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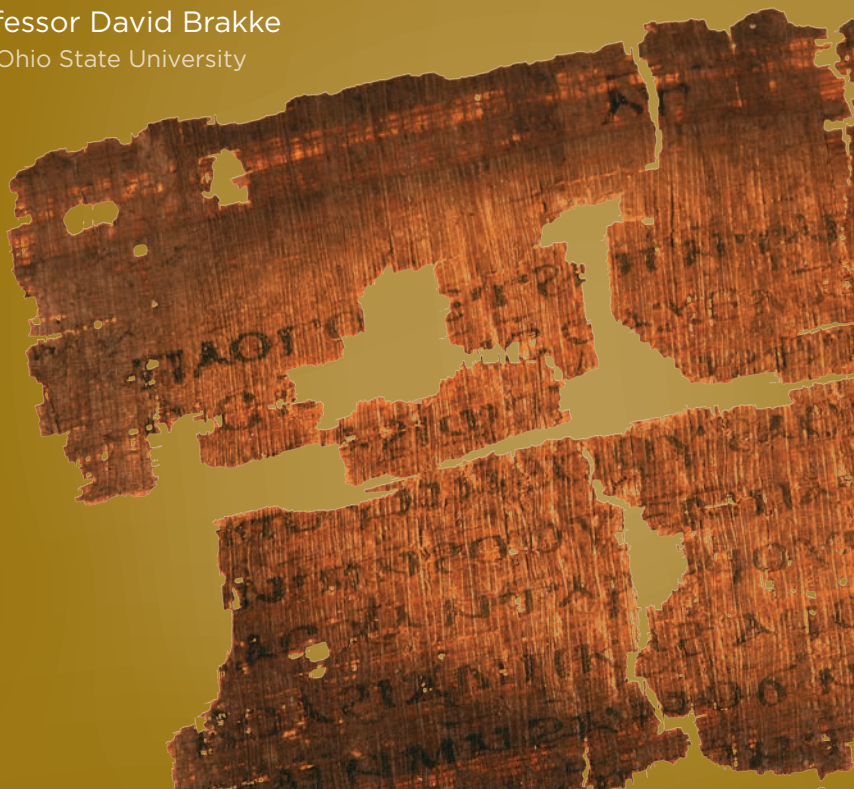
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Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas

Course Guidebook

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The Ohio State University



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Professor Brakke has published extensively on the history and literature of ancient Christianity, especially Egyptian Christianity, early monasticism, the formation of the biblical canon, and Gnosticism. He has edited and translated several ancient works that survive in Coptic and Syriac. He is currently a member of an international team of scholars producing the first unified critical edition and translation of the works of the monk Shenoute of Atripe (348–465), the greatest native writer of Coptic. Professor Brakke is also preparing a revised edition of Bentley Layton’s *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

At Indiana University, the professor received recognition for his teaching and research, including the Outstanding Junior Faculty Award. He has held several important fellowships, including ones from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. He has held visiting positions at Concordia College, the University of Chicago, and Williams College.

Professor Brakke is the author of *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*; *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*; *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*; and *Introduction to Christianity*, with Mary Jo Weaver. He has coedited six

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Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas

Scope:

Gnosticism is one of the most fascinating and perplexing phenomena in Western religious history. At its heart was *gnōsis*—direct knowledge of God—expressed in complicated myths. Yet Gnosticism itself often escapes our knowledge. Was it the first great Christian heresy? A new world religion? Or an invention of alarmed Christian leaders and modern scholars? How did it influence other religions? And why did its mythology appeal to so many people? Above all, what does *Gnosticism* mean?

During the last 75 years, previously lost Gnostic writings have reappeared, from the codices found near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 to the Gospel of Judas, first published in 2006. These texts have given scholars new insights into the diversity of Gnosticism. This course uses these new writings to explore the myths, rituals, and teachings of the first Gnostics and the other movements that used mythology to seek knowledge of God. Gnostics, Valentinians, Manichaeans, and others offered profound answers to the deep questions of human existence, especially the problem of evil. And “orthodox” Christianity developed partially in direct response to these groups.

In this course, we’ll discover the diversity of early Christianity, beginning with the so-called Gnostic school of thought, which flourished in the Roman Empire during the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. In such works as the Secret Book According to John and the Gospel of Judas, the Gnostics combined the book of Genesis with Jewish, Platonist, and Christian traditions to create a strange but beautiful myth that explained how this universe came into being through an ignorant and malevolent lower god. The Gnostics offered salvation from ignorance and fate through knowledge of a higher God, who sent Jesus, and they claimed that people could have mystical contact with that God now. The Christian teacher Valentinus and his disciples revised the original Gnostic myth to make it even more Christ centered, and they invited Christians to a deeper understanding of the Christian scriptures, sacraments, and doctrines. The Valentinian school existed alongside of, and in competition with,

“orthodox” Christianity for centuries. The Gospel According to Thomas did not share the Gnostic myth, but it did teach that to know one’s self is to know God, that is, the Jesus who is within you and who you are.

From these core groups within Gnosticism, we’ll follow the paths of *gnōsis*, myth making, and new revelations through the ancient Mediterranean world into the Middle Ages and to the present day. We’ll meet Mani, who founded a worldwide religion, Manichaeism, that left its traces in the thought of one of Catholic Christianity’s heroes, Saint Augustine. And we’ll encounter Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, the followers of the Greco-Egyptian god Hermes Trismegistus, the Cathars of medieval Europe, and the Mandaeans, who continue to follow a myth much like that of the Gnostics. We’ll follow Paul to the tenth heaven and learn secret teachings of Jesus from Mary Magdalene. And we’ll see how “orthodox” Christians, such as Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, invented the idea of heresy and their Christian doctrines in opposition to the Gnostics and Valentinians. The course concludes with the revival of Gnostic themes in the 20th century in pop culture and new religious movements.

By studying movements that were condemned as heretical and lost, we will gain new understanding of why orthodox Christianity developed as it did, and we will encounter alternative religious paths in the Western tradition—paths to *gnōsis*. ■

Rediscovering *Gnōsis*

Lecture 1

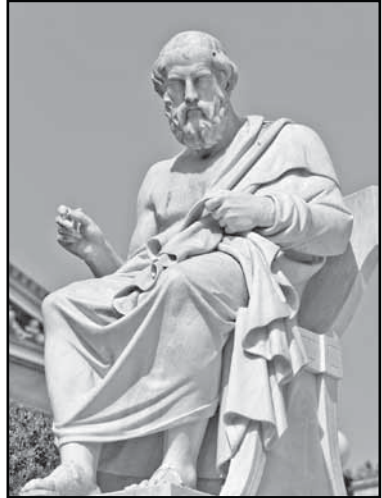
In this course, we will study a set of religious texts, persons, and groups that date mostly to the Roman Empire in the first four centuries A.D. We will find that these texts and the people who wrote them were diverse in their teachings and lifestyles. But they all share an interest in knowledge—*gnōsis*, in Greek—and they all suffered rejection and condemnation from what eventually became orthodox Catholic Christianity. The movements that scholars have called Gnosticism may have been labeled heretical, but they were profound and compelling attempts to speak to the human condition of evil and suffering, and they exerted a strong influence on the history of Western religions.

Defining Terms

- The English word *Gnosticism* was invented by an English scholar in the 17th century, but he based it on the Greek word *gnōsis*, meaning personal, direct, and immediate knowledge. The ancient Gnostics claimed to have *gnōsis* of God.
- The adjective and noun *Gnostic* comes from the Greek word *gnōstikos*, which meant “having to do with *gnōsis*” or “supplying *gnōsis*.” A *gnōstikos* science, in other words, provides higher knowledge, as opposed to practical knowledge.
- Later philosophical writers continued to use the term *gnōstikos* to refer to fields of study or aspects of the human intellect. However, around the year 180 A.D., a Christian leader named Irenaeus revealed that certain Christians were using the term *gnōstikos* to refer to themselves. This is the first time in history that we know of people being called gnostic. Clearly, these self-proclaimed Gnostics were highlighting their special relationship to *gnōsis*.

Common Gnostic Ideas

- Irenaeus was a fierce critic of the Gnostics; the persons and groups that he condemned had some key ideas in common, although they did not teach all the same things.
- First, they believed that the material universe in which we live is seriously flawed—even a mistake, something that God did not intend. The Gnostics and others had a profound sense of the imperfection that surrounds us and oppresses us—the disease, suffering, and death in the world. Such a world simply cannot be our true home; it cannot be where we are meant to live forever.
- Thus, the Gnostics and others concluded, as a second point of commonality, that the god who created this universe cannot be the highest, ultimate God. Instead, he must be a lower, inferior god—perhaps even a demonic or hostile god. The Gnostics offered *gnōsis* of the true God, a God who is entirely spiritual, serene, and unchanging; a God worthy of our devotion and worship; a God that most human beings have not known.
 - This is an important point of conflict between the Gnostics and other Christians. The Gnostics claimed that the God in the book of Genesis is not the real God but a lower, inferior god.
 - We will see that this idea was not as different from what other Jews and Christians believed as we might think, but the Gnostics and groups like them emphasized the inferiority of



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Plato invented the adjective *gnōstikos* to describe fields of study and parts of the human intellect that are related to *gnōsis*—“knowledge.”

the God of the Jewish Bible or the Old Testament to a degree that disturbed their opponents.

- Third, Gnostic movements tended to stress that we have our origin in the spiritual world of the highest God. That is, our true selves are not our bodies and sometimes not even our souls; these substances come from the lower universe and are not eternal. Instead, our true selves are our intellect or spirit, which originated in the spiritual realm and will return there. A large part of the *gnōsis* that Gnostics offered was knowledge of our true selves.
- Finally, Gnostic movements tended to communicate their ideas in elaborate myths that told who God is, how the universe came to be, what the original human beings were like, and what will happen in the future. These myths drew on a variety of religious and philosophical traditions, including the Jewish Bible, the works of Plato, and even pagan mythology.

The Nag Hammadi Codices

- Studying the Gnostics and other so-called heretical groups like them is difficult because so few sources survive. For centuries, historians had to rely on the writings of Irenaeus and other opponents of the Gnostics for information about them. Obviously, this information is useful but problematic. The *heresiologists* (writers who catalogue heretical groups) did not seek to present an objective account of heresies in order to help later historians. Instead, their goal was to expose the false nature of the heretical teachings.
- For this reason, historians were excited when, during the 19th and 20th centuries, manuscripts of Gnostic works and other heretical writings were discovered in Egypt. The most spectacular of these findings was the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, 13 ancient manuscripts found in 1945. The fact that these manuscripts are codices rather than scrolls was the first clue that their original owners were probably Christians.

- The codices were found by Muhammad ‘Ali al-Samman, an Egyptian peasant who was digging for fertilizer in the cliffs across the Nile River from the town of Nag Hammadi. Ultimately, the manuscripts were given to a local priest, who sent one to Cairo to be appraised.
 - Scholars quickly recognized that the Nag Hammadi codices are written in Coptic, which is the last phase of the ancient Egyptian language. Christians themselves invented written Coptic in the 3rd century in order to translate the Bible into Egyptian.
 - Although the texts in the Nag Hammadi codices are written in Coptic, they were originally composed in Greek. The manuscripts we have today were probably copied sometime between 350 and 450 A.D., but some of the original texts may be about 200 years older.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered around the same time as the Nag Hammadi codices, were associated with a specific Jewish community. But the owners of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts remain unknown. Although the codices are sometimes referred to as the Nag Hammadi library, we don’t know whether they constituted an intentional collection owned by a single person or institution. In fact, as many as 14 different scribes copied these manuscripts, and the texts are written in several dialects of Coptic. It’s possible, then, that the books originally belonged to several people and were only brought together at a later time.

Contents of the Codices

- The Nag Hammadi codices contain a total of 52 texts, but some of these are different versions of the same work. Thus, there are actually 46 separate works or, as scholars call them, *tractates*. These works vary widely in character.
- Most of the tractates can be considered Jewish or Christian because they make use of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible; the New Testament; and other Jewish and Christian literature. Such biblical characters as Adam and Eve or Jesus and the apostles appear in

nearly all of them. But other tractates do not come originally from Jews or Christians. For example, there is a fragment of the *Republic*, written by Plato centuries before Christ!

- Many of the treatises are apocalypses or revelations. These are books in which a divine figure, such as Jesus, or a legendary human being, such as Adam, reveals future events, secrets of the cosmos, or spiritual teachings to a chosen person or group. For example, in the Gnostic text known as the Revelation of Adam, Adam reveals to his son Seth the story of creation and foretells many events in the future.
- Other types of literature found in the Nag Hammadi codices include theological treatises, sermons, hymns, and philosophical letters. In addition, several tractates are called “gospels,” although none of them resembles the gospels in the New Testament, which tell the story of Jesus’s ministry and emphasize his passion and death. The Gospel According to Thomas from Nag Hammadi, for instance, presents a collection of Jesus’s sayings, somewhat like the biblical book of Proverbs.

Religious Traditions in the Codices

- Since the Nag Hammadi codices were discovered and translated, scholars have identified four religious groups or traditions represented in the texts. The first of these is the Gnostics or Gnostic school of thought that Irenaeus wrote about in 180 A.D.
 - Irenaeus described the myth that the Gnostics taught, and it’s precisely the same myth found in the Secret Book According to John from Nag Hammadi.
 - This myth is expressed in at least 11 other tractates, including the Revelation of Adam, the Reality of the Rulers, and the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit.
- A second set of works in the codices comes from the Valentinian school of Christianity. Irenaeus tells us of an influential Christian teacher named Valentinus (d. c. 175 A.D.), who adapted the Gnostic myth in creating his own system of thought.

- Valentinian theologians devoted considerable attention to such traditional Christian topics as sin and salvation, the resurrection of the dead, and the sacraments.
- Valentinian works found at Nag Hammadi include the Treatise on Resurrection and the Gospel According to Philip, among others. Some scholars argue that Valentinus himself is the author of the famous—and anonymous—Gospel of Truth.
- A third group of Nag Hammadi writings grants special authority to the apostle Didymus Judas Thomas, credited in Christian tradition with bringing Christianity to Mesopotamia and India. We see this special authority given to Thomas in the Gospel According to Thomas and the Book of Thomas the Contender. Thomas theology emphasized the divine origin of the soul, its fall from perfection into the body and the material world, and its ability to return to its origin through the reunion with its true self.
- The fourth group of writings consists of three tractates from Codex VI: the Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth, the Prayer of Thanksgiving, and an excerpt from the Perfect Discourse, also known as Asclepius.
 - Although both the Prayer of Thanksgiving and Asclepius were known before the Nag Hammadi discovery, the Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth is a new addition to the corpus of what scholars call *Hermetic literature*, or *Hermeticism*.
 - These writings belong to a body of ancient literature that centers on the god Hermes; they may have originated in religious and philosophical circles that were active in Greco-Roman times and late ancient Egypt. In these texts, the divine revealer is “thrice-great Hermes,” or Hermes Trismegistus, a composite of the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek god Hermes.
- After we have examined these movements and others, we will need to ask a basic question: Do they all make up a single thing called

Gnosticism, or is Gnosticism itself an invention of ancient church leaders and modern scholars?

Suggested Reading

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, general introduction.

Lewis, *Introduction to "Gnosticism."*

Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, chapters 1–2.

———, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, introduction.

Questions to Consider

1. Give some additional examples of the difference between ordinary knowledge and *gnōsis*.
2. It's hard to determine who might have owned the Nag Hammadi codices because all we have are the books themselves. Consider your own personal library: What might a later historian think about you based solely on the books you own?

Who Were the Gnostics?

Lecture 2

For centuries, scholars interested in the Gnostics or Valentinians had to rely on Irenaeus of Lyon, a bishop of the late 2nd century. Irenaeus was an enemy of the Gnostics, whom he called heretics. Although he's not an objective source of information about Gnosticism, Irenaeus still gives us some important insights. First, his writings reveal that Christianity was quite diverse in its first few centuries. Second, Irenaeus gives us some basic information about the Gnostics: He tells us what they taught, and even more important, he gives us clues about what they wrote. In this lecture, we'll look closely at Irenaeus and see what we can take away from him about the Gnostics.

Irenaeus of Lyon

- In the late 170s, Irenaeus became the leader of a small group of Christians in Lyon, which was a major city in the Roman province of Gaul (modern-day France). Most of the Christians in Lyon were Greek-speaking immigrants and were distrusted by the majority population. In fact, at the time Irenaeus became their leader, the Christians of Lyon had just endured a horrifying persecution. When he became bishop, Irenaeus sought to rebuild the confidence of the Christian community in Lyon and somehow to attract new followers.
- But Irenaeus was not the only Christian leader in Lyon. Other teachers of Christianity offered messages that conflicted with what Irenaeus taught. Irenaeus claimed that these other Christian teachers taught false knowledge and should not be called Christians—"followers of Christ"—but Valentinians—"followers of Valentinus." They were not members of the one true Christian church but members of multiple deceptive schools of thought—or heresies.
- Irenaeus took it upon himself not only to stop Christians in Lyon from following these other teachers but also to help other Christian leaders throughout the world combat them. He wrote a massive work known as *Against the Heresies*, in which he described false

versions of Christianity to enable his readers to recognize these false teachings when they encountered them.

Diversity in Early Christianity

- Irenaeus claimed that a single true Christianity originated with Jesus and the apostles. In his view, other groups, such as the Gnostics, may have claimed to be Christians, but they were false deviations from the one true Christianity. Irenaeus claimed to represent orthodox Christianity, and all competing Christians were heretics.
- For a long time, scholars tended to believe Irenaeus. That is, they thought that a single, unified Christianity had been born in the 1st century and this original Christianity could be found in the New Testament. Later on, some teachers, such as the Gnostics and Valentinus, diverged from mainstream Christianity. These days, however, most historians do not agree with this picture. They believe that Christianity was diverse from the very beginning.
- We can see this diversity already in the New Testament. The earliest Christian sources that we have are the letters of Paul, all of which are believed to come from the 50s A.D., about 20 years after the death of Jesus. Paul's letters reveal disagreement among the earliest Christians. One particular issue occurs multiple times in Paul's letters: How should Gentiles be included in salvation? The argument about this question shows us that even the first apostles did not always agree about the basics of the Christian faith.
 - Some of the apostles argued that to become fully righteous and be saved, Gentiles needed to believe in Jesus as God's Son and to give up their paganism by becoming Jews. That is, Gentile believers must undergo circumcision (if they were male) and observe the Jewish Law by keeping a kosher diet and so on.
 - Paul violently disagreed with this position. In his view, Gentiles needed only to have faith in Jesus to be righteous. Certainly, this meant giving up their pagan gods and living moral lives, but they did not have to get circumcised and follow the Law. God had given the Law to the Jews for them to follow until

the Messiah came. But now that he had come, Gentiles may be included in salvation simply by having faith in Christ.

