Gnosis* is imparted through a heavenly revealer (redeemer) figure, who comes from the divine realm and will ascend to it again. This revealer of *gnosis* has taken on many forms within Gnostic literature. Sometimes the revealer is the biblical figure Seth, Jesus Christ, or

Simon Magus.¹⁶ Salvation is gained through *gnosis* of the divine element (God) in humankind. The goal of the Gnostic is the return of the spark to the *Pleroma*. This brief overview of Gnostic ideology is characteristic of many texts found in the Nag Hammadi library, the Bruce and Askew Codices, and the Codex Tchacos.

Another characteristic of Gnostics is their reproof of Moses and their claim to possess the correct interpretations of Jewish scriptures.¹⁷ These reinterpretations are what connect Gnosticism to Judaism. Gnosticism, especially in what has been defined as Sethian-Gnosticism, respected and adored the biblical Seth, son of Adam.¹⁸ Their belief in an unknowable God stems from the Hebrew Bible. Many texts contain the traditions from Genesis. The personification of wisdom (*Sophia*) which has Jewish roots can also be found in Gnostic literature.¹⁹ Since creation is evil, Gnostics believed in a Demiurge. The Gnostic Demiurge is the Jewish God of the Hebrew Bible. Whereas Judaism created a complex angelology and demonology, and apocalyptic literature to

¹⁶ For examples concerning the role of Simon Magus in Gnostic thought see: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.22.3 and 1.27.4; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.15; *Martyrdom of Peter* 3. The church fathers considered Simon Magus to be an important figure in the advent of Gnostics.

¹⁷ For an example of this see the *Apocryphon of John* (NH II 13.19-20; 23.3; 29.6).

¹⁸ *Three Steles of Seth*, NHC VII, 5: 118, 12-13; Seth is a Gnostic saviour figure.

¹⁹ The personification of wisdom (Genesis 1:1, Sirach 24:1-9, Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-27, Proverbs 8:22-36). Wisdom was created by God as his first act, pre-existing the world and its creation. Wisdom is the fashioner of all things; she is also intelligent, pure, holy, unique, unpolluted, and all-powerful. Because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. She is the breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty. She is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness. 1 Enoch 42:1-3. Since Gnostics believe creation to be evil, *Sophia*'s role in creation is seen as her greatest shame. *Sophia* has a dual role. She is a fallen being but also a saviour and a life-giving mother. Compare to Genesis 1:2, which can be interpreted or translated as “the spirit of God”.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁵ Genesis 3:11

account for evil in the world, the Gnostics created a lower creator God (Demiurge) and renounced this world. The Gnostic Demiurge helps to solve the problem of evil in the world, taking the blame from the unknowable God to preserve his ultimate purity.

The Gnostics use three specific examples from the Hebrew Bible to demonstrate their understanding of the inferiority of the Jewish God. The passage from Exodus 20:5 is always used to support their claims: “You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me” (NRSV). Isaiah 45:5 also serves the same purpose: “I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me” (NRSV), as well as Isaiah 46:9: “for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me” (NRSV). These texts are interpreted as a way of showing the arrogance and idiocy of the Jewish God.²⁰

The Gnostic texts must be carefully scrutinized, because they are the primary sources containing the most relevant information concerning these people. Finally there is the opportunity for less ambiguity to surround those that Epiphanius called a “blasphemous assembly”.²¹ According to Irenaeus the Gnostics claimed to possess the history of the Jews. Irenaeus exposes their line of reasoning in *Against Heresies* 1.30.10, “through Moses [Ialdabaoth] brought Abraham’s descendents out of Egypt, and gave unto them the law, and made them the Jews”.²² The other side of the story can be told now. Christian traditions,

teachings, and beliefs appear to be completely absent from the *Apocalypse of Adam*. This is an excellent example of non-Christian Gnosticism. It is instead dependent on Jewish apocalyptic traditions. This tractate and others like it are evidence that Gnosticism is not exclusively dependent upon Christianity but most likely began from Judaism.

Three codices from the Nag Hammadi library will now be examined in order to give the Gnostics a voice. A close look at the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Testimony of Truth*, and *Melchizedek* will reveal the importance of Jewish influences on Gnostic thought.

