



INTRODUCTION

The search for the origins of Gnosticism has inspired much scholarly debate among historians and theologians. Interest in this religious phenomenon was heightened in the last half-century by the discovery of Coptic gnostic documents at the foot of the hills near the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi.¹ Research stimulated by the new materials has yielded much fruitful information, greatly increasing our understanding of the gnostic religion, which, prior to the discovery, was dependent almost exclusively upon the polemical writings of the early church fathers. Yet, it is fair to say, scholars are no closer to a consensus regarding gnostic origins at present than they were before the discovery.

Much of the difficulty with determining the origins of Gnosticism centers on the problem of definition. An international colloquium of scholars was held in Messina on April 13–18, 1966, to discuss the origins of Gnosticism and to define its essence.² Though many of the major scholars in gnostic studies were present at the meeting, a consensus regarding origins and definitions did not result. Historians continue to disagree about the central elements that define the core of the gnostic faith.

Many scholars accept a broad or vague definition of the term “Gnosticism,” deriving its primary meaning from the etymology of the term and identifying salvation by special knowledge as the central core. The greatest problem with this approach is that nearly every religion with a salvific emphasis identifies a unique truth or set of truths that must be grasped and accepted as a prerequisite to salvation. A narrower and more useful approach identifies the antic cosmic dualism (material as evil versus spiritual as good) of the gnostic faith as its unique and most definitive element.

¹For a brief story behind the discovery, see James M. Robinson, introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (rev. ed.; ed. James M. Robinson; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 22–25.

²See Ugo Bianchi, ed., *The Origins of Gnosticism: Colloquium of Messina, 13–18 April 1966* (SHR 12; Leiden: Brill, 1967).

Much discussion has been generated as to the origins of gnostic dualism. Though Gnosticism includes a concept of ethical dualism (i.e., light versus darkness), as was common in the ancient world in Iranian, Jewish, and Christian religions, the dualism unique to the gnostics identifies the spiritual realm of nature and the universe as morally good and the physical domain as evil, not merely less good as in various Platonic systems. The physical universe originated through a crisis in the realm of the divine and is the creative work of an evil demiurge. Within each human being is a divine spark or spirit that has been trapped in this physical world. Salvation is achieved through knowledge that allows the seeker to escape the body and ascend to the realm of the spiritual or the divine. The ethical approach of the gnostics, usually manifested in asceticism, but at times in libertinism, is designed to overcome or indulge the body, thus achieving the object of salvation.

Scholars have sought to trace the source of this dualism to religious and philosophical systems throughout the ancient Near East, yet no source has been certain. Though other systems do involve dualism, they are essentially ethical and/or eternal, unlike the temporal anticosmic dualism found in Gnosticism. There is no parallel in the ancient world for Gnosticism's antipathy toward the physical world and its ruler(s).

Three critical issues are involved in the search for gnostic origins: (1) the religious and intellectual context out of which Gnosticism emerged; (2) its primary geographical setting; and (3) the chronology of its development. Though many religious and intellectual roots have been suggested for gnostic thought, Judaism, Christianity, and Platonism are the most promising. The number of historians who identify the Judaism of late antiquity as the primary soil out of which Gnosticism grew is increasing. At the very least, Judaism and its scriptural traditions are recognized as the filters through which the gnostic religion emerged in the fluid intellectual environment of the ancient world. Further, early Christianity is seen as integrally related to certain gnostic elements, particularly the redeemer myth. Though the precise nature of the relationship between Gnosticism and Christianity is highly debated, the evidence presented in this book suggests the priority of the Christian faith. Finally, Platonism provided much of the language and certain mythical elements contained in the gnostic religion. Yet, in all of this, none of these sources is clearly the origin or source of gnostic dualism.

Not only is the flavor of gnostic dualism anticosmic in its negative evaluation of the physical world, it is also anti-Jewish or anti-Creator—that is, anti-“the God of the Old Testament.” Through some means, gnostics came to identify the God of the Jews as inferior to and separate from the true and highest God, and they defined the product of his creative activity as evil. The question remains of how the gnostics came to reject the God of the Jews and identify him as the evil demiurge.

Recent geographical speculations have centered upon Egypt as a possible point of origin for Gnosticism, though Samaria or Syro-Palestine are still considered by many to be its starting place. The early church fathers identified Simon Magus of Samaria (Acts 8) as the originator of Gnosticism; yet, there is little evidence that supports this claim or even identifies Simon as gnostic. It is a well-established fact that the Christian apologists of the second century were not accurate historians, often positing characters from the first century as fountainheads of either heresy or orthodoxy. In recent debate, Birger Pearson has given new incentive to Moritz Friedländer's nineteenth-century theory that Gnosticism arose within Egypt.³ Though both scholars accept the theory of a pre-Christian Gnosticism, the theory of an Egyptian origin is particularly attractive as a hypothesis when considered with the fact that the first historically viable gnostics came from Egypt: Basilides, Carpocrates and his libertine son, Epiphanes, and Valentinus.

Another primary issue in the debate is that of chronological development. Though it is ironic that many historians do not limit their theorizing regarding gnostic origins to known chronological factors and sources, there is no clear evidence presented as of yet that establishes the existence of a pre-Christian or even a first-century Gnosticism. The composition of the tractates contained in the Nag Hammadi codices cannot be objectively dated before the second century C.E. Though certain elements in Jewish and Christian literature written before the second century C.E. bear some resemblance to gnostic themes, they do not present a Gnosticism characterized by anticosmic dualism. The early elements that are shared with Gnosticism, such as ethical dualism, docetic theology, and intricate angelologies, do not demand the presence of Gnosticism—evidence for the parts does not demand the whole. Notably, it is not until the 120s C.E. that we see clear evidence of gnostic systems emerging in the teachings of Saturninus and Basilides.