- In contrast to Irenaeus's claims, we can see that even the original apostles did not agree on a single Christian message. In fact, they disagreed about a basic question: How are people to be saved—by faith in Christ alone or by faith in Christ and following the Jewish Law?

Marcion

- Disagreement on the question of inclusion of Gentiles and whether they should follow the Jewish Law persisted among Christians for decades. One Christian teacher, Marcion, argued that Christians should not use the Jewish Bible at all.
- Marcion was a Christian teacher in Rome in the 140s who concluded that Paul's gospel of faith in Christ was opposed to the Jewish Bible's teaching of circumcision and following the Law. In his view, Jesus and Paul preached a message of forgiveness and love—the New Testament—but the Bible preached a message of retribution and punishment—the Old Testament.
 - Marcion argued that Jesus could not be the Son of the Old Testament God. Instead, the Father of Jesus Christ must be some other God, a God that was unknown until Jesus revealed him. Jesus came to rescue people from the punishments inflicted on them by the overly righteous God of the Old Testament.
 - Marcion said that the Old Testament should no longer be read as scripture by Christians. Instead, they should use only the letters of Paul and a gospel about Jesus.
- Paul himself certainly would have disagreed with Marcion, but we can see how Marcion's message could develop from Paul's. Because Paul often contrasted faith in Christ with following the Law, Marcion concluded that Christianity should be completely separate from Judaism and everything Jewish, including the Old Testament.

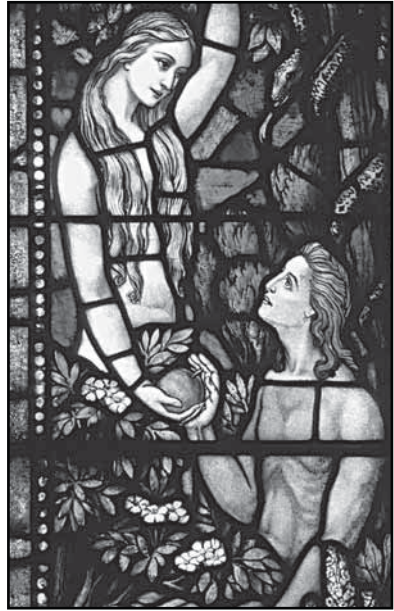
- Many other Christians in Rome argued that Marcion was a heretic who taught false Christianity. Thus, Marcion began forming churches outside of Rome. Eventually, a network of Christian churches devoted to Marcion's teachings spread throughout the Roman Empire and lasted for centuries.
- The story of Marcion illustrates two important points.
 - First, we have seen that Christians were diverse and often in disagreement and that some Christians, such as Marcion, were called heretics by others. But notice that there was no enforcement of the declaration of Marcion as a heretic. Christians in the 2nd century had no worldwide structure to impose standard teachings and practices.
 - Second, it's not correct to say, as Irenaeus would, that Marcion deviated from an original Christian truth. Rather, Marcion's distinctive view of how Christians should relate to the Old Testament and Jewish Law reflects longstanding diversity on this question.

Irenaeus on the Gnostics

- As we said, Irenaeus wrote *Against the Heresies* to help other Christian leaders recognize the teachings of so-called heretics and refute them. Certainly, Irenaeus disparages the teachers and groups he describes, but he is nonetheless careful to lay out their teachings in some detail. Thus, we can gain several insights into the Gnostics from Irenaeus.
- Primarily, Irenaeus tells us that the Gnostics taught a myth that explains who God is, how the world we live in came into being, how sin and death entered the world, and how God is acting to save people. According to Irenaeus, this myth presented a complicated picture of God.
- The Gnostic God, he says, consisted of several aspects or divine emanations from God, called *aeons*. The myth also told about the creation of this world by revising and restating the stories in the

biblical book of Genesis. Finally, the Gnostics said that Jesus came into this world to save people and will gather the souls of the saved at the end of time.

- The most striking feature of the Gnostic myth as Irenaeus tells it is that the God of Genesis is a divine being who is lower than the ultimate God and is arrogant, ignorant, and evil. He is hostile to human beings because human beings have a share of the divine spirit that belongs to the higher God. The real name of the god who created this world is Ialdabaōth—a spiritual being who runs this universe like a tyrant.



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- This idea—that the God of Genesis is actually a malevolent cosmic ruler—has important implications for how Gnostics understand the rest of the Genesis story.
 - If this god is hostile to human beings, then when he commands Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he is preventing them from knowing spiritual truth.
 - When Adam and Eve eat from the tree, they gain *gnōsis*, knowledge of the true God. As human beings continue to seek true spiritual knowledge, Ialdabaōth grows jealous of their devotion to the higher God and causes a flood to wipe

In the Gnostic myth, the serpent that persuades Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge may not be leading them into sin but helping them to gain true spiritual knowledge.

out humanity. Fortunately, the higher God saves Noah and his family from Ialdabaōth's evil plot.

- Finally, human beings later begin to lose the knowledge that Adam and Eve gained when they ate from the tree. But the higher God sends Jesus to restore this lost *gnōsis* and rescue them from Ialdabaōth and his fellow rulers.
- Obviously, the Gnostic myth was a direct challenge to how Irenaeus saw God and Jesus, but we can draw two conclusions from his report.
 - First, the Gnostics were concerned about aspects of the God of Genesis that did not seem godlike. For example, would a perfect god change his mind about the creation of human beings and cause a flood to wipe out nearly all of them? The Gnostics concluded that the god who did this must not be the ultimate, perfect God but something lower and imperfect.
 - Second, we have seen that Christians disagreed about the role that the Jewish Bible should play in their religion. When Paul said that salvation was based on faith in Christ and not on following the Law, he opened the door to Christians like Marcion, who concluded that the Jewish Bible was no longer relevant to Christians. The Gnostics took a different approach: The Bible is relevant, but it's not quite accurate. It tells the story of salvation, but we need to understand that the god it honors is not the true God.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, *The Gnostics*, chapters 2–3.

Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “The Gnostics According to St. Irenaeus of Lyon” and “Other Gnostic Teachings According to St. Irenaeus of Lyon.”

Räisänen, “Marcion.”

Questions to Consider

1. Why did the Jewish Law pose a problem for early Christians?
2. According to Irenaeus, what are the main features of Gnostic teaching?

God in Gnostic Myth

Lecture 3

The Secret Book According to John is the most important Gnostic writing that survives today. We know it's Gnostic because a major part of it matches what Irenaeus tells us the Gnostics taught. It's important because it tells the entire Gnostic myth, starting with God and the creation of this world and ending with the coming of the Savior and the salvation of humanity. Scholars believe that the book was written sometime between 100 and 150 A.D., which makes it the oldest surviving Christian work of any kind that gives a complete and comprehensive narrative of salvation. In this lecture, we'll explore the Gnostic conception of God found in this work.

The Secret Book as an Apocalypse

- The Secret Book According to John presents itself as a revelation from the Savior to the disciple and apostle John.
 - When the text opens, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus have already happened, and the disciple John is on his way to the Temple in Jerusalem, when he meets a Pharisee. The Pharisee tells John that Jesus has misled him and turned him away from the true traditions of his ancestors, the Jews. This encounter upsets John, who begins to question his beliefs.
 - At this point, the heavens open, and the Savior appears to John. The Savior strangely takes three forms—a child, a young person, and an elderly person. The Savior then begins a long speech to John, which takes up the remainder of the book.
 - When the Savior finishes his revelation, he instructs John to write it down and keep it safe. The Savior then disappears, and John goes off to tell the disciples what the Savior has revealed to him.

- The Secret Book, then, is an apocalypse—a revelation from a divine figure to a human being. Jews and Christians wrote many such revelations in the centuries before and after Jesus.
 - These revelations were an important way for people to communicate new religious insights. Their authors recorded their insights in the form of a revelation from God to an authoritative human figure from the past. Often, the divine revealer tells the human being to keep the revelation secret until the proper time. The revelations usually explain events in the present and predict what will happen in the future.
 - Like other revelations, the Secret Book According to John portrays the current world order as dominated by evil rulers who oppress human beings and work to prevent them from achieving their full spiritual potential. But the book offers the hope that through the Savior, God will soon overthrow these rulers and bring his people to salvation. In this respect, the Secret Book is similar to other Jewish and Christian works of its time.
 - But the Secret Book is also different from other Jewish and Christian revelations. Unlike the book of Revelation, it is not symbolic, and it focuses more on the past than the future. It details the story of the creation of humanity, and it devotes a great deal of attention to simply describing God. According to the Gnostic author, people can find hope and salvation not by knowing what will happen in the future but by understanding better who God is and how the world we live in came to be.

The Gnostic God

- The best way to envision the Gnostic God is to think of him as a vast intellect—a mind—similar to, but much greater than, our minds. Like an intellect, God is complex, full of thoughts called *aeons* and constantly active and creative. Just as we find peace when our minds are still and quiet, so, too, God is perfectly still and quiet, even as he is active and creative. Further, just as we can never

fully know another person's intellect, so, too, God is ultimately unknowable to human beings.

- This is where the revelation of the Savior to John begins—with God's ultimate unknowability. The Savior calls this ultimate unknowable God the Invisible Spirit or the Invisible Virgin Spirit. This Spirit is unlimited, unfathomable, ineffable, immeasurable, and incorruptible. It should not even be called divine because it is beyond our concept of divinity. It is complete silence and complete rest.

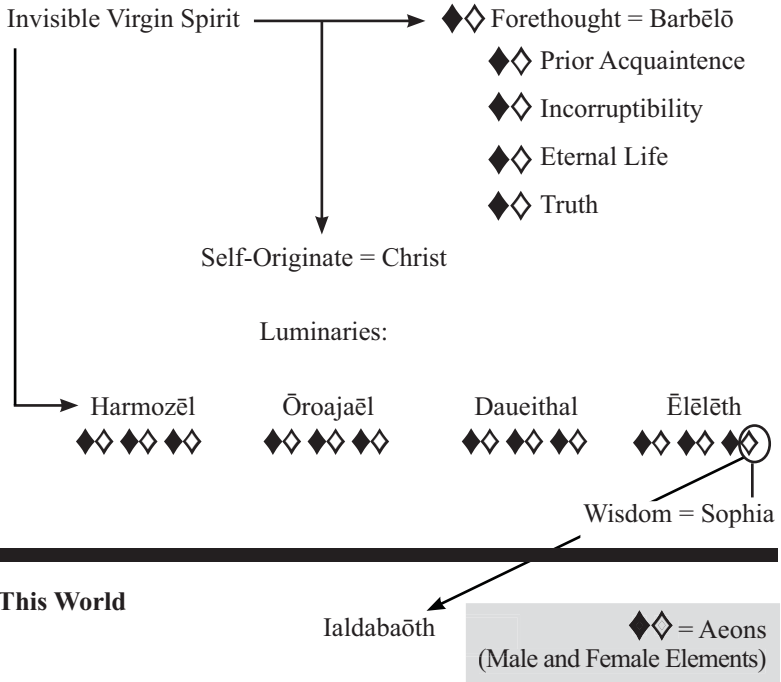


In the Secret Book According to John, the Savior lays out the complicated Gnostic picture of God to the apostle John.

- If the Invisible Spirit were all there is to God, we would never know God. In fact, we would not exist because the Invisible Spirit would just be—eternally at rest. But again, God is like an intellect; thus, the Invisible Spirit thinks, and its thinking produces a first thought, called Forethought (see **Figure 1**). Forethought is the Invisible Spirit's thought about itself.
 - Forethought is the first aeon that comes forth from the Invisible Spirit, and it's the highest level of God that we can possibly hope to know. The Gnostics believed that human beings, like God's thoughts, ultimately came from Forethought and would return to Forethought.
 - The Secret Book also gives Forethought another name, the Barbēlō, which has no equivalent in English.

Figure 1. Gnostic View of God (Secret Book)

The Entirety



- With these two aspects of God, the Invisible Spirit and Forethought, we can start to think of God not only as a person but as something like a place or realm, populated by God's thoughts, the aeons. When the Gnostics think of God as a collection of aeons or eternal beings, they call God the Entirety, that is, the total of all spiritual reality, which is God.
- Of course, once God starts thinking and produces Forethought, many other thoughts emerge. The Barbēlō is called the womb of the

Entirety because, as God's Forethought, it begins the multiplication of God's thoughts.

- In mythical terms, the Barbēlō requests from the Invisible Spirit to be given eternal realms, and in response, four new aeons appear: Prior Acquaintance, Incorruptibility, Eternal Life, and Truth. These aeons may be considered the most basic aspects of God, God's most original and central thoughts.
- Each of these aeons exists as a male-female pair that expresses the unity of two aspects of the same reality. Which aeon is male and which is female is determined by the gender of the aeon's name in the Greek language.
- At this point, the Invisible Spirit gazes at the Barbēlō, and this gaze begets in the Barbēlō a luminous spark, which becomes a new aeon called the Divine Self-Originate; in Greek, this is Autogenēs, who is also called the Anointed One, or Christ. The Gnostics think of the Invisible Spirit, the Barbēlō, and the Self-Originate as something like a nuclear family: Father, Mother, and Son.
- The begetting of the Self-Originate results in the emanation of yet more aeons. These aeons exist in four groups of three, and the four groups are led by four beings called the Luminaries, named Harmozēl, Ōroiaēl, Daueithai, and Ēlēlēth. The 12 aeons that are led by the Luminaries have abstract names that indicate aspects of God, such as Word, Perception, Intelligence, Peace, and Wisdom.

Creation of the World

- According to the Secret Book, our world came into being when the harmony and stability of the Entirety were disturbed. Wisdom, the lowest aeon, desired to think her own thought, apart from the will of the Invisible Spirit and without the consent of her consort. Her thinking produced another divine being, but because she acted on her own, the being she produced was imperfect and ugly.
- Wisdom was mortified by what she had done. She called her ugly divine being Ialdabaōth and cast it outside the Entirety. Outside

that realm was formless matter, which Ialdabaōth used to make this universe. Because Ialdabaōth had come from the Entirety, he had a dim memory of what the spiritual world is like and formed this universe as a kind of replica of it. But because of his ignorance and the imperfection of matter, the universe we live in is like the spiritual world but flawed—full of corruption and decay.

- Ialdabaōth, however, was quite impressed with what he had done. He proclaimed, “I am a jealous god. There is no other god apart from me.” Ialdabaōth’s delusion disturbed his mother, Wisdom, who realized that he had taken power from her and now ignorantly believed that he was the ultimate God. Wisdom began to move about in her distress, disturbing the rest and harmony of the Entirety.

Origins of Gnostic Ideas

- As we’ve seen, the Gnostics believed that the ultimate God was remote and could not be fully known, that we can know and understand only lower aspects or manifestations of God, and that this universe was created by an inferior god as a poor copy of the spiritual world.
- The Gnostic view of God was not particularly strange in its ancient context. In fact, it was similar to ideas found in other philosophical works of the time that were indebted to Plato. In one of his most popular works, the *Timaeus*, Plato described how a god named the Demiurge or Craftsman created the universe in which we live as a material copy of an ideal spiritual world made up of eternal ideas.
- Other Jews and Christians also accepted these ideas. For example, Philo was a Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria in Egypt in the 1st century A.D. The ultimate God, Philo said, is simply being itself and beyond our direct knowledge.
 - Further, the ultimate God did not create the world directly. Rather, he did so through a lower aspect of God or a divine meditating principle, which Philo called God’s Word (Greek: *logos*).

- The Gospel of John in the New Testament has similar ideas. According to John, it is the Word of God that became human in Jesus Christ, not the ultimate God, the Father.
- What stands out about the Gnostics in this context is the fact that their craftsman god is the ignorant and evil Ialdabaōth, not a positive god, as in Plato, Philo, and the New Testament. As suggested in the last lecture, the Gnostics most likely concluded that the creator God of Genesis is ignorant and malicious for two reasons.
 - First, the God of Genesis at times acts in ways that suggest ignorance and malice. In such stories as Noah and the flood, God destroys numerous people. The Gnostics probably saw these actions as unworthy of a good God.
 - Second, there were tendencies in the Christian tradition to see the Old Testament in a negative light. Paul, for example, contrasted faith in Christ with obedience to the Jewish Law: Christians should follow faith, not the Law.
 - Thus, building on the Platonist philosophy of the time and on Christian ambivalence about the Jewish tradition, the Gnostics concluded that it was the inferior deity Ialdabaōth who created this world, not the pure and perfect Invisible Spirit.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, *The Gnostics*, chapter 3.

King, *The Secret Revelation of John*.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “The Secret Book According to John.”

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Secret Book of John.”

Questions to Consider

1. What would you say is the dominant element in the Gnostic idea of God—the Bible or Platonism?
2. Does the “error” of Wisdom suggest that ultimately the Gnostics’ God is imperfect?

Gnosticism on Creation, Sin, and Salvation

Lecture 4

The Gnostics believed that Genesis tells us how humanity came into being, how we lost our original knowledge of God, and how God is acting to help us. But Genesis has a major problem. Like most ancient people, the Gnostics believed that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible—the Torah or Pentateuch—including Genesis. But they believed that Moses made a crucial mistake: He thought that Ialdabaōth is the true God. Thus, the Secret Book retells the stories of Genesis, but it “corrects” Moses. In this lecture, we will focus on three moments in this retelling: the creation of human beings, events in the Garden of Eden, and the flood survived by Noah and his family.