Apocryphon of John: A commentary on Genesis 1-8

The central Gnostic myth contained within the *Apocryphon of John*²³ has no Christian features. What makes the *Apocryphon of John* a Christian text is the frame story found within it concerning the resurrected Jesus. It is most likely that this was later added by a Christian editor since the Gnostic myth reflects pre-Christian ideals. Christianity had many characteristics that made it attractive for Gnostics, who then adopted many of the teachings of Jesus and viewed him as the revealer of *gnosis*. For example, the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:23-38 ends with Adam, son of God and makes Jesus a direct descendant from the seed of Seth. It is evident from texts such as the *Apocryphon of John* that Seth is an important figure in Gnostic literature. Seth represents a hope for humanity, being the third son of Adam and Eve, after the violent murder of Abel and the exile of Cain.²⁴

²⁰ *Apocryphon of John* II 11,19-21; *Hypostasis of the Archons* II 86.27 – 87.4; *Apoc. Adam* V 64.1-29.

²¹ Robinson, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 206.

²² Robinson, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 178.

²³ NHC II, 1: 1,1-32, 9 equals IV, 1: 1,1-49,28; NH Library, 104-23; Foester 1:105-20; Layton, 23-51; NH Scriptures, 103-32

²⁴ Genesis 4:1-16; *Apocryphon of John* 24, 35.

Birger Pearson notes that a part of the *Apocryphon of John* is found in Irenaeus's account of the teachings of Gnostics that he called "Barbelo Gnostics" (*Against Heresies* 1.29). Pearson contends that Irenaeus did not know that these teachings were presented in the text as a revelation of Jesus Christ to his apostle John. If Pearson's interpretation is correct then this would indicate the *Apocryphon of John* was in a more archaic form compared to what is found in the Berlin Codex 8502 and in the codices at Nag Hammadi (II, III, IV). The *Apocryphon of John* existed prior to 185 C.E. and must have undergone stages of literary development as Gnosticism became more Christianized.²⁵

The core of the *Apocryphon of John* is a commentary of Genesis 1-8, used to create an anthropogonic myth. The tractate begins by stating that it contains "the teaching [of the savior], and [the revelation] of the mysteries, [and the] things hidden in silence, [even these things which] he taught John, [his] disciple" (1, 1-5). In a time of grievance, doubt and contemplation concerning the reasons for the true mission of Jesus, John experiences a revelation from Jesus (1, 20-30; 2, 1-15). The rest of the tractate continues through the voice of Jesus as he teaches John the Gnostic understanding of theosophy (2, 25-36; 3, 1-36), cosmogony (9, 25-35; 10, 1-20), anthropogony (15, 1-35; 16, 1-35; 17, 1-6), and ends with a description of the triple descent of *Pronoia* (30, 12-36; 31, 1-22).

Jesus explains that the Monad is a monarchy with nothing above, and is described as being the invisible spirit of whom it is not right to think of as a god (2, 26-36). Section 2, 31 which states "pure light into which no eye can look" is

reminiscent of Exodus 33:17-23. God will not allow Moses to look directly at him, since no one can see God and still live. Similar to the image of light found in the *Apocryphon of John*, Exodus 34:29-35 describes how the face of Moses would shine after he spoke with God. His face shone so brightly that he had to cover it with a veil upon returning to the Israelites (34:33). In the *Apocryphon of John*, what immediately follows is "He [is the] invisible [Spirit] of whom it is not right [to think] of him as a god, or something similar" (2, 34-35). This sounds very similar to Exodus 3: 14, where one reads "I AM WHO I AM", and also Exodus 20:4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (NRSV). The tradition of not being able to perceive the image of God has an extensive history within Judaism.

Following a lengthy discourse of negative theology (2, 33-35 to 4, 25), the unknowable God creates through his first thought, Barbelo (4, 28-36). The figure of Wisdom is presented with some ambiguity. On one hand, Wisdom is described as possessing good aspects: heavenly, and brings enlightenment (4, 35). Yet, on the other hand, she has negative aspects: creation; obstacle to enlightenment (9, 30). This ambiguity is present in Sethianism, since in this tradition Wisdom is split in two: Barbelo and the Lower Sophia. Barbelo became the womb for everything for she is who is prior to them all (5, 5). This sounds very similar to the Jewish idea of divine Wisdom. Barbelo from the *Apocryphon of John* can be compared to the Jewish concept of Wisdom found in Genesis 1:2, Sirach 24:1-9, Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-27, and Proverbs 8:22-36. In Proverbs 8:22-24 one reads, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at