In 1959, Robert Grant proposed a bold hypothesis that Gnosticism arose as an intellectual and religious crisis within Judaism.⁴ Grant theorized that the disappointed apocalypticism of the First Jewish Revolt in Judea from 66–74 C.E. was the crisis out of which the gnostic religion emerged. Because apocalyptic hopes endured subsequent to the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 C.E., he later abandoned this thesis. Edwin Yamauchi, in the 1983 revision of his *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, a work that challenged the validity of modern theories that anachronistically

³Birger Pearson, "Friedländer Revisited: Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins," *SPhilo* 2 (1973): 23–39; repr. in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990): 10–28.

⁴Robert Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

identified pre-Christian gnostic systems, offered a modification of Grant's proposal.⁵ He identified the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132–135 C.E. as the end of Jewish messianic speculations and the context out of which Gnosticism grew. Though rabbinic evidence concurs that messianic expectations were markedly changed from this time, the presence of earlier gnostic teachers in Egypt and Syria limits the value of this proposal. The most that can be said is that the disappointed messianism that resulted may have confirmed and fueled the gnostic speculations that originated earlier in the second century.

My contention in this book is that evidence regarding the religious and intellectual milieu, geographical context, and chronological sequence of clearly gnostic teachers and documents points to an early second-century rise of the gnostic religion in the Jewish intellectual centers of North Africa. The crisis out of which Gnosticism arose was not that of the Jewish revolts of Judea; rather, it was the lesser-known revolt that originated in Cyrenaica and Egypt in 115–117 C.E. during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan.

Scholarly interest in the Jewish revolt under Trajan has significantly increased in recent decades. Several major works have considered it an important factor in the history of the Jewish and Christian communities of North Africa. The general consensus of historians is that this revolt was messianic and apocalyptic in character and that it resulted in the decimation of the Jewish, and very likely the Christian, population of this region. It is entirely possible that Hellenistic Jews responding to the disappointment of the revolt, Jewish Christians uniquely impacted by the disaster, and/or Gentiles intimately acquainted with Judaism and seeking to distance themselves from it, forged the gnostic system out of the intellectual and religious ruins of this event.

The historical and literary evidence that we possess allows for the possibility, if not the probability, of the rise of Gnosticism in this temporal and geographical environment. The Jewish population of Egypt was one of the largest and most intellectually active and religiously diverse of the Diaspora. Many of the currents present in Jewish circles of Egypt may have influenced Gnosticism, including asceticism, allegorical interpretation, and apocalypticism. The language, though not necessarily the system, of Middle Platonic cosmogony is foundational to gnostic thought, and it is well known that Jewish intellectuals in Alexandria such as Philo were using Middle Platonic concepts in their theological and hermeneutical systems. Further, the history of Middle Platonism in the first century centers upon Alexandria as a geographical focal point. That a

⁵ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), esp. 237–39.

significant Christian population emerged from within the Jewish community of North Africa is certain, as hinted at in the NT and evidenced in writings such as the *Epistle of Barnabas*. What remains to be shown is how Gnosticism could have emerged in this context. Such is the argument of this study.

The first chapter of this book presents a definition of the gnostic religion and an overview of the various theories of gnostic origins, outlining the major proponents, merits, and weaknesses of each. The second chapter presents in fuller detail the theories that define Gnosticism as rising out of the diverse crises experienced by the Jewish people during this time period, including socioeconomic, political, and religious factors. A historical reconstruction of the Jewish revolt under Trajan is the focus of the third chapter. Particular emphasis is given to the forces that caused the revolt, with special attention granted to the socioeconomic and political situation of the Jews of North Africa, especially in relation to the native, Greek, and Roman populations. The chapter concludes with a summary of the devastating consequences of the revolt for the various parties involved.

The fourth chapter sets forth the essential thesis and primary evidences of the book. The chapter closely examines the theological systems of the first individuals identified by the early church fathers as gnostics, evaluating especially their dualistic tendencies and attitudes toward Judaism and its God. The issue of polemics is a crucial point of discussion in the remainder of the chapter, based essentially upon the premise that Judaism, Christianity, Gnosticism, and, to a lesser extent, Middle Platonism were seeking self-understanding in this period of religious ferment. Individuals within each of these movements were defining themselves in opposition to the others. Determining precisely when a polemic against gnostic conceptions of dualism appears is significant in determining its point of origin. What is discovered is that anti-Judaism was becoming progressively more pronounced, but a rejection of the Jewish God or his creative work was not a point of discussion prior to the 120s C.E.

The fifth chapter continues with further evidences, particularly examining what is often posited as the earliest gnostic system: Sethian Gnosticism. What is found is that Sethianism itself is at the earliest a second-century development, and one that has close connections with Egypt. This section is followed by a survey of the geography of the gnostic heresy, ending with an examination of the religious context of Egypt, particularly Judaism and Christianity, just prior to the Jewish revolt of that region. The chapter ends with several scenarios regarding “how it might have happened,” suggesting that Gnosticism was birthed in the aftermath of the revolt.

Though there is no “smoking gun” for gnostic origins in early second-century Egypt, it is not until after this disaster that teachers emerge with

clearly gnostic systems, one in particular with a crucial evaluation of the rebellious nature of Judaism and its God. Whether there is a causal connection between the revolt and the rise of the gnostic religion is difficult to determine conclusively, but the clear historical chronology of teachers, writings, and conceptions certainly supports this thesis.