The Creation of Human Beings

- As you recall, after Ialdabaōth created this universe, he arrogantly claimed that he was the only god. His mother, Wisdom, repented for her act of independent thought that gave birth to Ialdabaōth, and the Invisible Spirit and the other aeons had mercy on her and restored her to harmony with the Entirety. Wisdom was temporarily united with the aeon Afterthought. Wisdom—or Afterthought—then works with Forethought (the Barbēlō) to regain the divine power that Ialdabaōth took from Wisdom.
- Their first approach is to inspire Ialdabaōth to create humanity. Forethought projects the light-filled image of a divine human being to the lower realms. Ialdabaōth and his fellow rulers decide to create a human being modeled after this image.
 - This act accords with God’s words in Genesis: “Let us make humanity in our image.” Notice that in this passage, humanity is made in a divine image and that multiple divine beings share in the creation.

- This is similar to the belief of other Jews and Christians of the time that God must have had helpers, probably angels, in making Adam and Eve.
- Ialdabaōth and the rulers create humanity twice. First, they make a purely spiritual human being, whose body is made of the stuff that constitutes the soul. Second, they make a material body into which the soul-body is placed.
 - This two-stage creation of humanity comes from the fact that the creation of human beings is narrated twice in Genesis (1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25). Modern scholars believe that the editor or compiler of Genesis combined two originally separate stories of creation into one book.
 - But most ancient Jews and Christians believed that God must have created people twice—the first time in a spiritual form, in God’s image, and the second time in a material form, in a physical substance—dirt. Perhaps when God blows spirit into the material human being, he is uniting the spiritual human being with the material one.
- The Secret Book shares this idea—but with a twist. After Ialdabaōth and the rulers create the spiritual human being, it does not move. Wisdom and the Barbēlō send some divine beings disguised as lower rulers to Ialdabaōth, and these beings persuade Ialdabaōth that if he blows his spirit into the human being, he will live. Ialdabaōth does this, and indeed, the human being stands up.
 - But this has been a trick! Ialdabaōth has blown his share of the divine power from the Entirety into the human being. When the human being stands up, Ialdabaōth and the rulers realize that the human being is more intelligent and stronger than they are.
 - Ialdabaōth and the rulers then make a material body from dirt and put the spiritual human being into it. The idea is to obscure and obstruct the human being’s thinking and to prevent him from realizing his superiority over them.

- In response, the Barbēlō sends Wisdom in the form of Afterthought to hide within the human being and to guide his thinking to the Entirety.
- Here begins the great drama of salvation in the Gnostic myth. Wisdom and the Barbēlō seek to regain the divine power that Ialdabaōth has stolen and that's now present in humanity. In contrast, Ialdabaōth and his rulers try to prevent human beings from realizing that this power is within them and stop them from worshipping the higher God. This great struggle continues to this day.

The Garden of Eden

- The first moment in this struggle takes place in the Garden of Eden and within the family of Adam. As we have seen, Ialdabaōth had placed Adam in a material body, which tended to make him forget his true nature. But Wisdom, in the form of Afterthought, was hidden within Adam.
- According to the Secret Book, the rulers realize that Afterthought is within Adam, and they try to take possession of her by creating a female body in her image. When the rulers take a part of Adam and use it to make Eve, Afterthought leaves Adam and goes into Eve. But miraculously, this enables Wisdom to reveal herself more fully to Adam. Adam then awakens from his forgetfulness and recognizes that his true self is a fragment of the divine.
- The rulers next attempt to prevent Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of *gnōsis*—acquaintance with good and evil—but once again, Afterthought helps them by appearing as an eagle and encouraging them to eat from the tree. They do so, and their thinking is raised. Ialdabaōth becomes enraged that Adam and Eve recognize that he is not God and expels them from the garden.
- Ialdabaōth also sees that Afterthought—that is, Wisdom—is shining forth in Eve, and he decides to rape her. The Barbēlō sends divine beings who take Wisdom out of Eve, which means that Ialdabaōth rapes Eve but fails to harm Wisdom. Cain and Abel are born from

the rape of Eve by Ialdabaōth, which helps to explain their rivalry and enmity.

- Ialdabaōth's rape of Eve is the origin of sexual intercourse, which clearly, the Secret Book sees as problematic. The desire for sex comes from the rulers, and sex itself results in the birth of material bodies in which the divine power that Ialdabaōth took is dispersed. Still, sex is not entirely bad because Adam and Eve have sex and beget Seth. Seth is begotten in the image of the archetypal divine Seth who resides in the Entirety; thus, he becomes the symbolic father of all people who have the divine power within them.
- This part of the story ends with the rulers giving Adam and Eve water of forgetfulness, with the result that human beings fall into oblivion and forget their true origins.

Noah and the Flood

- In Genesis chapter 6, strange beings called the "sons of God" take human women as wives, and the women give birth to giants. Following this, God sees that human beings are committing evil deeds. He regrets his creation and decides to destroy humanity through a flood. God saves only Noah and his family by commanding Noah to build an ark.
- Most ancient Jews and Christians believed that the "sons of God" were fallen evil angels, who had corrupted human women. Although the flood sent by God was catastrophic, ancient readers believed that it was a just punishment by God for a sinful humanity.
- In the Secret Book, Ialdabaōth also wants to destroy humans because they do not properly worship and serve him. The Barbēlō, however, instructs Noah to preach to about the truth. Noah fails to persuade most people, but many listen to him, in particular, a group called the "immovable race." Forethought saves Noah and the immovable race from Ialdabaōth's flood in a luminous cloud. Thus, the human beings who survive Ialdabaōth's flood are those who listened to the preaching of Noah and are faithful to true divinity.

- Ialdabaōth then sends his own angels to earth to mate with human women. At first, the women resist the evil angels, but then the rulers concoct a “counterfeit spirit” that leads human beings astray. Under the influence of the counterfeit spirit, human women have sex with the evil angels, and humanity loses its knowledge of the true God.

Salvation

- The Secret Book speaks about the saved people as part of a “posterity” that is descended from or linked with Seth. It also refers to the saved people as the “immovable race.” This language makes it sound as if only some human beings have the divine power within them and will be saved.
- But in the Secret Book, the Savior talks about two forces that are active in the lives of human beings: the spirit of life that comes from above, from the Invisible Spirit and the Barbēlō, and the counterfeit spirit that comes from below, from Ialdabaōth and the rulers. These two spirits descend upon human beings and compete for influence over human souls.
- The Savior divides people into three groups to further explain salvation.
 - The first group consists of people upon whom the spirit of life descends and who become perfect and worthy of salvation. These souls receive eternal life. This first group must be the Gnostics and those who listen to Gnostic teaching and become Gnostics.
 - Second are the souls upon whom the counterfeit spirit descends and who are led into works of wickedness. These people are not Gnostics and reject the Gnostic message. When these people die, their souls are placed in new bodies, and they go through multiple lives until they become perfect and attain salvation.
 - The third group consists of people who “have gained acquaintance and then turned away.” These souls will be tortured with eternal punishment, along with the rulers, at the

end of time. In other words, apostates are the only human beings who will suffer eternal damnation.

- How will people be saved? The Secret Book frequently refers to people as lost in “oblivion” or “forgetfulness.” We have forgotten who we really are—fragments of the divine from the Entirety. Thus, people need to be brought out of oblivion and returned to knowledge of God. It is Forethought or the Barbēlō who accomplishes this.



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In the Secret Book, Jesus does not save people by dying for our sins but by bringing us the message of the Barbēlō in human form.

- In the Secret Book, Forethought tells us that she has descended to humanity twice before but had to return to the Entirety, lest humanity be destroyed. Finally, she says that she has come to humanity a third and final time. She became incarnate in a human body and announced her message of salvation and awakening to human beings.
- Because the Secret Book identifies Jesus as the Christ and Savior, it seems reasonable to conclude that Forethought’s final visit to humanity in a body refers to her incarnation in Jesus. Through Jesus, the Barbēlō is calling human beings to wake up from our sleep, to recognize our true nature, to resist Ialdabaōth and the rulers, and to follow her. We can find salvation by joining the Gnostics.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, *The Gnostics*, chapter 3.

King, *The Secret Revelation of John*.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “The Secret Book According to John.”

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Secret Book of John.”

Questions to Consider

1. How would you define *sin* and *salvation* for the Gnostics?
2. Would you characterize the basic vision of the Secret Book as pessimistic or optimistic?

Judas as a Gnostic Tragic Hero

Lecture 5

The name Judas has come to stand for treachery and betrayal. It may seem surprising, then, to learn that the Gnostics had a text called the Gospel of Judas, claiming that Jesus revealed the truth about God, the creation of this world and humanity, and the future to Judas alone. Further, when Judas hands Jesus over for crucifixion, he sets in motion events that will lead to the dissolution of the present world order and its replacement by a new regime. If the Secret Book According to John presented a new Gnostic version of the Genesis story of creation, then the Gospel of Judas presents a new Gnostic version of the gospels' stories about Jesus.

Discovery of the Gospel of Judas

- The Gospel of Judas was not found at Nag Hammadi. It's contained in another ancient Coptic codex now known as Codex Tchacos. Unfortunately, Codex Tchacos has suffered a great deal of damage, much of which occurred after it was discovered.
- Codex Tchacos was one of four codices found by some peasants in the late 1970s in an ancient burial cave about 35 or 40 miles from the Egyptian town of Al-Minyā. Given that Al-Minyā is well north of Nag Hammadi, it's unlikely that these manuscripts were ever part of the same collection as the Nag Hammadi codices.
- After it was discovered, the codex found its way into the hands of a series of antiquities dealers, who did not treat it well. Eventually, it ended up in the possession of the Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art in Switzerland. Under the auspices of the foundation, a small team of scholars was able to reconstruct the fragmentary codex and translate its text. In the spring of 2006, the results of this labor were released to the world.
- But the story does not end there. It turns out that one of the dealers kept some fragments, which became available only a few years

later. It's likely that still more fragments exist that have not yet been given to scholars.

Gnostic Myth in the Gospel of Judas

- In the first scene of the Gospel of Judas, Jesus comes upon the disciples “offering thanksgiving over the bread,” and he laughs at them. The disciples ask Jesus, “Teacher, why are you laughing at our prayer of thanksgiving? What did we do? This is what’s right.” And Jesus replies, “I’m not laughing at you—you don’t do this by your own will. Rather, by this your god receives praise.” This is the first indication that the Gospel of Judas is Gnostic: It rejects the god that other Christians worship, that is, the god of the Old Testament.
- Jesus’s pronouncement that the disciples’ god is not his God angers the disciples, and Jesus challenges them: “Let whoever is strong among you people represent the perfect human being and stand before my face.” In other words, Jesus wants to know whether any of the disciples belongs to the saved people and whether any of them can display their *gnōsis* before him.
 - None of the disciples dares to answer Jesus, except for Judas Iscariot. Judas stands before Jesus and says, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You have come from the immortal aeon of the Barbēlō. But as for the one who sent you, I am not worthy to say his name.”
 - This scene is almost certainly modeled after the scene in the New Testament gospels in which Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” They give various answers, but only Simon Peter answers properly: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This scene establishes Peter as the leader of the disciples; only he declares Jesus’s true identity.
 - But in the Gospel of Judas, it’s Judas who answers, and he says that Jesus comes from the Barbēlō aeon. Judas, however, says that he cannot name the one who sent Jesus. Surely, this unnamable God is the Invisible Spirit, the ultimate unknowable God from the Secret Book According to John.

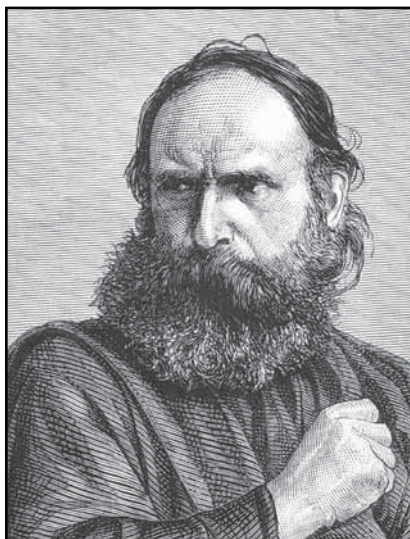
- Later in the Gospel, when Jesus reveals to Judas the true nature of God and the cosmos, other elements of the Gnostic myth appear, including the Self-Originate and his four angelic attendants and the divine human being, Adamas. There are also numerous references to a “great undominated race” associated with Seth. There are two important ways, however, in which the Gospel of Judas differs from the Secret Book According to John.
 - First, there’s much less interest in female characters, whether divine or human.
 - Second, in the Secret Book, it does not seem to have been God’s will that Ialdabaōth come into existence. In the Gospel of Judas, however, Ialdabaōth and his assistant Saklas come into existence at the initiative of a divine figure, who seems to be Ēlēlēth, one of the Self-Originate’s four attendants. It was the Invisible Spirit’s plan to bring these lower rulers into existence to rule over the chaos of the material world.
- Despite these differences, the Secret Book According to John and the Gospel of Judas teach the same basic Gnostic myth. They agree that the god of the Old Testament is a lower, pseudo-divine being. The true God is the Invisible Spirit, and his primary emanations are the Barbēlō and the Self-Originate.

The Role of Judas

- As we said, Judas is the only character in the Gospel of Judas who has *gnōsis* of God and Jesus. The other disciples mistakenly worship Saklas (identified here as the god of the Old Testament) and think that Jesus comes from Saklas. This would seem to indicate that Judas is a privileged character, a member of the great race that the Gospel says will be saved.
- But Judas’s role in the Gospel is not so positive. For example, Jesus says to Judas at one point, “I will tell you the mysteries of the kingdom, not so that you will go there, but so that you will be much grieved.” That is, Jesus implies that Judas is not one of the saved

people. Such passages would seem to indicate that Judas is a negative character.

- Most scholars tend to see Judas not as evil but as ambiguous. He's a kind of tragic hero: He plays an essential role in salvation, but one for which he suffers. His ultimate fate may not be to dwell in heaven, but he will receive an exalted position that gives him great power and authority.



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The Gnostic Gospel of Judas narrates a series of conversations between Jesus and his disciples and between Jesus and Judas, the only one of the disciples who has true *gnōsis*.

- Interestingly, this view of Judas is not so different from what we see in the New Testament gospels. There, Judas's betrayal of Jesus is required for the salvation of humanity; it's part of God's plan and was predicted in the Old Testament, and Judas dies for his guilt. In the Gnostic gospel, Judas must also hand Jesus over, and he suffers for doing so, but he receives a much more prominent position in the universe.
- Perhaps the most controversial moment for understanding Judas in the Gospel of Judas is when Jesus addresses him as "you thirteenth *daimōn*."
 - In antiquity, the Greek word *daimōn* sometimes functioned as a general term for all divine beings, including gods. More often, however, it referred specifically to divine beings in an intermediate position between full-fledged gods, such as Apollo, and extraordinary human beings, such as Herakles.

- Even more specifically, ancient philosophers often used *daimōns* to refer to divine beings that lived and operated within our universe, while gods dwelled in a different domain. The gods delegated to *daimōns* the work of running this world under their supervision.
- It seems likely that the Gospel of Judas uses the term *daimōn* in this morally neutral sense, rather than to mean “demon.” Thus, Jesus is telling Judas that he will receive a “promotion” from human being to divine ruler. This will come to Judas precisely because he alone knows the full truth about God and Jesus and because he was willing to perform the act that led to Jesus’s saving crucifixion.

Cosmic Reorganization

- The ultimate message of the Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic vision of future cosmic reorganization—something that Judas helps to set in motion.
 - The divine Jesus tells Judas that Judas will sacrifice the human being in whom Jesus dwells, not the divine Savior himself. This act will set in motion a series of events that will lead to the dissolution of the current world order and its reestablishment under Judas, the *daimōn* in the highest heaven of our world, the thirteenth heaven.
 - The current rulers, led by Ialdabaōth and Saklas, will be overthrown; even the stars that are associated with them will be destroyed. Judas will take their place as ruler of the material cosmos, while the saved people will enter the spiritual kingdom.
- One interesting point in this vision is the role of the stars. As we saw in the Secret Book According to John, the Gnostics believed that one way Ialdabaōth and the other evil rulers try to impede our *gnōsis* of God is by controlling our decisions through fate, which can operate through the stars. According to the Gnostics, however, the Barbēlō has acted through Jesus to free human beings from fate and the stars by means of *gnōsis*.

- The Gospel of Judas also speaks of the stars guiding and leading people, but it does not use the term *fate*, and it associates specific stars with individual human beings and groups of people. For example, Judas has his own star, which can guide him rightly or lead him astray.
- This understanding of stars seems to be closer to ancient Jewish literature, in which the stars are beings, similar to angels or demons. They guide and influence events but as part of a wider scheme directed by God, and their influence is not as coercive as fate.
- It's also interesting to note that as the Gospel of Judas elevates Judas to the position of future world ruler, it depicts the other disciples as ignorant of religious truth.
 - In a strange vision, the disciples see themselves as priests making sacrifices at an altar. They offer up animals and even human beings to God and engage in a host of other sins—all in the name of Jesus. When the disciples tell Jesus their vision, he commands them sternly, “Stop sacrificing animals!” In other words, stop leading other Christians to their spiritual deaths.
 - Here, the Gospel strongly criticizes Christian leaders who claim to be the successors to the apostles, who act as priests, and who celebrate the Eucharist in Jesus's name as a new Christian sacrifice to God. That is, it depicts contemporary bishops and priests as false priests who are worshipping the false god of the Bible and leading their followers to damnation.

Suggested Reading

Jenott, *The “Gospel of Judas.”*

Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos.*

Krosney, *The Lost Gospel.*

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Gospel of Judas.”

Questions to Consider

1. How did the author of the Gospel of Judas hope to make the Gnostic message persuasive to other Christians?
2. What do you think of the overall character of Judas in this work?