²⁵ Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 30. This appears in footnote 3 of Pearson's book.

the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water” (NRSV). Interestingly, the *Apocryphon of John* says that the thought of the invisible Spirit performed a deed and she came forth, she who had appeared before him in the shine of his light (4, 27-35). This is connected to Wisdom 7:25-26 which states, “for she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (NRSV). Genesis 1:1 is comparable to (13, 13): “then the mother [Barbelo] began to move to and fro.” In the Genesis account, Wisdom or the wind from God swept over the face of the waters. The imagery is nearly the same. Later in the *Apocryphon of John* (13, 17-28) it is clarified that the mother moving to and fro is not the same as when Moses said “above the waters” in Genesis 1:2. Instead this action of the mother is a sign of her repentance for creating without the consent of her consort, and the wickedness of the theft which her son had committed. Salvation is achieved when the mother’s dissipated essence is restored to its original unity.

The concept of Wisdom begins to differ once the *Apocryphon of John* describes the fall of Sophia. Her fall is a mistake and brings into being the Demiurge Yaltabaoth. This archon is ignorant darkness. It is at this point that the Genesis story comes back into play. This weak archon has three names; Yaltabaoth, Saklas, and Samael. The third name Samael is said to be “impious in his arrogance which is in him. For he said, ‘I am God and there is no other God beside me,’ for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he had come” (11, 19-22). This is the Jewish God from the Hebrew Bible. Again Samael

says “I am a jealous God and there is no other God beside me” (13, 9). The narrator explains in (13, 10-13) that by Samael “announcing [his jealousy] he indicated to the angels who attended him that there exists another God, for if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?” This is a reinterpretation of Exodus 20:5, Isaiah 45:5 and 46:9. These Gnostics were obviously very well familiar with the writings attributed to Moses.

Yaltabaoth-Saklas-Samael and his angels created man according to the image of God and according to the likeness of his authorities (15, 1-5). This sounds identical to what the God of the Hebrew Bible says at Genesis 1:26. The first man in both accounts is called Adam. The Gnostic account, however, describes in explicit detail the separate creation of every part of the body of Adam (15, 14 to 17, 36). The lifeless being that results is from the rabbinic golem tradition (19, 13-15). Golem originates from the Hebrew in Genesis 2:7 and is also present in Psalm 139:16 where it describes as being Adam a lifeless mass when first created. Then Yaltabaoth is tricked into breathing into the face of Adam the spirit of the power of his mother (19, 23-30). This act transfers the power of the mother from Yaltabaoth to Adam. In Genesis 2:7 the act of God breathing the breath of life into Adam’s nostrils makes him a living being. The archons then place Adam in paradise where there is the tree of life (21, 16-25). This is the same concept as found in Genesis 2:8-9. This anthropogony is an innovative reinterpretation of Genesis and other Jewish traditions.

In Genesis 4:1 one reads of the birth story of Cain. This story is also found in the *Apocryphon of John* (24, 15-26).²⁶ Seth is

²⁶ For similar examples see: *Hypostasis of the Archons* (91, 11-14); *Apocalypse of Adam* (66, 25-28); *On the Origin of the World* (113, 34-114, 5, 114, 14-15).

the good son to replace Abel who was killed by Cain.²⁷ He is a prominent Gnostic saviour since he is a revealer of *gnosis*.²⁸ In Genesis 4:25; 5:3, and 1 Enoch 85-90, Seth is connected to the Messiah. Many more parallels between the *Apocryphon of John* and other stories from Genesis exist. To mention briefly, this includes: the serpent in paradise (22, 10; Genesis 3:1); and Noah and the flood (28, 32-35; Genesis 7).

After this exegetical analysis of the *Apocryphon of John* there are good reasons to assume that it is highly unlikely that Gnosticism is a deviant form of Christianity. It does not make sense that the Gnostics would accept Jesus as the Christ and then go back to the Hebrew Scriptures to create their elaborate myths. Jesus as the revealer of *gnosis* must have been added to their already established cosmogony.

