Gnosis and Primitive Christianity: A Survey (1)

Abraham J. Malherbe

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Christian Denominations and Sects Commons, Christianity Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, History of Christianity Commons, Liturgy and Worship Commons, Missions and World Christianity Commons, Practical Theology Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol3/iss3/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Restoration Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ ACU.
Gnosis and Primitive Christianity: A Survey

Abraham J. Malherbe

The phenomenon known as "Gnosticism" has enjoyed the attention of more researchers into the background and development of primitive Christianity than almost any other subject. Perhaps, when one notices the many prefabricated molds into which the material for the study has been made to fit, it will be more correct to say that Gnosticism has been at the mercy of a great host of investigators whose main contributions have not always been objectivity or lucidity. Gnosticism is such an important factor in the study of the New Testament and of the early church, that the serious student cannot afford not to come to grips with it. It is the purpose of this study to survey the field rapidly and to introduce the reader to the literature, problems, and theories pertaining to the study. A survey of this type can be of value only if it is made in the light of recent discussion. The main feature of this study will therefore be the continual references to contemporary discussions of Gnosticism. References to the older works will only be made if they stand as mileposts in the history of the investigation.

Definition

A claim to be able to define Gnosticism and to give an account of its origin would be highly presumptuous at this stage of scholarly investigation. The terms "Gnosticism" and "Gnosis" are used in this paper to denote those Christian sects or individuals who were so violently opposed by the early church. This use of gnosis and gnostikos is a modern one and is not derived from the early church as denoting the large, ill-defined movement that we have in mind when we use them. The term "Gnostic" is derived from the emphasis placed by these ancients themselves on gnosis, "knowledge."

The cardinal characteristic of Gnostic thought is its dualistic view of the universe and the divine power. The deity is supramundane and is in no way responsible for the universe, which came into existence through emanations from the divine being. The human soul, or according to the Gnostics, man's true, inner self, is part of the divine being, but, having been overpowered by demonic beings, now finds itself captured in the cosmos, over which the demons have dominion. The heavenly being sends his Son down to the cosmos to redeem those who really belong to him. By virtue of their true,

spiritual nature, they recognize the Son and are illumined, receiving knowledge, *gnosis*. This knowledge is revelatory, and thus of a religious nature, and not the rational cognition of philosophy. The reception of *gnosis* by the *pneumatikos*, the spiritual man makes him again a partaker of the divine nature. The redeeming Son now again ascends to the Father and in his ascent brings to nought the power of the demonic forces who try to restrain him.2

This basic outline posed certain problems for Christianity. One of these problems involved the question of Christology. If all matter is evil, as the Gnostics said, how does one reconcile this with the incarnation, that is, with the assumption of the material body by the Son? This problem was overcome either by Adoptionism or Docetism, that is, either by the statement that the divine Son was not really united with the human body, but that the Father only “adopted” the human Jesus and thus ascribed the value of sonship to him, or, that the Son only appeared or seemed (*dokein*, “to seem”) to have a human body.

Another problem involved Christian ethics. If matter is evil and thus of no positive value, what effect does it have on one’s moral conduct? Again, there were two possible views, quite different from each other, namely license and asceticism. Since not the body but only the spirit of the *pneumatikos* is important, one could be morally free and indulge all one’s desires, since these acts could not possibly affect one’s true self. On the other hand, since the body is so inferior, one could say that it was to be denied and was to be brought under subjection to the higher, spiritual entity.

It should be emphasized that this sketch, although basic to most of the Gnostic systems, does not represent everything called “Gnostic.” Almost any one system will differ in some aspect from what has been said. The only way to obtain any familiarity with Gnosticism is to read Gnostic material. When this is done, it will be observed that one has to come in contact with the phenomenon in order to understand it, or at least, to know what it is. In this it is like existentialism, with which, according to some modern existentialists, it has much in common.3 Of primary Gnostic material, the


most accessible to readers of this journal are the "Hymn of the Pearl" in the *Acts of Thomas*, and selections from the *Hermetica*.

**Sources, Methodology, and Origin**

Determining the origin of Gnosticism is as hazardous as defining it. We are primarily concerned with the adaptation of Christians to the above Gnostic base. However, the situations in which early Christians found themselves, and to which the apologists addressed themselves, will be immeasurably illuminated if it can be determined whether Gnosticism was of Greek or Oriental origin, or of both, and whether it was pre- or post-Christian in origin.

The nature of the sources of early Gnosticism has been the chief obstacle in arriving at any consensus on these matters. The main sources have been secondary ones, namely the polemical writings of the Church Fathers against the Gnostics. Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Origen, and Epiphanius quote from some Gnostic writings and summarize some of the systems. When it is remembered that these writers were vehemently battling the views they preserved for us, it will be understood that great care should be exercised in forming opinions of the Gnostics from them. After all, one is not too likely to emphasize those elements in an opponent which are orthodox, or point out those characteristics worthy of emulation! Nevertheless, the skepticism of many writers regarding the veracity and the value of the Church Fathers as sources for early Gnosticism, is not justi-
Some investigation into the reliability of these sources has been made with positive results.