Gnostic Bible Stories

Lecture 6

As we've seen in the Secret Book According to John and the Gospel of Judas, the Gnostics retold stories from the Bible, almost always stories from the first chapters of Genesis. In this lecture, we'll discuss two other Gnostic texts that also rewrite the early chapters of Genesis: the Revelation of Adam and the Reality of the Rulers. These fascinating texts helped Gnostic readers see how the stories in Genesis related to them and their salvation. And they help to explain certain features of the biblical text that Gnostics and other ancient people saw as problematic or unclear.

Background on the Texts

- The Revelation of Adam and the Reality of the Rulers were originally written in Greek and probably date to the 2nd or early 3rd century.
- The Revelation of Adam presents itself as Adam's final revelation to his son Seth. Adam explains how he and Eve were created and what happened to them in the Garden of Eden. Then he looks forward to future events in Genesis, such as the flood and Sodom and Gomorrah.
- The Reality of the Rulers claims to be sent from a Gnostic teacher to a student who had asked about the reality of the spiritual beings that appear in the New Testament letter to the Ephesians. The author of Ephesians writes, "Our contest is not against flesh and blood, but against the authorities of the world and the spiritual hosts of wickedness." The Gnostic author seeks to explain the origin and nature of the spiritual rulers of this world.

Retelling Biblical Stories

- Jews and Christians retell biblical stories for a number of reasons. One motivation, for example, is to resolve contradictions between different accounts of events in the Bible. People also may want



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The Christmas nativity scene is just one example of how Christians retell stories from their Bible, combining elements from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke into one coherent narrative.

to fill in gaps in certain stories or add elements that the Bible doesn't mention. In addition, people may retell biblical stories to make theological points or to connect themselves more closely to the stories.

- Ancient Jews and Christians retold biblical stories for the same reasons. For example, some of the most fascinating texts to survive from ancient Judaism are a group of books called the *targums*. These are revised versions of the books of the Bible in Aramaic. Such books were necessary because nearly all of the Jewish Bible is written in Hebrew, but during the first few centuries A.D., most ordinary Jews in Palestine spoke Aramaic.
- The targums don't simply translate biblical stories but also revise them. In so doing, they highlight the concerns of ancient Jews. Consider, for example, the book known as the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. Its final form dates perhaps to the 8th century A.D., but

it contains traditions and materials that go back to the time of the Gnostics in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

- This targum retells Genesis, and it's clear that one thing that concerned the author is the nature and character of God in Genesis. For example, in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, God asks Adam, "Where are you?" This question makes God seem human and ignorant. But in the targum, it's not God himself who walks around in the garden but the Word of God (Aramaic: *Memra*), a kind of lower manifestation of the ultimate God.
- The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan also makes the biblical story of Genesis more relevant to contemporary Jews. At the time the targum was composed, the rabbis were encouraging Jews to base their lives on closely following the Law as found in the Bible. But in the Bible, the Law does not appear until the time of Moses. In the targum, however, God gives the Law to Adam and Eve in the garden, placing contemporary religious beliefs and practices into the story of the first human beings.

Gnostic Retelling of the Creation

- Both the Revelation of Adam and the Reality of the Rulers spend time discussing the creation of human beings; their primary concern is the passage of the divine spirit or power into and out of Adam and Eve.
- As we saw in the Secret Book According to John, divine power came to human beings through Ialdabaōth and became dispersed into humanity. This divine power enables human beings to know the true God, and the story of salvation is the story of how God works to return this power to the spiritual realm of the Entirety.
- In the Revelation of Adam, Ialdabaōth and his fellow rulers create humanity in two stages, just as in the Secret Book. But here, the author makes clear that the original spiritual human being was an androgyne, made up of both Adam and Eve. In fact, many Jews and Christians in the ancient world thought that the original human was

androgynous because of the wording of the creation story in the Bible: “And God made the human being; according to God’s image he made it; male and female he made them” (Gen. 1:27).

- Recall that in chapter 2 of Genesis, creation seems to restart. Here, God makes Adam and places him in a garden, but he can find no suitable partner for Adam from among the other animals; thus, God constructs a woman from Adam’s rib.
- As we’ve mentioned, modern biblical scholars believe that Genesis represents the combination of two originally separate creation accounts into one somewhat confusing story. But ancient Jews and Christians believed that a single divinely inspired author, Moses, wrote all of Genesis; thus, they had to make sense of the two accounts as a single coherent narrative.
- One widespread solution was to say that Genesis 1 narrates the creation of an ideal androgynous human being, and Genesis 2 tells of the division of this human being into male and female beings, with good and bad effects.
- This is the situation in the Revelation of Adam. When Adam and Eve were first created, they were a single being, and the divine power or glory dwelled in them and made them superior to the rulers who made them. But when the rulers split Adam and Eve into two beings, the divine power left them and went to dwell in a special people, namely, the seed of Seth.
- The Reality of the Rulers is also intrigued by the division of Adam and Eve, and here, too, the result is a loss of divine power. In this text, the original human being seems to be just Adam, but he has within himself the divine power or spiritual helper, which is portrayed as female. The evil cosmic rulers try to get this divine power by creating Eve, and in fact, the divine power leaves Adam and dwells in the newly created Eve.
 - On the positive side, this means that the spiritual helper can now speak directly to Adam and inspire him. On the negative

side, the rulers still want to possess the power or helper and try to rape Eve.

- But the power departs from Eve and goes into the snake in the Garden of Eden. The rulers succeed in raping Eve, but the spiritual helper speaks to Adam and Eve through the snake and encourages them to eat from the tree of knowing good and evil. In this way, Adam and Eve become aware that they lack the divine power.
- Although these two Gnostic texts do not agree on precisely what went wrong, they both conclude that the separation of humanity into male and female brought with it tragic consequences.

Gnostic Retelling of the Flood

- Both the Revelation of Adam and the Reality of the Rulers also retell the story of Noah and the flood. The flood story is a classic problem in considering the nature and character of the biblical God. Would God really change his mind and destroy nearly all of humanity?
 - Our Gnostic texts clearly believe that no true God would do such a thing. Instead, it was the evil Ialdabaōth who did this to stop human beings from realizing that he's not the real God.
 - In both texts, Noah is not even a good character. Ialdabaōth saves him from the flood because he worships Ialdabaōth.
 - If Ialdabaōth uses the flood to wipe out human beings who will not worship him, and Noah is actually an adherent of Ialdabaōth, then who will be saved? How do the Gnostics put themselves in the biblical story?
- In the Revelation of Adam, the saved people are represented by a group called the seed of Seth, or Those People. The seed of Seth survives Ialdabaōth's attacks on them because the spiritual aeons from the Entirety rescue them and keep them safe. Clearly, the seed of Seth represents the Gnostics.

- In the text, Adam tells Seth that in the future, a human being will come and perform signs and wonders to bring knowledge of God to human beings and to awaken the seed of Seth. The rulers will punish the body of that human being, but to no avail.
- Adam also predicts that at the end of time, the saved people will receive eternal life, but the human beings who have not recognized the true God will perish, along with the rulers of this world.
- In the Reality of the Rulers it's not Seth who is the ancestor of the Gnostics but a new Gnostic character, Nōrea, the sister of Seth.
 - When Eve gives birth to Nōrea after Seth, she says, “[God] has begotten on me a virgin as an assistance for many generations of humankind.” Nōrea becomes the female spiritual helper for all of humanity. When she helps human beings to improve spiritually, the rulers decide to destroy humanity with the flood.
 - And just as the rulers wanted to rape Eve when the divine power and spiritual helper dwelled in her, they try to do the same to Nōrea. But she defies the rulers and cries out to God for assistance.
 - God sends to rescue her Ēlēlēth, one of the four Luminaries who attend the Self-Originate. Ēlēlēth reveals to Nōrea that she is the mother of the saved human beings, whom he calls Nōrea's “offspring.” The evil rulers of this world cannot approach the offspring of Nōrea because in them dwells the spirit of truth. They possess *gnōsis* and exist immortal among dying humankind.
 - As Adam prophesied in the Revelation of Adam, Ēlēlēth tells Nōrea that sometime in the future, a human being will reveal the existence of the spirit of truth, teach the offspring of Nōrea about the Eternity, and free them from the blindness and death of the rulers. Then, this world and its rulers will perish, and the children of light will receive salvation.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, “The Seed of Seth at the Flood.”

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “The Revelation of Adam” and “The Reality of the Rulers.”

Luittikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions*.

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Revelation of Adam” and “The Nature of the Rulers.”

Questions to Consider

1. People often say that the Gnostics rejected or rebelled against the Bible. Does this seem like a good way of understanding their attitude?
2. It’s clear that the writings we call Gnostic differ on many mythic details. Why might various Gnostic authors tell the same stories in different ways or introduce new characters, such as Nōrea?

Gnosticism's Ritual Pathway to God

Lecture 7

In their texts, the Gnostics referred to themselves as the seed of Seth, Adam and Eve's third son, or the offspring of Nōrea, Seth's sister. But it's probably not the case that one had to be born into Gnosticism. Instead, it seems that people became offspring of Nōrea or descendants of Seth through a ritual of baptism. No Gnostic text gives us a clear description of this ritual, but in this lecture, we will look at five new Gnostic writings from Nag Hammadi that offer evidence for baptism and other forms of Gnostic worship: First Thought in Three Forms, the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit (Egyptian Gospel), the Three Tablets of Seth, Zōstrianos, and the Foreigner.

Gnostic Baptism

- We've seen brief references to water and salvation and even to baptism in some of the Gnostic texts we've already discussed, such as the Secret Book According to John and the Revelation of Adam. Another Gnostic text, First Thought in Three Forms, is a lengthy poetic retelling of the Gnostic myth. It concludes with First Thought (the Barbēlō) explaining how she washes and saves a person.
- The Barbēlō describes the act of being washed in the water of baptism, as well as more mysterious actions: enthroning, glorifying, and snatching up, all carried out by divine beings. At the end, the baptized person experiences "the luminous place," probably a reference to the Entirety.
- This description of baptism concludes with a fragmentary mention of the five seals that belong to First Thought. The "five seals" seem to have been a distinctive feature of Gnostic baptism, but we don't know what they were. Perhaps they refer to the five actions in the baptismal ritual: enrobing, washing, enthroning, glorifying, and snatching up.

- The Gnostics celebrated baptism as part of a larger worship service, as we know from the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, a kind of Gnostic liturgy that culminates in baptism. The Holy Book tells the Gnostic myth, with stops at multiple points so that divine beings can be praised with hymns. It also promises that those who undergo baptism will receive *gnōsis* and will not taste death.
- Baptism was not the only time when the Gnostics sang hymns. A book called the Three Steles of Seth consists of seven hymns and concludes with directions on how they are to be used. The hymns are arranged so that they lead the worshipers upward toward contemplation of God, at which point they are to be silent; then, the hymns lead the worshipers downward again.

Zōstrianos and the Experience of *Gnōsis*

- The book Zōstrianos tells the story of an ancient person with that name who desires to contemplate God and other spiritual realities. He turns away from material things and engages in a program of bodily discipline, philosophical study, and teaching. Through his hard work, Zōstrianos learns to see the ordinary world of material things as petty and insignificant, and he formulates deep questions about higher reality. But because he does not reach his goal of contemplating God directly, he finds himself anguished and suicidal.
- The “angel of *gnōsis*” appears to Zōstrianos and invites him to ascend through the lower realms of this cosmos up to the Entirety. The hero abandons his physical body and is carried upward on a luminous cloud. He meets several divine revealers, undergoes repeated baptisms, and gains increasingly esoteric knowledge of our universe and the Entirety. His journey takes him higher, not only in a cosmic sense but also intellectually, as he contemplates increasingly abstract levels of reality.
- Eventually, he ascends into the Barbēlō aeon, the highest level of divinity that human beings can know. At this apex of his journey, Zōstrianos seeks to understand the Invisible Spirit, but this act is

Excerpts from Gnostic Texts

Description of Baptism, First Thought in Three Forms*

And I delivered him to the Baptists and they baptized him—Micheus, Michar, Mn[e]sinous—and they immersed him in the spring of the [Water] of Life. And I delivered him to those who enthrone—Bariēl, Nouthan, Sabēnai—and they enthroned him from the throne of glory. And I delivered him to those who glorify—Ariōm, Ēlien, Phariēl—and they glorified him with the glory of the Fatherhood. And those who snatch away snatched away—Kamaliēl, [missing name], and Samblō, the servants of [the] Great holy Luminaries—and they took him into the light-[place] of his Fatherhood.

Thanksgiving Hymn, Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit**

I have been formed within the orbit of the riches of the light.
For the light is within my bosom, bestowing form upon the various
engendered beings by unreprouchable light.
I shall truly declare your praise,
For I have comprehended you:
It is yours, O Jesus! Behold, O eternally omega, O eternally epsilon,
O Jesus!

Hymn in Praise of the Barbēlō, Three Steles of Seth**

We praise you—we who, in our capacity as those who are perfect and
particular, have become wholly saved,
We who are perfect because of you,
We who became perfect along with you.
O you who are perfect!
O you who are perfect!
O you who are perfect through all these [spiritual beings]!
O you who are everywhere similar!
O thrice-male!
You have stood at rest: you stood at rest in the beginning.

You have become divided everywhere: you have remained One.
And you have saved whomever you desired: and you desire that all
worthy people become saved.
You are perfect! You are perfect! You are perfect!

*Adapted from James M. Robinson's *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: HarperOne, 1990).

**Excerpts from Bentley Layton's *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

described as “reckless.” Zōstrianos then descends, returns to his physical body, and preaches a message of moral reformation and *gnōsis* with God to others.

- The idea of traveling through heavenly realms to gain knowledge of the cosmos and God came from a long tradition of Jewish apocalypses, such as 2 Enoch. In that book, the hero is extremely righteous in following Jewish Law and displays special fidelity to the God of Israel. For these reasons, he is led on a tour through the heavens and learns important secrets of the universe. Eventually, he experiences a vision of God; he then returns to earth and exhorts other Jews to follow the Law and be faithful to God.
 - We see several similarities between Zōstrianos's heavenly journey and that of Enoch. In both stories, the main figures journey upward through the heavens, guided by one or more angels, and learn divine information about the universe. Both experience some sort of contact with God, then descend to preach and teach others.
 - However, there are also important differences between the two stories that show the distinctiveness of the Gnostic religious vision. First, Enoch receives his heavenly journey as a reward for following Jewish Law and being faithful to the

God of Israel. Zōstrianos, in contrast, undertakes a program of asceticism and study; he follows the path of philosophy until it can take him no further and God must step in.

- Second, the information that Enoch learns on his journey mostly concerns the creation and structure of this universe and God's future judgment. Zōstrianos also sees how God created the world and how he will judge people, but he sees other things, as well. He is shown the aeons of the Entirety, and he sees the eternal forms after which things in this world were copied. In other words, Zōstrianos sees the important philosophical concepts of the Gnostic myth.
- Finally, Enoch's journey culminates in a vision of God's face, but when Zōstrianos asks to understand the ultimate God, his request is deemed "reckless." The ultimate God of the Gnostics cannot be understood, nor does it have a face that can be seen.
- In the story of Zōstrianos, the Gnostics have combined a Jewish apocalyptic tradition of gaining *gnōsis* of God through a heavenly journey with a philosophical tradition of knowing God through study and contemplation. This philosophical path can be traced to Plato.
 - Plato's most famous description of how a human being can experience mystical knowledge of God is found in the *Symposium*. In this book, a group of educated men entertain themselves after dinner by giving speeches in praise of Eros, the god of erotic love.
 - In the climactic speech, we learn that erotic desire is meant to lead us to love God. Here, the man of philosophy undertakes a journey of increasing abstraction, starting with love of the beauty of a particular human body and moving to the beauty of the body in general, the beauty of the soul, and so on, up to beauty itself. If a man trains himself in this way, Plato says, he might be fortunate enough to be granted "all of a sudden" a vision of beauty itself, which is God.

- What we see in Zōstrianos is the adaption of Plato’s method of knowing God to the idea of a revelatory heavenly journey. Zōstrianos, as Plato advises, takes up the study of philosophy, and during his heavenly journey, he contemplates increasingly abstract levels of reality, including the eternal ideas that Plato said are the models for everything in this universe.
- The only “mistake” that Zōstrianos makes is that he recklessly tries to gain understanding of the ultimate God. But according to Plato, such a vision cannot be forced; it will happen “all of a sudden.” Plato also says that the person who is granted this vision becomes “immortal.” *Gnōsis* of God grants a person salvation from this material world and eternal life. Zōstrianos may not achieve *gnōsis* of the Invisible Spirit, but he gets what’s possible in this life: divine knowledge of the cosmos and the Entirety, culminating in *gnōsis* of the Barbēlō. This brings him salvation and eternal life.

The Foreigner and the Experience of *Gnōsis*

- The book entitled the Foreigner is similar to Zōstrianos. Its hero, named simply “the Foreigner,” is a mythical human being from long ago—possibly Seth. The Foreigner also experiences a heavenly journey, guided by an angel named Iouēl. Like Zōstrianos, the Foreigner ascends as high as the Barbēlō aeon, the level of reality just below the Invisible Spirit. Iouēl tells the Foreigner that he will receive a revelation of the unknowable God after a period of 100 years.
- The Foreigner spends the time preparing himself for this experience. When the century is over, he is taken outside his body to a holy place. There, divine beings instruct him in how to contemplate God by turning his attention toward himself and contemplating sequentially the structures of his mind.
 - This process of mental withdrawal is like Plato’s ascent through levels of abstraction of love, but it’s totally intellectual and self-oriented. We must know our true selves, that is, our intellects, in order to know God.