The Testimony of Truth

The *Testimony of Truth*²⁹ is a fragmentary tractate from the Nag Hammadi Library that is in very poor condition. Much is lost in lacunae. Thankfully scholars such as Giversen and Pearson have been able to translate and restore the majority of the content.³⁰ This tractate does contain Christian elements. It is one of the most important documents of Christian Gnosticism. The author believes Jesus to be the Son of Man, who was baptized by John in the Jordan River (30.19-25). Polemical passages argue against catholic

Christians and other Gnostics. The Church fathers were not the only ones attempting to purify Christianity. The Gnostics had strong beliefs and were willing to argue against those who did not share their unique Christology. This text also clearly polemicizes against Judaism. The Pharisees and the scribes of the Law are under attack. There are several references to themes and characters from the Hebrew Bible. Even this "Christian" Gnostic community used the Jewish Scriptures in order to better define their beliefs.

But of what sort is this God? First (he) maliciously refused Adam from eating of the tree of knowledge. And secondly he said, "Adam, where are you?" God does not have foreknowledge; (otherwise), would he not know from the beginning? (And) afterwards he said, "Let us cast him (out) of this place, lest he eat of the tree of life and live for ever." Surely he has shown himself to be a malicious grudge. And what kind of a God is this? For great is the blindness of those who read, and they did not know him. And he said, "I am the jealous God; I will bring the sins of the fathers upon the children until three (and) four generations." And he said, "I will make their heart thick, and I will cause their mind to become blind, that they might not know nor comprehend the things that are said." But these things he has said to those who believe in him (and) serve him!³¹

The God of Genesis is characterized as being a blind and not omniscient. This section from the *Testimony of Truth* directly quotes passages from Genesis 2:17; 3:9; 3:22-24; and Exodus 20:5. The *Testimony of Truth* tells the story of the "Garden of Eden"³² from the viewpoint of the serpent in the form of a Gnostic

²⁷ The birth of Seth see: *Apocryphon of John* (II 24, 34-25, 2), *Hypostasis of the Archons* (91, 31-33), Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.30.9.

²⁸ Seth as the father of the Gnostic race: *Apocalypse of Adam* 65, 6-9 and also *Three Steles of Seth* 118, 12-13.

²⁹ NHC IX, 3:29, 6-74, 30+; *NH Library*, 448-59; *NH Scriptures*, 613-28

³⁰ James M. Robinson (ed.). *The Nag Hammadi Library: The Definitive Translation of the Gnostic Scriptures Complete in One Volume* (New York: HarperOne, 1990), 448.

³¹ *Testimony of Truth* (IX, 3, 47.14-48.16).

³² Genesis 2:15.

midrash (45, 23-49, 10).³³ The serpent is portrayed as being the revealer of life and knowledge, and is therefore seen positively (IX, 3: 45, 23-49, 10).³⁴ Again, the God of the Hebrew Bible is viewed negatively since he wants to withhold knowledge from Adam (46, 16-47, 4; Genesis 3:8-13). *Testimony of Truth* (45, 23-49, 7) is similar in style to a Jewish expository midrash.³⁵ This Gnostic midrash paraphrases texts from Genesis which is similar to Jewish targumic traditions. The *Testimony of Truth* even contains references to King David and King Solomon (70, 1-30). More Jewish than Christian literary influences are evident within the text. Although the Jewish Scriptures are analysed by utilizing Jewish exegetical methods, the interpretations are diametrically opposed. By the time this tractate came to be in its present form this community was no longer Jewish but were followers of Jesus Christ. The Jewish roots of Gnosticism could not have been excluded from their understanding of Jesus as the Christ. The author of *The Testimony of Truth* was cognizant of Jewish traditions in a similar fashion to the writers of the canonical Gospels.

Melchizedek:

The *Epistle to the Hebrews* found in the Christian canon was not written by Paul but has been traditionally attributed to him. The author of this work remains anonymous but can be referred to as being Deutero-Pauline. Only an approximate