The best material, however, is still original Gnostic material. Some such material is embedded in some Fathers. These blocks of material have been subjected to close scrutiny and are still, despite the recent discoveries (see below), the best material for the non-expert to work with. Thus, in Clement of Alexandria, a sophisticated kindred spirit, there is a collection of excerpts from Theodotus, a member of the Valentinian school. Epiphanius, in Panarion 33:3-7, contains a letter of Ptolemaeus, a “bud of the Valentinian school” (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I, 1, 1-8,4), to Flora. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Origen contains forty-eight fragments from the commentary on John by Heracleon, another disciple of Valentinus. Finally, there is the newly discovered cache of Gnostic writings, for the most part Valentinian. These will be discussed in greater detail.

For a general view of the sources, and for a suggestion of the different layers of material in them, see A. Harnack, Geschichte der altchristliche Literatur bis Eusebius. Although Harnack’s work has been superseded in many respects, contemporary scholars would do well to note his suggestions, especially on the sources for Valentinus. For Irenaeus, see A. Hilgenfeld, Ketzergeschichte des Urchristentums, p. 52. For Hippolytus, see G. Salmon, the cross references in the Philosophumena, in Hermathena 5(1885), pp. 389-402; H. Staehelin, Die gnostische Quellen Hippolyts in seiner Hauptschrift gegen die Haeretiker (Texte und Untersuchungen 6,3), Leipzig, 1890; and S. Schneider, St. Hippolyt on the Greek Mysteries, Rospr. Akademji 56 (1917), pp. 329-377.

The sources have especially been worked over in order to determine the system of Valentinus. Cf. W. Foerster, Von Valentin zu Herakleon, Giessen, 1928; and C. Barth, Die Interpretation des Neuen Testaments in der valentinianischen Gnosis (Texte und Untersuchungen 37), passim. The most helpful introduction to this aspect of the study is by G. Quispel, “The Original Doctrine of Valentine,” Vigiliae Christianae 1(1947), pp. 43-73.

A beautiful example of the kind of work that is needed in the study of Gnosticism is that of R. P. Casey, The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria (Studies and Documents), London, 1934.


W. Foerster, op. cit., has discussed these fragments in their context in Origin, and has placed them in position in the development of second century Valentinianism.
in the survey. Of this material there have been published The Gospel of Truth, The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Philip, and The Apocryphon Johannis. These are really the only definitely second century primary Gnostic material at our disposal.

In working with this material, which is difficult to handle and which represents a religious entity difficult to understand from the outside and almost two millennia removed, it is not surprising that different approaches have been made, and different results have been obtained.

The first great proponent of the Oriental origin of Gnosticism was W. Bousset, the real father of the religionsgeschichtliche method for the study of ancient religion. The Oriental view is largely dependent on this method, and consequently those who hold to it, mostly German scholars, stand or fall with it. The religionsgeschichtliche method, or the “history of religions” method, as it may be clumsily translated, approaches the study of a particular religion by studying it in its setting within surrounding religions and with the phenomenon of religion as the guiding principle. Locale, source, and temper.
poral relationships are not assigned much value. The main emphasis is placed on the phenomenological elements. Certain motifs are traced, and interpretation takes place upon them as a basis. By using this method, Bousset found that Gnosticism was a mystic religion with an Oriental, dualistic basis. He thought that a type of Syrian Gnosis was at the bottom of it all.

W. Anz arrived as basically the same view, except that for him a Babylonian background was more probable. He saw the emphasis as being not so much on dualism per se, as on the ascension of the soul through the heavenly constellations which are ruled by evil spirits.¹⁹

The best known modern theologian who depends on this approach is Rudolf Bultmann. Present-day German New Testament scholarship is heavily indebted to him for its general view and many of its presuppositions. Bultmann's methodology is faulty, and in the light of this it is surprising that he has exerted so much influence. Somewhat like Bousset, he joins all the elements of different Gnostic systems together and constructs a pan-Gnostic system, which certainly did not exist. Especially important for him is the Mandaean literature. This body of literature dates from about A.D. 700, however, so "for any history of the Mandaeans and their beliefs before 700 we are dependent solely on inference and speculation."²⁰ Bultmann thinks that the traditions on which the Mandaean literature is based can be traced to the beginning of the Christian era, however, and it is upon this ground that he posits the theory that John's Gospel is a Christian revision of the Mandaean myth. A recent statement by Alan Richardson is very much to the point here.