- We can do this because it was the Invisible Spirit's own act of self-knowledge—of thinking about itself—that generated the Barbēlō and the other aeons of the Entirety. The structure of our minds is a fragment or miniature version of the structure of the Entirety, which is God's mind.
- As the Foreigner performs this self-contemplation, he gains knowledge of aspects of the Barbēlō aeon that are also in his own intellect: blessedness, vitality, and reality. He gains *gnōsis* of himself and discovers the Barbēlō as “that which existed within me.”
- The Foreigner then receives a vision of the Invisible Spirit. He wants to understand this vision, but the divine beings explain that the Invisible Spirit is not knowable. Ultimately, what the Foreigner learns is a paradox: He understands the Invisible Spirit precisely by not understanding it. In the end, the Foreigner ascends to acquaintance with God by journeying through his own intellect, and he receives *gnōsis* of the Invisible Spirit as a gift.
- Here, we reach what must have been the ultimate appeal of Gnostic teachings. The Gnostics acknowledged that this world is flawed and full of misery and saw that our bodies and the physical world can obstruct our contemplation and understanding of higher spiritual realities. But there is a spiritual realm of truth and perfection beyond this universe, and our dissatisfaction with this world is a sign that we belong to that higher realm. If we contemplate rightly, we can experience—however briefly—*gnōsis* of the true God. Such an experience confirms the reality of what the Gnostics teach.

Suggested Reading

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “First Thought in Three Forms,” “The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit,” “Zōstrianos,” “The Foreigner,” and “Three Tablets of Seth.”

McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, chapters 1–2 and 4.

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “Three Forms of First Thought,” “The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit,” “Zostrianos,” “Allogenes the Stranger,” and “The Three Steles of Seth.”

Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism.”

Questions to Consider

1. Some scholars argue that the Gnostics did not actually perform baptisms with real water because the Gnostics did not think much of the body and because the language they use for baptism is so mythological. Rather, baptism is a metaphor for *gnōsis*. What do you think?
2. Can you imagine engaging in the mystical contemplation that the Foreigner describes? How might you try to do it?

The Feminine in Gnostic Myth

Lecture 8

When scholars first began to read texts from Nag Hammadi in the 1960s and 1970s, they were astonished to find how frequently these books depict God and other divine beings as female. This strong female element suggested that the Gnostics had a more inclusive, less patriarchal notion of the divine than did orthodox Jews and Christians. Since the 1970s, however, scholars have become less enthusiastic about the roles of women and the feminine in Gnostic myth. In this lecture, we'll look at three examples of the feminine in Gnostic texts: the feminine divine in the Secret Book According to John, the feminine revealer in The Thunder: Perfect Intellect, and the feminine heroine in the Reality of the Rulers.

The Feminine Divine

- The Secret Book According to John describes the Barbēlō as follows: “She became the universal womb, for she precedes everything, the mother-father, the first human, the holy spirit, the triple male, the triple power, the androgynous one with three names, the aeon among the invisible beings, the first to come forth.”
- This description twice balances male and female elements: The Barbēlō is the “mother-father” and “androgynous.” At one point, the author makes the Barbēlō seem female: She is “the universal womb,” yet he also calls her “the triple male” or “thrice male.” (*Thrice* seems to be Gnostic jargon for “supremely” or “very.”) Thus, the Barbēlō is supremely male, yet she is also a womb—and androgynous. How can this all be true?
- In modern thought, *androgynous* might be taken to refer to equal shares of two equal principles. In other words, to be androgynous is to be equally male and female, and these qualities are equal in value. But this may not have been how ancient people thought of androgyny.

- As mentioned in an earlier lecture, humanity is created twice in the first two chapters of Genesis. In chapter 1, the text reads: “And God made the human being; according to God’s image he made it; male and female he made them” (Gen. 1:27). It’s difficult to know whether God made multiple human beings who are either male or female or whether he made a single human being who is both male and female.
- In chapter 2, God constructs a female mate for Adam from Adam’s rib—removing the female as a part of the male. This does not seem to refer to the separation of two equal halves. Instead, the female appears to be less than the male. In fact, many ancient people did not think of male and female as two opposite and equal genders, but they considered the female to be a derivative aspect of the male. To be female was to be “not enough” male.
- In this understanding, androgyny is not the union of two equal genders but the proper incorporation of the female into the more fundamental and superior male.
- This seems to be precisely what we see in the Barbēlō. The Secret Book depicts her primarily as a female character because her other name, Forethought, is a feminine name in Greek, and at some point, she conceives the Self-Originate from the gaze of the Invisible Spirit. But as a perfect divine being, the Barbēlō is essentially masculine. She is, in fact, “thrice-male” because she includes within her masculinity the features of femininity. The Gnostic view of God incorporates feminine elements, but it does not dislodge the superiority of the masculine.
- The aeon Wisdom (Sophia in Greek) is an even more clearly female character than the Barbēlō because she has an unnamed male aeon as her consort and she is the mother of Ialdabaoth. She is also a good example of the ambiguity of the divine feminine in Gnostic myth.

- On the one hand, it's Wisdom who enlightens human beings about their true origins in the Entirety and teaches them about the way to *gnōsis*.
- On the other hand, it's her error that leads to the generation of Ialdabaōth and the loss of the divine power to him in the first place. And remember, her error is daring to think on her own, without the consent of her male partner.
- The author of the Secret Book strongly emphasizes harmony. By pondering on her own, Wisdom disturbs the harmony that should exist between male and female aeons.

The Feminine Revealer

- One of the most remarkable Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi is *The Thunder: Perfect Intellect*, probably written before 300 A.D. It consists entirely of a revelation monologue spoken by a female divine revealer. In some passages, this speaker exhorts her audience to listen to her message and to realize their true selves. In other passages, she talks about herself in paradoxes. For example:

I am the first and the last.

I am the honored one and the despised one.

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin. ...

I am the bride and the bridegroom

And it is my husband who begot me.

- What did these paradoxes mean for the ancient Gnostics? One persuasive hypothesis is that these statements form a riddle that reveals the identity of the speaker. What woman is both revered and despised, is seen as both holy and a harlot, and has a husband who gave birth to her? The female revealer in *The Thunder* would seem to be Eve but Eve as the embodiment of the female divine, whether Wisdom or Forethought, the *Barbēlō*.

- As the revelation monologue of a female divinity, The Thunder resembles at least two other ancient texts, one Jewish and one “pagan.”

- In the Old Testament book of Proverbs, God’s Wisdom is personified as a female figure. The Hebrew word for wisdom, *hochmah*, is feminine, just as Sophia is in Greek. Proverbs depicts Wisdom as God’s helper in creating the world, and she addresses human beings directly,



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Isis was an Egyptian goddess, but temples devoted to her spread throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

inviting them to follow her. It’s virtually certain that the Gnostic author of Thunder modeled his divine female revealer on the Wisdom of Proverbs. By doing so, he indicates that the true Wisdom of God can be found in Gnostic myth.

- The author may have been equally inspired by a famous text called the Isis Aretalogy (Discourse on Virtues). This text is famous because it shows a goddess—not a god—making grand claims about her powers. In the text, Isis lists her many virtues and reminds human beings of all that she has done for them: “I divided the earth from the heaven. / I showed the path of the stars. / I ordered the course of the sun and the moon.”

The Feminine Heroine

- The Gnostics are famous not only for having female divinities but also for giving the human female Eve a larger role in the Genesis story and for including the new biblical character Nōrea, sister of Seth, who is prominent in the Reality of the Rulers. In contrast to all other Gnostic writings, this text characterizes the Gnostics as the descendants, not of Seth but of Nōrea, who leads humanity to improve and defies male human beings, including Noah and the evil rulers.
- That Reality of the Rulers is distinctive for how it places gender and sexual violence at the center of its story. From the start, the divine power that enters this world is coded as feminine, and the evil rulers of this world experience an erotic attraction to it. They create Adam and Eve precisely so that they can possess the divine power from above. When the divine spirit enters Eve, the rulers want to rape her.
- But the divine spirit laughs at the rulers, leaves Eve, and becomes a tree, probably the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. The divine spirit leaves behind a fleshly Eve, a shadow of herself, and it is this fleshly Eve whom the rulers rape. The female spiritual principle mocks the rulers and escapes, but they succeed in raping the human Eve.
- When Nōrea becomes the female source of divine knowledge, she, too, comes into conflict with the rulers. First, when the rulers decide to destroy humanity with a flood, Nōrea tries to escape the flood with Noah on the ark. When Noah refuses to let her onboard, Nōrea causes the ark to be destroyed by fire, and Noah must build another.
- At this point, the rulers decide to attack Nōrea. The chief ruler says to her, “Your mother Eve came to us.” But Nōrea replies: “It is you who are the rulers of darkness; you are accursed. And you did not know my mother; instead it was your female counterpart that you knew. For I am not your descendant; rather, it is from the world above that I am come.” The chief ruler is undeterred, and Nōrea cries out to God for help. The Luminary Ēlēlēth arrives to

rescue her, and he reveals to her that she is the mother of all the saved people.

- It's difficult to call the depiction of women and gender in this Gnostic tale wholly positive or wholly negative. On the one hand, the female divine spiritual principle always manages to outwit the evil rulers, and Nōrea is an assertive woman who defies both Noah and the rulers. On the other hand, women and the feminine are the repeated objects of sexual violence.
- In general, Gnostic myth depicts a negative view of sexual desire. To be sure, some instances of sexual intercourse have good consequences. For example, Adam and Eve produce Seth, and in the Entirety, the conception of the Self-Originate by the Invisible Spirit and the Barbēlō closely resembles sexual intercourse. But sexual desire itself is never seen as good.
 - In the Reality of the Rulers, sexual desire motivates the evil rulers to attack Eve and Nōrea. In the Secret Book According to John, Ialdabaōth rapes Eve, and the rulers later seduce human women, leading to human sinfulness.
 - After Ialdabaōth rapes Eve, the author of the Secret Book writes: “To this day sexual intercourse has persisted because of the first ruler.” In other words, sex as we know it comes from Ialdabaōth, and sexual desire is a major means by which the counterfeit spirit leads human beings astray.
 - If the Gnostics were not positive about sex, neither were most early Christians. In 1 Corinthians, Paul told his followers that he wished all Christians could be celibate, and he encouraged single Christians not to get married. This does not mean that the Gnostics or other early Christians thought that marriage was wrong. It was acceptable for Christians to get married, but reproduction was the only good reason to have sex. Christians universally agreed that sex for pleasure—out of desire—was wrong.

Suggested Reading

King, *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*.

———, “Reading Sex and Gender in the *Secret Revelation of John*.”

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “The Secret Book According to John,” “The Thunder—Perfect Intellect,” and “The Reality of the Rulers.”

———, “The Riddle of the Thunder.”

McGuire, “Women, Gender, and Gnosis in Gnostic Texts and Traditions.”

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Secret Book of John,” “Thunder,” and “The Nature of the Rulers.”

Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, chapter 3.

Questions to Consider

1. Would you characterize the Gnostic perspective on women and sexuality as predominantly positive, negative, or ambiguous?
2. Why do you think rape figures prominently in several Gnostic writings?

The Gospel of Thomas's Cryptic Sayings

Lecture 9

The Gospel According to Thomas, which contains more than 100 sayings of Jesus, is probably the most widely known “Gnostic” gospel. For many people, this gospel is what “Gnosticism” is all about. But as we’ll see, Thomas lacks most of the distinctive teachings and practices that we have seen in Gnostic literature. Thus, scholars are increasingly reluctant to call it Gnostic. Instead, we need to appreciate the Gospel of Thomas for its own sake and try to understand its unique teachings about how Jesus can lead people to *gnōsis* with God.

Background on the Gospel of Thomas

- Scholars always knew that a text called the Gospel According to Thomas existed because several early Christian authors mention it. One father of the church, Hippolytus (fl. 3rd c.), even gives a short quotation from Thomas that was later found to match a saying of Jesus found in the Nag Hammadi text of the gospel.
- Once scholars had the gospel in Coptic, they realized that they also had fragments of it in Greek, found in excavations at Oxythynchus around 1900. Scholars date these Greek fragments to the 200s, which means that the original gospel must have been written sometime before 200.
- The Gospel of Thomas begins as follows: “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas recorded.” But no historians believe that it was actually written by the disciple Thomas. Most early Christian gospels, including those in the New Testament, were originally composed anonymously. Only later were such titles as “According to Matthew” or “According to Luke” assigned to these books.
- Almost all biblical scholars agree that the earliest gospel written was Mark, which probably comes from around the year 70. They agree

also that the authors of Matthew and Luke used Mark in writing their gospels. There is no consensus about whether the author of John had read any of the other gospels. Did the author of the Gospel of Thomas know and use Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John?

- Historians disagree on this point. Some believe that the author of Thomas did not have access to the other gospels, and thus, it probably dates to the 1st century. Most scholars, however, think that the author of Thomas did use the gospels in the New Testament, which means it probably comes from the early 2nd century.
- The answer to this question primarily matters to scholars who are interested in studying what Jesus himself taught. If the Gospel of Thomas is not dependent on the New Testament gospels, then it provides an independent witness to teachings that Jesus may have said and his followers passed down orally.

Message of the Gospel

- Unlike the New Testament gospels, the Gospel of Thomas is not a story about Jesus. Instead, it's a *wisdom book*, a collection of wise sayings. In the gospel, Jesus speaks in a similar vein as Wisdom in the book of Proverbs: He speaks about himself, and he calls people to follow him in devotion to God. In fact, we probably say that in Thomas, Jesus is Wisdom—or, at least, the voice of Wisdom. In this respect, Jesus is something like the aeon Wisdom in Gnostic texts. He's the voice of the divine calling us to understand our true selves, and he's the divine potential within us that makes up our true selves.
- With the opening sayings of Thomas, we learn that what the gospel teaches is a matter of life and death, a matter of salvation. The source of salvation is present in the sayings of Jesus, the meaning of which we must seek. Ultimately, what we seek is not far away but within us.
- Because Jesus is God's Wisdom, he is eternal and alive. The gospel is not interested in a Jesus who lived years ago in Palestine. It

repeatedly calls Jesus “the living Jesus”—the Jesus who lives now and is present to people.

- As Wisdom, Jesus is the source of all that is, and he is present in all creation: “I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I’m there. Lift up the stone, and you’ll find me there.” (77).
- Jesus is the divine presence in all that is, but he is especially present in the words that he says. He tells the disciples that they will understand who he is from the things he says to them. Even more, the light that is Jesus is also within human beings. We ourselves are from the spiritual realm: “There is a light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark” (24).
- When we hear the message of Jesus, we realize that the kingdom of heaven is within us, that knowing Jesus is knowing our true selves. If we do not recognize the light within us, we remain in darkness. But if we do recognize it, we essentially become Jesus, who is the light.

Differences between Thomas and Gnosticism

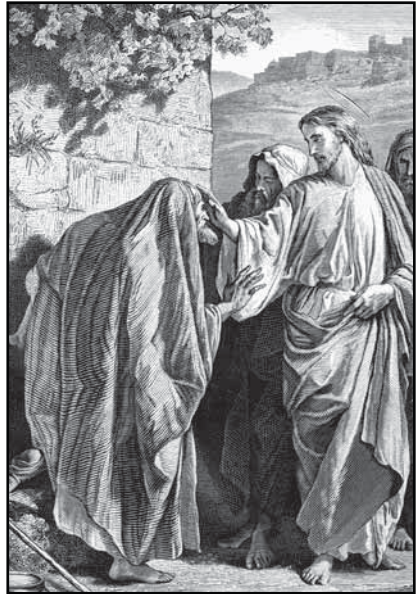
- In some respects, the teaching of the Gospel of Thomas resembles that of the Gnostics. We belong to the spiritual realm of light, and the spiritual realm is present within us as light. Jesus saves us by waking us up to this fact, by revealing to us our true natures, by bringing us the *gnōsis*—the saving knowledge—that we need.
- But the Gnostics did not emphasize knowledge of the self as knowledge of God as strongly as Thomas does. They were concerned with how distant we are from God and the fact that we did not identify ourselves closely with God. For the Gnostics, to experience *gnōsis* of God, we don’t simply recognize our true selves. Instead, we must ascend through levels of abstraction to contemplate the Barbēlō aeon.
 - In Gnostic myth, it was the Barbēlō who spoke through the human Jesus, and it was Wisdom who guided Adam and Eve, Seth, and Nōrea toward God.

- In contrast, the Gospel of Thomas does not have a divine aeon named the Barbēlō, nor does it separate Wisdom from Jesus. Indeed, the gospel does not have the complicated divine realm that we saw in Gnostic myth at all.
- The Gospel of Thomas shares with the Gnostics the idea that we have within ourselves divine potential that we must recognize. And like the Gnostics, it teaches that Jesus came to reveal this truth about ourselves. There are also hints in Thomas that this world is controlled by inferior divine beings. But otherwise, Thomas lacks the distinctive characters of the Gnostic myth.
- For these reasons, most scholars of early Christianity are reluctant to use the term *Gnostic* for the Gospel of Thomas. This gospel teaches salvation by *gnōsis*, but it does not share the mythology and rituals of the Gnostic school of thought. Instead, Thomas represents another path to salvation through *gnōsis* within the great diversity of early Christianity.

Apocalyptic Eschatology

- One important way in which Gnostic myth is closer to emerging orthodox Christianity than the Gospel of Thomas is in its view of history and the future. The New Testament, the early church fathers, and Gnostic myth all agree that history is moving toward the end of the world as we know it and the establishment of a new kingdom of God. But Thomas explicitly rejects this teaching: There is no future kingdom of God; salvation is available right now!
- According to the New Testament, Jesus proclaimed, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). When the disciples ask Jesus when the kingdom will come, he gives a paradoxical answer. On the one hand, there will be signs, such as war, famine, and acts of sacrilege. On the other hand, we need to be prepared because we can never know precisely when the kingdom will come.

- Scholars call this teaching about a future kingdom of God *apocalyptic eschatology*. The term refers to a religious view that emphasizes revealed knowledge about the end of the world. Apocalyptic eschatology can be found in the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition, among the early Christians, and in the teaching of the Gnostics.



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In the New Testament, Jesus says that his healing of the sick was a sign that Satan's rule of this world was coming to an end.