date can be estimated between 60 and 95 C.E. based on its content and other letters of the same time period. As the title suggests, it is most plausible that the original audience were Jewish-Christians. *Hebrews 7* goes into detail concerning Melchizedek. This character is described in *Hebrews 7:2* as being King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God. He is a figure from the Hebrew Bible, appearing only briefly in Genesis 14:17-24 and Psalm 110:4. In the story found in Genesis, Melchizedek interacts with Abraham, but only momentarily to bless him.³⁶ It is in *Hebrews* that Paul points out the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood to that of Aaron in the following respects. First, he resembles the Son of God, as he remains a priest forever (7:3). Next, even Abraham paid him tithes (7:4); he blessed Abraham in 7:6 which is interpreted in 7:7 as being the result of the inferior being blessed by the superior. Levi, yet unborn, paid him tithes in the person of Abraham (7:9). The permanence of his priesthood in Jesus Christ implied the abrogation of the Levitical system (7:11). *Hebrews* was written in Greek, so most likely the author would have read and used the Septuagint. Mystery surrounds Melchizedek since not much is said about him in Scripture. He is essentially a very insignificant Jewish figure when compared to others.

Imagine the surprise when a tractate featuring Melchizedek the priest of the Most High God was discovered at Nag Hammadi. Why would the Gnostics find this figure appealing? If Gnosticism does not have strong ties to Judaism, the answer to this question is even more perplexing. Could this tractate be based on *Hebrews*? Out of all the great mythological and biblical figures found

³³ Compare this portrayal of the role of Eve and the serpent to those found in *Hypostasis of the Archons* (89, 32-91, 7) and *On the Origin of the World* (113, 21-114, 4).

³⁴ Compare this positive evaluation of the serpent of Genesis 3 to *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II, 4) and *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5). Also consider the reference to other biblical serpents (48, 18-26; Exodus 7:8-12; Numbers 21: 9; 48, 26-49, 7).

³⁵ Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 42.

³⁶ In Genesis 14 Abraham is still called Abram. Salem is a short form of Jerusalem, see Ps 76:2. Melchizedek blesses Abraham: Genesis 14:19; Hebrews 7:1.

within Antiquity, Melchizedek is less than minor.³⁷ If this community did not come from Jewish roots, how would they have stumbled upon this ambiguous figure? The Gnostic community that preserved and upheld this text must have come from roots deep within Jewish traditions. There is no mention of Melchizedek in the canonical Gospels, or in any other tractates from Nag Hammadi.³⁸

The present tractate *Melchizedek*³⁹ is only partially preserved. The genre of this tractate can be identified as apocalyptic, with features drawing from Jewish apocalyptic literature. Melchizedek is an eschatological figure in this tractate, especially in the third major section (18, 11-27, 10). The tractate opens by declaring that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and came down from the aeons in order that a divine revelation may be given. Jesus is described as teaching in parables and riddles, having a following of holy disciples, and being resurrected from the dead on the third day (2, 1-4, 1). The text is difficult to read because of the damage it has endured over time. Thankfully it is still possible to make sense of what has been written. The introduction continues by emphasizing the humanity of Jesus. The author is clearly opposing those who claim that Jesus was fully divine and only appeared to be human. Interestingly, this is very characteristic of Jewish-Christians of this time, as they viewed Jesus as being

human and only being the adopted Son of God upon baptism. For the author of *Melchizedek* Jesus truly was begotten, ate and drunk like a human being, was circumcised according to Jewish traditions, was of the flesh, suffered, and arose from the dead (5, 1-11).

Three main divisions in the tractate are evident. The first revelation is mediated by the angel Gamaliel to Melchizedek (1, 1-14, 15). Melchizedek is called the Holy One, High-Priest, the perfect hope, and the gifts of life (5, 15-17). Gamaliel was sent to the congregation of the children of Seth (5, 20). This is the biblical Seth from Genesis, and in this tractate Melchizedek is in connection to him in some way that is not entirely obvious. This community possessed deep admiration for many figures of the Hebrew Bible. A very different interpretation of the fall of Adam and Eve is presented (10, 1-11, 10). The chronology of events seems to be inverted since when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, they trampled the Cherubim and the flaming sword. Unfortunately the tractate is so badly damaged in this particular section that it is difficult to deduce any more relevant information.

The second part of the tractate (14, 15-18, 1-20) is Melchizedek's reaction to the secret revelation he has just received. First he rejoices and glorifies God. The text reads "and I began to [...] God [...]" (14, 19-21) but it should be assumed here that Melchizedek is worshipping God in this section because of the surrounding verses, even though the word is lost in a lacuna. Melchizedek goes on to proclaim a prayer of praises to God, Barbelo the mother of the aeons, the four Luminaries (Harmozel, Oriael, Daveithe, Eleleth), and Jesus Christ (16, 16-18, 6).