It will be noted that when scholars like Bultmann describe a Gnostic doctrine they take their first-century 'evidence' from the New Testament itself. But this is a question-begging proceeding, since the New Testament is susceptible of a very different interpretation; if there is no real evidence for a developed 'Gnosticism' in the first century outside the New Testament, then the New Testament can hardly be used as evidence for its existence.²¹

It has been seen then that the religionsgeschichtliche method is embarrassed by the paucity and the late date of the sources. It is historically inaccurate in its phenomenological approach, and it is therefore fluid enough for one to be able to find whatever he is looking for, wherever he wants to find it, whenever he wants to find

¹⁹Ursprung des Gnostizismus (Texte und Untersuchungen 15), 1897.
it. Proponents of this method usually read the late evidence back into the New Testament, and then they conclude the Gnosticism existed earlier than Christianity and that it materially affected it as early as the writing of the New Testament.

Proponents of the view of Oriental origin build their study mainly on the myth of the redeemer, who overcomes the problem posed by dualism. The mythological element thus predominates. Those who hold to a Greek origin, on the other hand, see the rationalistic aspect of Gnosticism reflected in Greek philosophical thought. For them dualism is the basis on which the study is to be conducted. Harvey, in the introduction to his edition of Irenaeus, discusses the Greek background and reveals clearly the emphasis placed on dualism.

Harnack described Gnosticism as the "acute Hellenising of Christianity." According to him, the Gnostics were essentially Christian philosophers. He sees the allegorization and spiritualizing of the Old Testament as due to the influence of Greek philosophy. The hidden meanings thus obtained gave readers of the Old Testament a strange interest which was carried over into Christianity. This preoccupation with that which is hidden developed under Greek influence into Gnosticism. Harnack regarded the Oriental characteristics that he could discern in Gnosticism as representing a lower type of Gnosticism.

Hans Leisegang, like Paul Wendland, think that Greek philosophy played an important part in the formation of the Gnostic systems. They regard the Oriental motifs as the constituent parts of a mosaic, with Greek philosophy being the cement that holds it together.

De Faye belongs to this general view rather than to the pronounced Oriental school. He is more conscious of the need to develop a sound methodology and has tried to work one out. De Faye does not think that one can speak of "Gnosticism" proper until about A.D. 120. From a close study of the second and third century sources, he concludes that there are three stages of development of Gnosticism, corresponding roughly to the first half of the second century, the second half of the second century, and the third century. In the

first period the Gnostics applied a philosophic exegetic method, while in the last there is an overwhelming sacramental outlook. This development in Gnosticism would parallel that in Neoplatonism. While de Faye’s work is encouraging, the details of his conclusion will not stand up in the light of the Nag Hammadi discoveries.

Finally, with regard to the Greek background, attention should be drawn to the work of Torhoudt. Perhaps because of the fact that this stimulating work is written in Dutch, it has not received much scholarly attention. Torhoudt isolated a Gnostic system in Plutarch’s *De Iside et Osiride*, which represents to him in rough outline the system of Valentinus. He suggests a common source for Plutarch and Valentinus. Plutarch does mention Plato’s dualism in his discussion of the mysteries. Harvey has pointed to Valentinus’ possible dependence upon the Greek philosophers. If Torhoudt’s thesis is valid and is developed, the whole question of the relationship between Gnosticism and the mysteries would be opened up.

A third theory of the origin of Gnosticism which is constantly gaining in popularity, is one which relates to the rise of Judaism and Christianity. Just as the New Testament has been viewed through glasses tinted with preoccupation with eschatology in the last fifty years, so now Gnosticism is related to apocalypticism.

Burkitt thinks that Gnosticism was an expression of ordinary Christianity in terms and categories which suited the science and philosophy of the day. He tells that if we can make our way through the unfamiliar imagery to the ideas that they attempt to express, some of these forms will appear really thoughtful to us and will show kinship with some modern philosophical and psychological conceptions. To him Gnosticism was a Christian product, an attempt to fill the void left by the failure of apocalypticism and the eschatological hope. Robert Grant has taken up the task from Burkitt.

---


32 These views, presented in lectures delivered at Harvard Divinity School on November 5th and 6th, 1957, are to be elaborated in a book *Gnosticism*, to be published late in 1959.
Probably the most important new direction is that which looks to heterodox Judaism. Quispel\textsuperscript{33} and his Utrecht colleague, van Unnick, are the main advocates of this view. They think that certain motifs existed in heterodox Judaism out of which Gnosticism developed, after these motifs were brought over to Christianity. Their evidence at this point is still somewhat tenuous. They do, however, realize the need for remaining with the sources.

In summary, then, it has been seen that the nature and scarcity of the sources prevent absolute certainty on these introductory matters. Nevertheless, it does seem likely that Gnosticism blossomed forth in the early generations of Christianity, nurtured in a Judaeo-Christian milieu and obtaining its sustenance from an atmosphere heavy with the motifs of dualism and redemption.

Lexington, Massachusetts