- But the Gospel According to Thomas explicitly rejects apocalyptic eschatology. The kingdom of God is not some future event to which history is moving. The kingdom is already present, hidden within each of us. When we awaken to this fact, we will experience the kingdom and gain full salvation.
- In the opening of the gospel, Jesus rejects the idea that the kingdom is a place or an external reality: “The kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you.” It seems not to be a place at all but an experience, something that happens when “you come to know yourselves.”
- As they do in the New Testament gospels, the disciples in Thomas ask Jesus when the kingdom will come. Jesus answers by rejecting the idea that it is coming in the future: “His disciples said to him, ‘When will the rest for the dead take place, and when will the new

Excerpts from the Gospel of Thomas*

Saying 1

He said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."

Saying 2

Jesus said, "Let one who seeks not stop seeking until one finds. When one finds, one will be disturbed. When one is disturbed, one will be amazed, and will reign over all."

Saying 3

Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Behold, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds in the sky will get there before you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will get there before you. Rather, the kingdom is inside you and outside you. When you know yourselves, then you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and embody poverty."

Saying 96

Jesus said, "The kingdom of the Father is like a woman who took a little yeast, hid it in dough, and made large loaves of bread. Whoever has ears ought to listen."

Saying 98

Jesus said, "The kingdom of the Father is like someone who wanted to put a powerful person to death. He drew his sword at home and thrust it into a wall to find out whether his hand would go through. Then he killed the powerful person."

Saying 107

Jesus said, "The kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine and looked for the one until he found it. After he had toiled, he said to the sheep, 'I love you more than the ninety-nine.'"

Saying 108

Jesus said, “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to him.”

Saying 113

His disciples said to him, “When will the kingdom come?” Jesus said, “It will not come by looking for it. Nor will it do to say, ‘Behold, over here!’ or ‘Behold, over there!’ Rather, the kingdom of the Father is spread out on the earth, but people do not see it.”

*Excerpts adapted from Marvin W. Meyer’s *The Gnostic Gospels of Jesus: The Definitive Collection of Mystical Gospels and Secret Books about Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2005) and Robert J. Miller’s *The Complete Gospels* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2010).

world come?’ He said to them, ‘What you are looking forward to has come, but you don’t know it.’”

- Some of the parables Jesus tells in this gospel express the danger of not recognizing the kingdom: “Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of the Father is like a woman who was carrying a jar full of meal. While she was walking along a distant road, the handle of the jar broke, and the meal spilled out behind her along the road. She didn’t know; she didn’t understand how to toil. When she reached her house, she put down the jar and discovered that it was empty.’”
 - This woman’s ignorance of the fact that the meal is spilling out of her jar represents the ignorance of those who go through life unaware of the presence of God within them. Just as this woman comes to the end of her journey and has nothing, people without *gnōsis* come to the ends of their lives without having discovered the truth about themselves and the divine.
 - Notice that the woman is said not to have understood how to toil. The gospel makes clear that Jesus has revealed the

truth to us, but we must expend effort to grasp and understand his revelation.

- The toil that *gnōsis* requires is the hard work of trying to understand the often perplexing sayings of the Gospel According to Thomas. If we do, we will discover our true selves and experience the kingdom of God—not in some future time but now!

Suggested Reading

Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom*.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “The Gospel According to Thomas.”

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas.”

———, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, chapter 3.

Pagels, *Beyond Belief*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think the author of Thomas turned against the idea of a future kingdom of God?
2. How is Thomas similar to and different from the Gnostic writings?

The Gospel of Thomas on Reunifying the Self

Lecture 10

The shortest saying in the Gospel of Thomas is: “Jesus said, ‘Be passersby.’” We belong to the realm of spirit and light, not this world of flesh and darkness. Thus, Jesus commands that we should live our lives in this world as “passersby.” In our last lecture, we learned that the Gospel of Thomas shares with the Gnostics the belief that salvation comes through *gnōsis*, the special knowledge of God that Jesus brings; for Thomas, *gnōsis* is knowledge of our true selves. We need to regain knowledge of our true selves through the sayings of Jesus. In this lecture, we’ll learn more about this true self and what it means to become “passersby.”

The True Self

- Basic to everything that the Gospel of Thomas teaches about human beings is the idea that our bodies are not who we are. Our true selves are completely spiritual, immaterial, not flesh. The body and flesh are poor and useless in comparison to the wealth and wonder of the soul and spirit.
- The gospel teaches that our souls existed in a spiritual realm of light before they came to dwell in our bodies, and our destiny is to return to that realm. For example, Jesus says, “The end will be where the beginning is,” and “Blessed are those who are solitary and chosen: you will find the kingdom. For you have come from it, and you will return there again.”
- Most people are like the woman with the jar of meal that we met earlier: They go through life unaware of their true selves. But when we listen to the message of Jesus, we wake up from our stupor and come to realize who we really are. When that happens, we can experience the rest and repose of the spiritual realm—even in this world. According to Thomas, that is the kingdom of God.

- Much of this comes from the philosophy of Plato. For Plato, too, human beings essentially are souls. Our souls existed before we were born into this material world, and they will continue to exist after our bodies die. According to Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, the gods made our souls with a seed of the divine within them. We were educated about the universe, then sent down to live in bodies. In our bodies, we tend to forget what we were taught when we existed only as souls, but through philosophy and education, we remember and can achieve happiness.
- The Gospel of Thomas shares this basic Platonist view of the origin and destiny of human beings, but it insists that it's Jesus, not philosophy, who brings insight to our souls, reveals to us our origins in the world of spirit and light, and offers us the way back to our origins.

Becoming Unified

- In Thomas, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are solitary and chosen." In fact, many of the sayings in Thomas refer to individuals who have achieved *gnōsis* and salvation as "solitary" or a "single one."
- In the Gospel of Thomas, the terms *single one* and *solitary* refer to a person who has overcome the divisions and multiplicity of life in this world and has become unified. In response to a question from the disciples, Jesus explains that salvation comes from combining opposites:
- Jesus said to them, "When you make the two into one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female; when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the kingdom." (22)

- The idea here seems to be that before we are saved, we don't really know our true selves, and for this reason, we're divided. We have one self who lives in this world, has a family and a job, and thinks that those things constitute life. But that is a false self. There is another self who does not belong to this world but is spirit and light. When we achieve *gnōsis*, the two selves will become one.
- But overcoming this division is only part of the story. When we know ourselves, we also know Jesus, and we realize that we are light, as Jesus is. Thus, the difference between the self and Jesus also fades away.
- This idea—that the division between the believer and Jesus is also overcome—is symbolized by name of the supposed author of this gospel, Didymus Judas Thomas.
 - Both the names *Didymus* (Greek) and *Thomas* (Aramaic) could mean “double” or “twin” in their respective languages. Therefore, Didymus Judas Thomas was believed by some early Christians to be Jesus's twin brother in the sense that they looked very much alike.
 - The twinship of Thomas and Jesus becomes a metaphor for the relationship between every human soul and Jesus. As we have seen, in the Gospel of Thomas, *gnōsis* of self is *gnōsis* of God. Our true selves are divine, just as Jesus is divine. Within us is the light that Jesus is. Thus, when we know ourselves as divine light, then we will know Jesus and recognize our essential unity. Jesus and the individual soul are one—twins, like Thomas and Jesus.

Baptism in the Gospel of Thomas

- One of the divisions that salvation overcomes is that between male and female. Jesus says that Christians will enter the kingdom when they “make the male and the female be one and the same, so that the male might not be male nor the female be female.” We have seen already in Gnostic myth that the division between male and female was a powerful religious symbol.

- Some early Christians clearly believed that baptism restored human beings to the image of God, which they had lost when they sinned. In Galatians, this renewal overcomes divisions among human beings: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). Saying 22 in the Gospel of Thomas also tells us that salvation comes when people overcome divisions.



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In the ritual of baptism, the old self is stripped away when one's clothing is removed, and a new self emerges from the baptismal waters.

- In the New Testament gospels, Jesus often compares his followers to children. The Gospel of Thomas goes even farther: Jesus's followers are not simply children but nursing infants. Such newborns are pre-sexual; they have not yet divided into male and female. Thus, nursing infants provide a good metaphor for what the gospel is saying: The new human being is beyond male and female, like an infant.
- With this understanding of baptism, salvation, and unity, we can now better understand the last saying of Thomas: “Simon Peter said to them, ‘Make Mary leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too might become a living male spirit, like you. For every female that makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven’” (114).

- Peter and Mary here are symbolic of male and female elements, and the female element must be made male to achieve the kingdom of heaven. Again, we see that the ancient author does not understand overcoming male-female division as the union of two equal things but as the return of the female element to the more basic male element.
- To be saved, both Peter and Mary must recover a state in which female is not separated from male. Neither alone will be sufficient. The two must become one, and the saved person must be a “solitary”—fully integrated and beyond divisions of any kind. That is the experience of the kingdom of heaven.

Gnostic Ethics

- This is a compelling vision of human salvation, but what does it mean in practical terms? How should a person who follows the Gospel of Thomas live in this world?
 - Because Gnostic literature is mostly mythology and apocalyptic visions, it’s difficult to pinpoint the ethics or lifestyle of the Gnostics. We saw that they had a negative view of sexual desire, but they did not have a negative view of marriage and family. And we see some aspects of their worship life, such as meditation, hymn singing, and baptism, but otherwise, Gnostic literature does not give much practical direction about the religious life.
 - In contrast, the Gospel of Thomas tells its readers specifically: “Be passersby.” Thomas urges people to live in this world as if they are just passing through.
- Sayings in Thomas reject the traditional features of conventional religion in the ancient world. For example, Jesus says, “If you fast, you’ll bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you’ll be condemned, and if you give to charity, you’ll harm your spirits” (14). Fasting, giving alms, and praying were the basic activities of a devout life among ancient Jews and most Christians, but in Thomas, Jesus rejects these acts of piety as harmful. What’s

important is cultivation of the soul, the divine light within us, not external activities.

- In some of the New Testament gospels, commitment to Jesus is placed before one's family in importance. For example, in Luke 14, Jesus says that people must hate their parents, siblings, spouses, and children if they are to be his disciples. We find similar teachings in Thomas. For example, Jesus says: "Whoever does not hate father and mother cannot be my disciple, and whoever does not hate brothers and sisters and carry the cross as I do will not be worthy of me" (55).
- Several sayings also suggest that true followers of Jesus will embrace poverty, homelessness, and begging. For example, in saying 14, after telling his disciples not to fast or give alms, Jesus instructs them to depend on others for their food and support. Not surprisingly, Thomas also strongly condemns making money and engaging in business.
- Did any Christians actually live the lifestyle of wandering and begging that the Gospel of Thomas recommends? Evidence shows that such wandering Christians existed throughout the early centuries of Christianity, especially in Syria and Mesopotamia. But it was the ideas of the Gospel of Thomas that had a much greater influence in the history of ancient religions: that *gnōsis* of one's self is *gnōsis* of God and that salvation is the integration of a divided self.

Suggested Reading

Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom*.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, "The Gospel According to Thomas."

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, "The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas."

———, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, chapter 3.

Pagels, *Beyond Belief*.

Questions to Consider

1. Compare the idea of gender in Thomas to what we saw in the Gnostic writings.
2. How do you think people who believed in the message of Thomas actually might have lived their lives?

Valentinus, Great Preacher of *Gnōsis*

Lecture 11

When Irenaeus wrote his *Against the Heresies* in 180, his greatest fear was that Christians would listen to teachers he called Valentinians, followers of Valentinus. Valentinian Christians, Irenaeus said, are “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” ready to pounce on unsuspecting Christians and lead them into satanic error. Why was Valentinus such a threat? Why did other Christian leaders attack him so frequently and so viciously? In short, because Valentinus was a brilliant and eloquent Christian theologian who turned the Gnostic myth into a powerful Christian message and started a Christian movement that lasted for centuries. Valentinus invited people to find in Jesus true *gnōsis* of the Father and of themselves and to experience God directly, immediately, and above all, joyfully.

Life of Valentinus

- Valentinus was probably born around the year 100 and may have spent his early years in Alexandria in Egypt. By around the year 140, he was a popular and effective teacher in Rome. We don’t know when Valentinus died, but he was certainly dead before Irenaeus wrote his massive work against Gnostics and Valentinians in 180.
- In his lifetime, Valentinus was never declared a heretic. Despite the fact that many Christian teachers considered his views wrong, he had a substantial following. In addition, at the time, there was no single Christian church that could officially declare someone a heretic. Only later did church authorities agree that Valentinus should be condemned.
- Unfortunately, as a result of this condemnation, nearly all of Valentinus’s writings have been lost. We have about a half dozen fragments from his works that his critics quote and a short poem quoted by an ancient author. In addition, many scholars believe that

a sermon found at Nag Hammadi called the Gospel of Truth is by Valentinus.

“Summer Harvest”

- Valentinus’s short poem “Summer Harvest” highlights his willingness to express himself in innovative ways:

In spirit I see that all things are hanging
In spirit I know that all things are being carried
Flesh hanging from soul
Soul cleaving to air
Air hanging from upper atmosphere

Crops coming forth from the deep
A baby coming forth from the womb.

- Note that the speaker here does not communicate someone else’s views, nor does he claim to interpret the Bible or some other religious text. Instead, the speaker says, “I see” and “I know,” underscoring his personal experience of truth and insight.
- “Summer Harvest” has two parts. In the first five lines, the poet conveys the interdependence of all that is. Everything that exists hangs from, or is carried by, or clings to something more spiritual than itself. These first lines communicate a peaceful cosmos of unity and stability.
- But the last two lines suggest motion, generation, and birth. Stability and interdependence are interrupted by creation and fertility. The poem then vividly expresses the life and vitality that lie behind the universe and, indeed, all of existence. It leaves the reader suspended between two truths: All of reality is stable and interconnected, yet at the base of reality is tremendous life-giving force.
- The last two lines are also typical of Valentinus in that they create a religious feeling by drawing on specific terms and images that the reader may or may not recognize. For example, the poem refers to

the source of life as “the deep” and “the womb,” and we know from other ancient sources that Valentinus referred to the ultimate high God as “The Deep.”

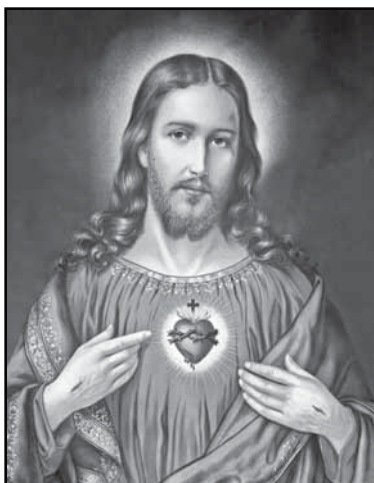
- In “Summer Harvest,” we see the characteristics that made Valentinus such an attractive preacher. He expresses a vision of deep personal insight, and he does so in a way that brings together several religious traditions: Gnostic myth, the Gospel of Thomas, the New Testament, and Greek philosophy. He leaves readers with feelings of wonder at divine stability and creativity and suggests that others, too, can have the same kind of personal insight that he has experienced.

The Valentinian Myth

- One of the sources for Valentinus’s thought was the Gnostic myth, but Valentinus modified the myth significantly to make it more explicitly Christian and to remove some of its more anti-Jewish features.
- Like the Gnostics, Valentinus considered God to be a complex structure of emanations, but Valentinus used biblical names for his aeons: Truth, Life, Word, and Church. The Gnostics called the divine realm the Entirety, but Valentinus called it the Fullness.
- Like the Gnostics, Valentinus believed that one aeon, Wisdom, did something wrong. But in the myth of Valentinus, Wisdom does not produce a flawed divinity and cast him out of the Entirety. Instead, Wisdom herself leaves the Fullness and enters our world. Valentinus then calls this aeon the Mother.
 - The Mother generates multiple divine beings. The first is Christ, who takes from the Mother her share of divine spirit, then returns to the Fullness. Next, without divine spirit, the Mother emits a second being, whom Valentinus calls the Craftsman and the Almighty. This is the creator of this world and the God of Genesis.
 - Valentinus agreed with the Gnostics that the God of Genesis is a lower divine being, but his creator god is not malicious and

does not persecute human beings. He is simply lower and less spiritual than the ultimate God.

- In this way, Valentinus's myth is less hostile toward Jewish tradition than the Gnostic myth, and it's more similar to how other Christians thought about God.
- Finally, in Gnostic myth, Wisdom and Forethought work together to enlighten human beings, to recover the divine power from the rulers, and to restore what had been lost to the Entirety. Valentinus, however, does not emphasize the recovery of stolen divine power. Instead, he highlights the divine essence within humanity as our connection to God, that which enables us to know our selves and God and to realize our superiority to mortal existence.
 - The divine being who helps us is primarily God's Word, or Logos, who is also God's Son and God's Name. It is this Word who reveals to us God and to our selves and who became incarnate in Jesus.
 - According to Valentinus, when the creator god and his angels made human beings, they were awestruck in the presence of humanity because the Word of God planted a seed of higher essence in humanity. The Name of God, present to and within human beings, fulfills what's lacking in us because we were created by



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Valentinus's message of salvation is centered on Christ—the Word, Son, and Name of the Father, who is present within us and was embodied in Jesus.

lower beings. The Word is the divine potential that lies within all of us.

- This same Word of God is how God the Father reveals himself to human beings. God visits the hearts of human beings and purifies them of evil spirits. In this way, through the Son of God, a person can gain a pure heart and see God, just as Jesus promises in Matthew 5:8: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”
- For Valentinus, the salvation that the Word of God brings unlocks the divine potential within us and enables us to triumph over the corruption and decay of the material world. The Gospel of Thomas urged Christians “to abstain from the world” because it’s not their true home. Valentinus goes further: He tells his disciples to “abolish the world.” Christians who have gained *gnōsis* through Christ activate the immortality they have always had. Through them, death dies, and they prevail over everything that is created and suffers corruption.

The Gospel of Truth

- The most complete statement of Valentinus’s spirituality is the sermon entitled the Gospel of Truth. Although we don’t know for certain that Valentinus wrote this gospel, many scholars attribute it to him. The sermon is an invitation to every Christian to experience the repose and joy of knowing God the Father through his Son, Jesus.
- The sermon defines sin—what separates us from God—as ignorance. Salvation—our return to God—is discovering the Father through the power of the Savior, the Word. This is the heart of the Christian message for Valentinus, and in the sermon, he explains how ignorance came to be, how Christians gain knowledge through Jesus, and what the experience of joy is for these Christians.
- According to Valentinus, the material world in which we live is the result of ignorance. Ultimately, everything that exists is in God the Father, and all truly real beings are emanations from him. For

all beings, joy and blessedness are to know the Father and to be known by him. But to have that kind of relationship, we must be separate from the one we want to know, and separation introduces the possibility of ignorance.