The third main part of *Melchizedek* (18, 20-27, 10) is very fragmentary. Scholars must

³⁷ Melchizedek is of minor importance (and popularity) when compared to the great heroes of Greek and Roman mythology, or to the Israelite patriarchs, Kings, and prophets. That is not to say Melchizedek is of no significance. He was subjected to Jewish interpretation and was of importance in Christian circles as well.

³⁸ Melchizedek is present in the Gnostic fragment from Bala'izah, the *Second Book of Jeu* in the Bruce Codex, *Pistis Sophia*, Book 4, in the Askew Codex, and *Pistis Sophia*, Books 1-3.

³⁹ (NHC IX, 1:1, 1-27, 10; *NH Library*, 438-44; *NH Scriptures* 595-605).

act as detectives, searching this ancient text for evidence of its true message. It seems as though heavenly beings are appearing to Melchizedek since 18, 20 can be translated as “many [...] appear [...] there [...] appear...”. Then after this, 19, 10 states “they gave [...] their words [...] and they said to me, [...Melchizedek, Priest] of God [Most High]”. This vision also includes mention of the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus (25, 1-9). Jesus was physically abused, then crucified from the third hour of the Sabbath-eve until the ninth hour. He then arose from the dead. Whether this resurrection occurred over three days is unknown. In the concluding passages, Melchizedek is described as being a great warrior-priest. He is instructed by the heavenly beings to be strong because the enemy archons have made war. Melchizedek is a heavenly figure in this tractate, even possessing the power and strength to battle archons. The influence of *Hebrews 7* is predominant throughout the text, but the tradition originated from Genesis. Melchizedek’s role as a heavenly warrior-priest (26, 1-10) is from Jewish apocalyptic speculation.

Conclusion

The basic Gnostic myth and ideologies stem from Judaism because Gnosticism began in a Jewish *milieu*. Stating the Jewish origins of Gnosticism does not detract from the religion itself, but aids modern scholars to better understand and to envisage the *milieu* from which Gnosticism sprang. Documents from the first-century or earlier are needed to make this thesis bullet-proof, but by closely examining the texts it can be concluded at this point that Judaism influenced Gnosticism, and that most of the earliest Gnostics were probably Jewish. That is not to say, however, that no other religions or cultures influenced the resulting Gnostic ideologies that are present in the forth-century Coptic

documents which are currently available from Nag Hammadi.

Suggesting that Gnosticism originated in Judaism does not deny the other cultural and religious influences present in Gnostic literature. Throughout the first century CE, Greek religion and culture dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Platonic-Pythagorean metaphysics have a strong influence on the Gnostic concept of *gnosis*. Allegorical interpretation of Mosaic Law in Diaspora Judaism cannot be totally ruled out. There were conservative Jews, and Jews who could more closely be associated with philosophers. Judaism was far from being uniform. Deriving spiritual truths from the Law is not considered to be conservative Judaism. Positing a Jewish sect who could reinterpret their own scriptures to the extent found in the Gnostic texts is entirely plausible. We have seen through the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the Essene community interpreted the Jewish scriptures differently from what can be considered conservative Judaism.

If Gnosticism is older than the turn of the Common Era, it might have become stronger immediately around the time of the Roman occupation (circa 37 B.C.E.). The traditions within the Nag Hammadi codices reflect ancient beliefs. This would mean that Gnosticism began as a religious conviction independent of and prior to Christianity. It seems that the influence of Judaism is too great to account for any other direct site of origin. Diaspora Judaism accounts for the Hellenistic, Platonic influences incorporated into Gnosticism. If the first Gnostics were pagans of some sort (Romans or Greeks) then they would not have claimed the Jewish scriptures for themselves. Roman and Greek mythology and philosophy provide a myriad of possible sources of interpretation and inspiration. It is

therefore highly unlikely that the Hebrew Scriptures would play such a central role in their ideologies. Jewish influences have shown to be central to the *Aprocryphon of John*, the *Testimony of Truth*, and *Melchizedek*. These three documents are Gnostic Christian, yet still contain evidence of strong influences from Judaism. These are only three examples from the Nag Hammadi Library and many other tractates show evidence of Jewish influence. As scholars continue to work on these texts, the mysteries behind the origins of Gnosticism may be revealed.

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