- For Valentinus, ignorance of the Father became a kind of fog that condensed into matter; matter was then formed into a universe of things by a personified female character, Error. Ultimately, then, the material world in which we live is not real: It is ignorance, and it becomes irrelevant as soon as our ignorance is dispelled by *gnōsis*. It is Jesus who makes possible the *gnōsis* that removes ignorance and brings joy.
- Valentinus tells us that Jesus came to humanity to enlighten us and guide us to truth. Error, the personification of the forces of ignorance, persecuted Jesus and caused him to be crucified.
 - Valentinus evokes the crucifixion from the New Testament, but instead of a cross, Jesus is nailed to “a tree,” and on this tree, he becomes “fruit of the Father’s acquaintance.” This is an allusion to the traditional story of the fall of humanity in Genesis. But for Valentinus, to eat from the fruit of knowledge—which is Jesus—is not ruin but joy, the discovery of the Father of whom people were ignorant.
 - People can eat the fruit that is the crucified Jesus in the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, and they can discover the Father within themselves. The Father is within us, just as we are within the Father, because all beings that are truly real are emanations of the Father.
- In another passage, Valentinus uses a book as a metaphor. All knowledge is “the living book of the living, which is written in the Father’s heart and intellect.” No one can read this book, and no one even dares to pick it up, except Jesus.
 - Here again, Valentinus reverses an image from the Bible, this time, from chapter 2 of Colossians. There, Jesus’s crucifixion

is described as nailing to the cross the edict of God's condemnation of us for our sins.

- But in Valentinus, through the crucifixion, Jesus makes available the book of knowledge of the Father, which had been closed. The Entirety that comes from the Father is in that book, and now it can be known. Readers of the book learn about themselves and, thus, return to the Father.

Suggested Reading

Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*, chapter 3.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, "The Writings of Valentinus."

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, "The Gospel of Truth."

———, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, chapter 5.

Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, chapters 30–32.

Questions to Consider

1. Why would some people find Valentinus's message so appealing?
2. Why did some Christian leaders find his message so dangerous?

God and Creation in Valentinian Myth

Lecture 12

In the 140s, when Valentinus was preaching his version of the gospel in Rome, there were many small groups of Christians worshipping together in separate house churches or studying the Scriptures with different teachers. Valentinus's proclamation of *gnōsis* caused a disturbance among such Christian communities. One prominent Christian teacher, Justin, denounced Valentinus's teachings as inspired by demons, but another Christian community nearly elected him its bishop. We don't know precisely how Valentinus taught his students, but we can guess that they read the Bible and other texts and that Valentinus explained what these texts revealed about God the Father, his Son, and salvation. In this lecture, we'll look at what Christians might have learned from Valentinus.

The Valentinian School

- We know the names of some of the most prominent students of Valentinus who became important Christian theologians, including Ptolemy, Heracleon, and Theodotus. Eventually, a network of Christian teachers inspired by Valentinus's theology spread across the Roman Empire. This network is known as the Valentinian school.
- Valentinianism related to other forms of Christianity in diverse ways. In its most basic form, it was just a type of Christian theology, a way of understanding the Christian message, with which any educated Christian could engage without necessarily joining a Valentinian group.
 - The Valentinians, however, also formed study groups that operated alongside other Christian communities. These Valentinian groups seem to have been the most prevalent form of Valentinianism in the 2nd century and, perhaps, the 3rd.
 - By the 300s, Valentinians had completely separate churches. At some point, it probably became too difficult for Valentinians

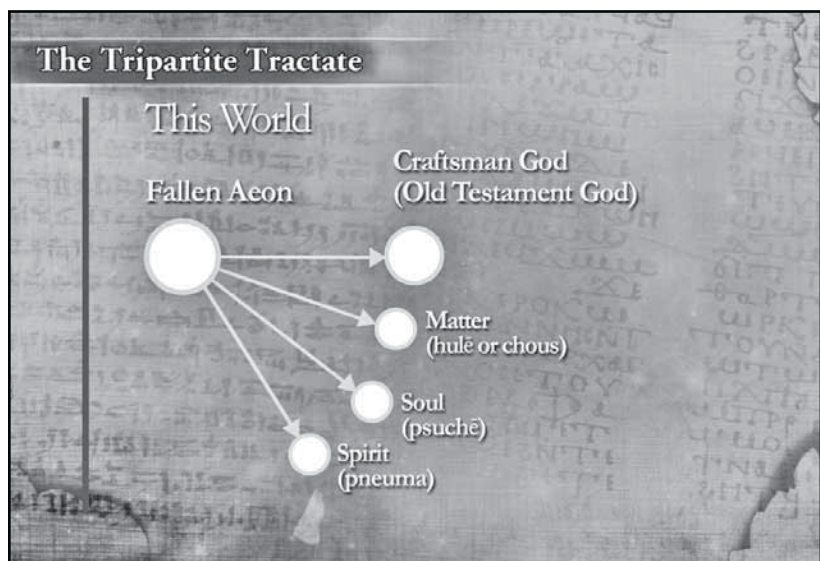
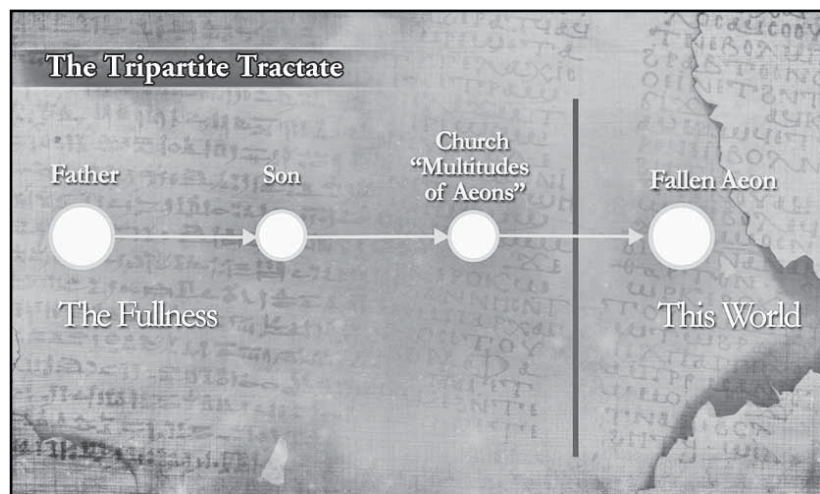
to participate in other Christian churches that rejected their theology.

- Whatever social form they took, Valentinians invited non-Valentinian Christians to learn about their teachings. In fact, Valentinus had encouraged his followers to bring his message of *gnōsis* to others: “Unto those who are weary give repose. And awaken those who wish to arise. For it is you who are unsheathed intelligence” (Gospel of Truth).

Later Versions of the Valentinian Myth

- As we saw in the last lecture, Valentinus had revised the Gnostic myth to make it more explicitly Christian and less anti-Jewish. Later students of Valentinus continued to revise and augment the myth.
- We have two major complete narratives of the Valentinian myth. One is Irenaeus’s summary of the myth that Ptolemy taught. The second is a long text from Nag Hammadi that scholars call the Tripartite Tractate. This anonymous work probably comes from the middle of the 3rd century, about 70 years after Irenaeus. Given that difference in time, it’s no surprise that it differs from Ptolemy’s myth in important ways.
- Like the Gnostics and Valentinus, the Valentinians believed that everything comes from a single ultimate divine being, which they called the Deep and the Father (**see Figure 2**). This God is unknowable, ineffable, beyond our concepts of divinity and thinking. Yet the Father desires to be known, and he thinks, and his thinking generates a series of aeons.
 - In the Tripartite Tractate, the aeons of the Fullness are without number and are not individually named. At the center of the Fullness are the Father and the Son; then, multitudes of aeons form what the author calls the Church.

Figure 2. View of God in the Tripartite Tractate



- In Ptolemy's myth, there are precisely 30 aeons, arranged into groups of 8, 10, and 12, and they all have names, such as Truth, Word, Motionless, and Hope. The final aeon is Wisdom.
- These aeons exist in male-female pairs, just as we saw in the Gnostic myth. Valentinian theology greatly values harmony and stability, and the pairing of male and female aeons provides these. This pairing also explains how God can move from unity to multiplicity. Male and female are different, yet they are also one humanity, complements of each other.
- According to Irenaeus, some Valentinians taught that even the ultimate Father has a female consort, named Silence. The feminine name Silence would express the ineffability of the ultimate principle, while the masculine names Father and Deep would express its generative power. Irenaeus tell us that other Valentinians, however, argued that the Father exists beyond the categories of male and female.
- Just as in Gnostic myth, the creation of this world happens after one aeon disrupts the harmony and stability of the Fullness by trying to know the Father on its own. This aeon presumptuously moves toward the Father, disturbing the serenity and order of the aeons. In Ptolemy's version of the myth, this aeon is, of course, Wisdom. In the Tripartite Tractate, the aeon is not named; it's called simply "the youngest aeon" or "a *logos*."
- In the Valentinian myth, this aeon becomes the primary source for the cosmos in which we live. The aeon's desire to know the Father directly is, of course, misguided because it disrupts the stability of the Fullness. Thus, the aeon is temporarily removed from the Fullness. It then emits three substances, the building blocks for the universe in which we live and for us. These three elements are matter or dirt (Greek: *hulē* or *chous*), soul (*psuchē*), and spirit (*pneuma*).
 - Matter is the physical stuff that we find in everything from rocks to plants to animals; in humans, it makes up our flesh. Matter has its origins in the fallen aeon's ignorance, grief, and fear.

- The fallen aeon repents of its passionate desire to know the Father and asks for forgiveness. This repentance produces soul. Soul is the somewhat physical, somewhat spiritual stuff that makes things live and breathe. It's an intermediate element between matter and spirit.
- When the Father and the other aeons accept the repentance of the fallen aeon, it is restored to its divine status. And because it is divine, its thinking produces spirit. This is the nearly immaterial element that enables humans and other spiritual beings to understand higher realities and possibly gain *gnōsis* of God. Spirit can be present in people but not in plants and animals.

The Three Elements

- In our world, matter, soul, and spirit exist in various beings and things in different proportions. They make individual beings, including angels and people, more or less spiritual (and closer to the Fullness) or more or less material (and closer to animals and other lower beings).
- At the end of time, the three elements will be separated and placed in their proper realms or conditions. The spiritual element will return to the Fullness. The material element will perish because it has no real basis in true existence; it comes from ignorance, fear, and other emotions that will pass away. The soul element will take a place lower than that of the Fullness—sometimes called the “midpoint”—but it will not pass away.
- For the Valentinians, just as the three elements of matter, soul, and spirit are the building blocks of the cosmos, so too, they are present in differing amounts and proportions in human beings. In fact, human beings can be divided into three categories based on which element predominates in them.
 - The highest element, spirit, predominates in spiritual people. These are the Valentinians themselves, who possess *gnōsis* of

God and of themselves. Obviously, these people will be saved and enter the Fullness.

- The lowest element, matter, predominates in material people. These are non-Christians, including pagans, Jews, and anyone who does not believe in Jesus. Like the material element to which they are oriented, these people will perish at the end of the world.
- The middle element, soul, predominates in animate people. These are non-Valentinian Christians—people who do not yet have the full *gnōsis* that Christ brought. These Christians have not reached perfection, but they have made the choice to worship Christ and to avoid idolatry and immorality. The sources disagree on the destiny that awaits animate people.
- Animate people and the soul element have the freedom either to turn toward God, live righteous lives, and receive salvation or to turn away from God, live sinful lives, and perish with the material people. According to Irenaeus, the Valentinians said that righteous animate people would spend eternity with the lower craftsman god in the “midpoint.” Other sources suggest that some Valentinians thought that the animate people would eventually share fully in salvation within the Fullness.
- What determines whether people are spiritual, animate, or material? Here, too, our sources disagree.
 - According to Irenaeus, the Valentinians taught that the three categories are three different kinds or species of human beings, descended or derived from the three sons of Adam and Eve. Cain is the father of the material people, Abel is the father of the animate people, and Seth is the father of the spiritual people. People are simply born into these categories.
 - As Irenaeus presents it, the spiritual people will be saved no matter what, and the material people will be destroyed no matter what. The only people who have any kind of free will

are the animate people: They can either live righteous lives as Christians and gain limited salvation, or they can live sinful lives and be condemned. Again, according to Irenaeus, the Valentinians themselves had no reason to be concerned about behaving ethically; they did not need to live righteous lives because they will be saved by nature!

- According to most modern scholars, however, the Valentinians probably thought that every person consists of all three elements. Each person chooses whether to live righteously or sinfully, whether to follow Christ, whether to accept Valentinian teachings, and so on. Over time, these choices determine which element predominates and, thus, whether a person is spiritual, animate, or material.
- Some scholars find an even deeper intellectual problem in this line of Valentinian thought. The Valentinians believed that when this universe comes to a conclusion, these three substances will be separated and have their appropriate ends—the spiritual element in the Fullness, the material element in destruction, and the soul element somewhere in between. In this sense, then, the destinies of these three elements are fixed.
 - Human beings, too, are made up of these three elements and, thus, must experience in some way the same fixed destinies. By placing human beings in three categories that correspond to the elements, the Valentinians seem to be saying that individual people also have such fixed destinies.
 - Yet the Valentinians clearly tried to persuade other Christians—the animate people—to become Valentinians. It seems that somehow human beings can orient themselves toward one of these three elements, or they can make one of these three elements dominate within them, enabling them to participate in that specific fate.

Suggested Reading

Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism*.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “Ptolemy’s Version of the Gnostic Myth (According to St. Irenaeus).”

Marjanen and Luomanen, eds., *A Companion to Second-Century “Heretics,”* “The School of Valentinus.”

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Tripartite Tractate.”

Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, chapters 5–6.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the most important similarities and differences between the Valentinian myth and the original Gnostic myth?
2. How might the question of whether people are born into one of the three categories of people have affected Valentinian life and practice?

“Becoming Male” through Valentinian Ritual

Lecture 13

The Valentinians appear to have had a rich worship life, filled with such rituals as baptism and celebration of the Eucharist. This may be surprising given that they considered matter to be the lowest of the three elements that make up this cosmos. Unlike spirit and soul, matter originated in ignorance and fear and would perish at the end of time. How, then, could material things, such as water and bread, convey salvation? For the Valentinians, in this universe, it's impossible for truth to come to us without such material symbols. In this lecture, we will explore the Valentinian sacraments, drawing from two sources: the Excerpts from Theodotus and the Gospel According to Philip.

The Eucharist

- In his sermon the Gospel of Truth, Valentinus said that the Eucharist is a means by which Christians gain *gnōsis*. On the cross, Valentinus said, Christ became the fruit of the Father, and by eating that fruit, Christians come to know the Father within themselves.
- Several excerpts in the Gospel According to Philip consider the symbolism of the bread and wine in the Eucharist. For example, the bread represents the spiritual nourishment that human beings did not have until Christ came and brought them his “bread from heaven.” The bread also reminds Christians of the crucifixion of Christ, when he spread out his body on the cross, just as the bread is broken and handed out to others. And just as ordinary bread is made holy in the Eucharist, so too, the body of the individual Christian becomes holy.
- In fact, as we see in the Gospel of Philip, the Eucharistic bread represents and even brings about the resurrection of Christians.
 - The author of the gospel criticizes two opposing views on the question of whether people in the resurrection will have “flesh.” On the one hand, some Christians believe that when

the resurrection comes, people will have bodies made of the same flesh we have now. The Valentinian author rejects that idea because we must divest ourselves of this world, which is not our true home. On the other hand, other Christians say that there is no sense in which the flesh will arise from death. The author rejects this view, as well.

- Instead, he argues that it's the flesh of Jesus that will rise up. The flesh of Jesus is the bread of the Eucharist, in which the Word of God comes to us. By partaking of the bread, Christians participate in the Word; they join with the Word and, thus, experience resurrection in the present, not at some future resurrection of the dead.

Valentinian Baptism

- Baptism, of course, initiates a person into Christianity and begins the relationship with Christ that leads to *gnōsis* and resurrection. For the most part, Valentinian Christian baptism seems to have resembled the baptisms of other Christian groups in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.
 - First, there was a period of instruction and training (Greek: *catechesis*) for the interested candidates. If a candidate proved worthy, there was then a more intense period of preparation consisting of "fasts, supplications, prayers, laying on of hands, and kneelings." These acts of physical discipline focused the mind of the candidate and symbolized his or her withdrawal from the sinful practices of the world. They were also designed to remove evil spirits.
 - When it was time to be baptized, the candidates undressed, which symbolized liberation from the body and the giving up of one's old life. The candidates also renounced the evil rulers of this world. They were then immersed in water, and the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was spoken over them. This was considered the single Name of God, and it was called being "sealed."

- After the immersion, there was an anointing with oil, through which the candidates became Christians. The candidates then dressed themselves, and once again, hands were laid upon them with prayers. Then, the new Christians received the Eucharist for the first time.
- For the Valentinians, baptism accomplished at least three important objects: the removal of unclean spirits, the provision of freedom from the evil rulers of this world, and the sealing of the candidate with the Name of God.
 - Ultimately, the true Name of God is Christ. “The Son is the Name of the Father,” Valentinus said in the Gospel of Truth. This means that one knows the Father through the Son. The Son reveals who the Father is, just as a name identifies who a person is.
 - Unlike ordinary human names, which are basically arbitrary, God’s Name belongs uniquely to him and truly reveals who he is. In baptism, Christians are stamped or sealed with that Name.

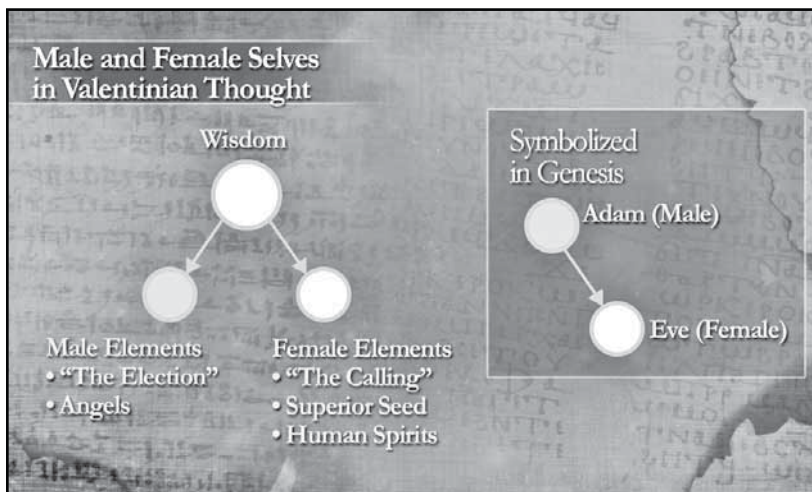
The Male and Female in Baptism

- Valentinians also talked about baptism with the language of male and female. For example, consider this passage from the Excerpts from Theodotus:
- So long as the seed is still without form, they say, it is a child of the female. But when it is given form, it is changed into a male and becomes a son of the bridegroom. It is no longer weak and subject to the cosmic powers, whether visible or invisible; rather, having been made male, it becomes a male fruit.
- This should remind us of the Gospel According to Thomas, which discussed salvation in terms of integration. The separation between male and female was one of the divisions that salvation and baptism removed. But, again, this did not mean uniting two equals—male

and female. Rather, it meant returning the female to the more basic male.

- In addition, recall that the pairing of male and female aeons in Valentinian myth provides harmony and stability in the Fullness. It stands to reason, then, that separating the male and female would be negative in Valentinian thought, and that’s precisely the case. Valentinian thinkers identified the separation of Eve from Adam as the beginning of death. Christ, they said, came to heal this division:
 - If the female had not separated from the male, she and the male would not die. That being’s separation became the source of death. Christ came to rectify the separation that had been present since the beginning and join the two; and to give life unto those who had died by separation and join them together. (Gospel According to Philip)
- Does this mean that each of us has a lost half of the other gender with whom we need to reunite? The answer is yes—but there’s more. It’s not the case that each of us must reunite with our partner of the opposite gender, because our identities as men and women belong to our bodies, which are not our true selves. Our true selves are our spiritual selves, the parts of us that originated from above—and our true spiritual selves are all female.
- Genesis 1:27 tells us: “In the image of God he created them; male and female he made them.” For the Valentinians, this refers not to the creation of male and female human beings but to two created selves, angelic selves and human selves, which are male and female, respectively (**Figure 3**). We humans are all female elements, and we exist in a kind of alienation from our higher masculine selves, the angels. We are like the divine male-female aeon pairs, but we are all female aeons and are separated from our male consorts.
- The separation of Eve from Adam represents that alienation on the level of human difference.

Figure 3. Male and Female Selves in Valentinian Thought

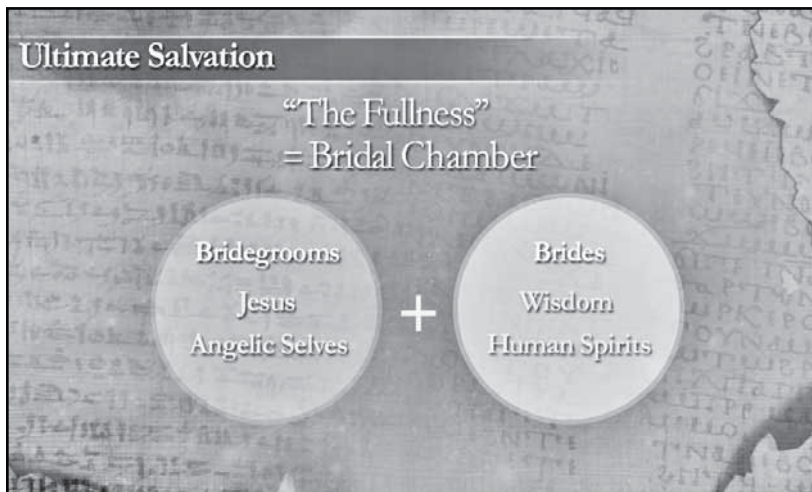


- The original Adam, created in Genesis 1, indicated the original union of the male angels with the female superior seed, and the separation of Eve from Adam in Genesis 2 demonstrated the separation of the female element from the male.
- The Genesis account makes clear that the female element is derivative of the male. The female selves that we have now are the lower, derivative aspects of our true masculine angelic selves.
- Salvation, then, is not simply the reunion of male and female or the coupling of our angelic and spiritual selves. It is, rather, the return of the derivative female element to the higher male element.
- The Valentinians understood this process of being made male and reuniting with one's true angelic self as beginning in baptism and being gradually accomplished through the rituals and practices of the church.

The Bridal Chamber and Marriage

- Several sources mention a ritual or a symbol of the reunion with one's true angelic self called the *bridal chamber*. Most modern historians believe that this term was probably a symbolic way of speaking about the union of our male and female selves that happens through baptism, Eucharist, and other rituals and is completed after our deaths.
- Salvation will not be complete until the end of this world, when our spiritual elements, our female selves, will unite definitively with our angelic bridegrooms and join the aeons of the Fullness as eternal male-female pairs. Ultimate salvation is to be the union of the angelic male selves and the human female selves within the Fullness—this is the ultimate bridal chamber (**Figure 4**).
- If the division of Adam and Eve represents on a worldly level the division between the male angelic elements and the female spiritual elements, then ordinary marriage provides an image or representation of this final consummation. Marriage is a mystery—

Figure 4. Ultimate Bridal Chamber (Ultimate Salvation)



that is, something symbolic—which provides an image not simply of our final salvation but of the underlying male-female organizing principle of the cosmos.

Ransom

- One ritual practiced by the Valentinians alone was *apolutrōsis* (Greek), meaning “ransom” or “redemption,” a ritual for someone who was dying.
- According to Irenaeus, in this ritual, the dying person was anointed with a mixture of oil and water. These two elements, oil and water, would have reminded the person of his or her baptism, when the Christian was immersed in water and anointed with oil. Thus, one meaning of this ritual was to complete the process of salvation that was begun in baptism.
- But the ritual mainly prepared the person for what would happen after death. Remember that according to the Valentinians, human beings are made up of spirit, soul, and matter, and each element must go to its proper place. The ritual of ransom made the person ready to abandon the material body and leave it here on earth. Freed from the material body, the soul and spirit would ascend.
- Next, the ritual gave the dying person secret words to say to the cosmic rulers and to the creator God. After saying these words, the person would leave the soul with the creator God, and only the spirit would ascend into the Fullness. There, the spiritual element, the lower female self, would unite with its angelic male self. Salvation would then be complete in the heavenly bridal chamber.

Suggested Reading

Foerster, *Gnosis*, “Valentinianism V.”

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “The Gospel According to Philip.”

Lewis, “*Apolytrosis* as Ritual and Sacrament.”

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Gospel of Philip.”

Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism.”

Questions to Consider

1. Would a Valentinian worship service have looked different from a non-Valentinian Christian worship service?
2. Did the Valentinians have a positive or negative view of the female and femininity?

Valentinian Views on Christian Theology

Lecture 14

The Valentinians frustrated Christian leaders, such as Irenaeus, because it was so difficult to tell that they were, in fact, “false” Christians. The Valentinians professed the same doctrines as other Christians, but they had different interpretations for these doctrines. Irenaeus presents this problem as misinterpretation on the part of the Valentinians, while all genuine Christians agreed on the truth. But in fact, during the early centuries of their religion, Christians were still trying to work out many of their teachings. In antiquity, the Valentinians participated in lively debates about various aspects of Christian theology. To understand and appreciate what the Valentinians taught, we must put them in the context of the diverse Christian beliefs of their day.

Christian Views of Resurrection

- Christianity began when followers of Jesus believed that he had risen from the dead after his crucifixion. They concluded that Jesus’s resurrection was the “first fruits” of a more general resurrection. But how would people rise from the dead? Would they have bodies, and if so, what kind? Christians generally agreed that their own resurrection would be similar to that of Jesus, but that did not solve the problem because how Jesus rose from the dead was also unclear.
- The apostle Paul gives us a view of the resurrection that is spiritual and transformative. In 1 Corinthians, Paul first refutes Christians who believed that there would be no resurrection of the dead, at least not one that involves the body. Paul reminds the Corinthians that he and other believers saw Jesus after his death; thus, they know that Jesus was raised. And he says that the resurrection is the basic hope of Christians: Without it, the Christian faith is futile.
- Then, Paul turns to the problem of what kind of bodies people will have when they rise.

- He first points out that there are different kinds of bodies, made up of different kinds of materials. The flesh of fish is different from the flesh of human beings, and the bodies of heavenly beings, such as the sun, are not the same as the bodies of earthly beings.
- He further says that the bodies we have in the resurrection will not be the same as our current bodies. The current body is related to the resurrected body as a seed is related to a plant. The seed is not the same as the plant, but when you sow the seed in the ground, it is transformed into the plant. After our current body of soul is sown into the ground at death, it will be transformed into a body of spirit at the resurrection. There is continuity but also a major transformation.
- Paul is certain that the resurrected body will not have flesh similar to what we have now: “Flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50).
- It’s important to note that Paul never mentions that Jesus’s tomb was empty, which would surely indicate that the flesh of Jesus was somehow raised. Most historians conclude that Paul did not know of any claim that Jesus’s tomb was empty. Instead, Paul based his idea of what Jesus’s resurrected body was like on the appearances of Jesus to himself and others. In Paul’s mind, Jesus had a spiritual body, not one of flesh; we, too, will have spiritual bodies in the resurrection.
- If Paul’s view of the resurrection was spiritual and transformative, the gospels tend to have a view that is more fleshly and stable. In the gospels, the tomb is empty: It’s obvious that Jesus’s fleshly body was brought back to life. And his body is less transformed than what Paul envisioned. Jesus walks, talks, and eats after his death.

Valentinian View of Resurrection

- This question of the resurrected body was complicated for the Valentinians because they believed that human beings were made

of three elements: matter, soul, and spirit. Because they knew that matter would eventually perish, Valentinians could not follow the idea of a resurrection of the flesh. They believed that the only element of a person that would enter the Fullness is spirit. What did it mean, then, for this spiritual element to be resurrected?

- A Valentinian teacher tries to answer this question in a letter addressed to a student named Reginus; this letter is known as the Treatise on Resurrection.



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The idea of the empty tomb would become one of the most important claims of Christianity; it was proof that Jesus had risen from the dead.

- The teacher first explains that Jesus came to reveal the truth to human beings and to manifest the superior element in us, that is, our spirit or intellect. Jesus demonstrated that we should turn away from the corruptible realm of the flesh and, instead, seek the eternal realm of the spirit. By doing this, the Savior “swallowed up” death, made visible to us what is invisible, and gave us the way to immortality.
- According to this view, the point is not that Jesus had any kind of body after his death. Instead, it’s the movement from the material world of corruption to the spiritual world of truth

that constituted the resurrection of Jesus. The same is true of our resurrection.

- The Valentinian teacher tells us that this world is not our true home and our bodies are not our true selves. The real part of us is our spiritual selves, which are present in the material world only temporarily. Further, our spiritual selves are like rays from the sun, which is Jesus. Resurrection is the process of the rays being “retracted” back to their origin. This resurrection of the spirit eliminates any resurrections of the soul or flesh.
- Obviously, the return of the rays to the sun, or the return of our spirits to the Fullness, is an ongoing process, happening right now. Christians need not wait for some future resurrection of the dead at the end of time. They can have resurrection now— if they receive *gnōsis*, recognize their true spiritual nature, and contemplate higher reality.

Christian Views of the Old Testament

- Another major question that early Christians faced was what to do with the Jewish Bible.
 - When Paul and other early believers agreed that Gentile Christians did not need to convert to Judaism and follow the Law, they thought that they were building on what the Bible taught about Gentiles, the Messiah, and the coming day of the Lord.
 - But during the 2nd century, there were more Gentile Christians and fewer Jewish Christians. These Gentile believers often did not have much prior exposure to the Jewish Bible, and some began to question the relevance of the Bible and its God to their Christian faith.
- As we saw in an earlier lecture, the Christian teacher Marcion argued that the Jewish Bible had no relevance for Gentile Christians. The god of the Old Testament was a relentlessly demanding god of righteousness, who severely punished human beings for failing to

fulfill his Law. Jesus came as the Son of a more forgiving and loving God. He paid the price for our sins to the Old Testament god, and he brought a message of forgiveness and grace. Therefore, Marcion said, Christians no longer needed the Jewish Bible as Scripture.

- The Gnostics did not discard the Bible. They believed that the Bible, especially Genesis, gave them information about the origins of the cosmos and humanity and about the history of salvation. But they also believed that the Bible required corrections for errors made by Moses.
- Other Christians, such as Irenaeus, continued to believe that the God of the Old Testament was the Father of Jesus Christ and that the Jewish Bible was the inspired Word of God. The same God who sent Jesus gave the Jews this book—and now it also belonged to the Christians. These Christians read the Bible as a story that leads to the coming of Jesus and interpreted passages about the Law symbolically, not literally.

Valentinian View of the Old Testament

- The Valentinian view of the Old Testament comes to us in a letter from the theologian Ptolemy to a non-Valentinian Christian woman named Flora. Ptolemy opens the letter by explaining that Christians disagree about the status of the Old Testament. He identifies two positions that he considers wrong.
 - The first is that the Old Testament comes from the perfect God and Father. This is the position of Irenaeus and other Christians who used allegorical interpretation in their reading of the Bible. According to Ptolemy, this position is incorrect because the Old Testament itself is imperfect and required fulfillment in Jesus. Therefore, it could not come from the perfect ultimate God.
 - The other false position is that the Old Testament comes from the devil. This is almost certainly a reference to the Gnostics. Ptolemy says that this position is wrong because Christian texts teach that the god who created this world is just and hates evil.

- Ptolemy stakes out a middle position: The Jewish Law does not come from the ultimate perfect God, nor does it come from an evil god.
- Using what Jesus says in the gospels, Ptolemy argues that the Old Testament has no single author. Rather, only some of the material comes from God. Other rules and commandments come from Moses, and still others are traditions of the Jewish elders. It's only the material that comes from God that applies to Christians, and this material itself can be divided into three categories.
 - First, there is legislation that is pure but imperfect. It's good and comes from God, but Jesus needed to come to fulfill it. A good example of this is the Ten Commandments. They come from God and are entirely good, but Jesus came to bring them to perfection.
 - Second, there is legislation that contains injustice and that Jesus abolished. The best examples of this are the Commandments that require retribution—an act that is violent and unjust.
 - Finally, there is legislation that's symbolic, consisting mainly of ritual laws. Ptolemy argues that these laws should be understood allegorically, as symbolic references to moral principles; they are not meant to be followed literally.
- Then, Ptolemy asks: What is the nature of the god who would establish such laws? This god cannot be evil because the laws he established have good principles in them. But this god also cannot be the ultimate perfect God because the laws he established required fulfillment by Christ and because Christ abolished some of them. Thus, Ptolemy concludes, this god must be somewhere between good and evil; this god is simply just.

Suggested Reading

Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism*, chapter 5.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “Ptolemy’s Epistle to Flora” and “Treatise on Resurrection (Epistle to Rheginus).”

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Treatise on Resurrection.”

Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, chapter 1.

Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, chapter 11.

Questions to Consider

1. Why might ancient people have found one or another of the early Christian views of resurrection persuasive or unconvincing?
2. What ideas about the Jewish Scriptures did all early Christians share? On what points did they differ?

Mary Magdalene as an Apostle of *Gnōsis*

Lecture 15

Mary Magdalene, one of the few original disciples of Jesus who was a woman, appears in many Valentinian and other “heretical” texts. For example, the Gospel According to Philip tells us: “There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother and his sister and the Magdalene, the one who was called his companion.” In another passage, the apostles wonder why Jesus loves Mary more than he does them. There is also an ancient Christian text called the Gospel According to Mary, in which Jesus gives Mary Magdalene a special revelation. In this lecture, we’ll see why Mary was so prominent in these alternative gospels and why she and the apostle Peter are often portrayed as antagonists.

Witnesses to the Resurrection

- To early Christians, the Greek word *apostolos* (“apostle”) simply referred to an envoy or a representative. Christian apostles were those sent by Jesus to proclaim his message. The earliest Christian author, Paul, uses the term to refer to Christians who had seen Jesus after his resurrection and whom the risen Jesus had commissioned to spread the gospel. According to Paul (1 Cor. 15:3–9), there were far more than twelve of these people.
 - It’s important to note that Paul seems to consider the order in which Jesus appeared to people after his death to be significant.
 - That Jesus appeared to Paul last—perhaps about three years after the crucifixion—indicated that he was “the least of the apostles.” Presumably Peter, the first person to see Jesus, was greatest among the apostles.
- When we turn to the New Testament Gospels, the picture becomes more complicated. All the gospels tell us that Mary Magdalene, sometimes accompanied by other women, found the empty tomb and brought the news to the male disciples. In Matthew and John, Mary—not Peter—is the first disciple to see the risen Jesus. As

noted, Paul shows that at least some early Christians considered the order in which Jesus appeared to the apostles to be important; thus, we can see the makings here of a rivalry between Mary and Peter.

The Valentinian View of Mary

- A passage in the Gospel According to Philip reads as follows:

- As for the Wisdom who is called “the barren one,” she is the mother [of the] angels. And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to]

kiss her [often] on her [...]. The rest of [the disciples...]. They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” The savior answered and said to them, “Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then the one who sees will see the light, and the one who is blind will remain in darkness.”

- As you recall, the Valentinians believed that we all have higher, more divine selves. These are our angelic selves, which Wisdom emitted, along with our human selves. Our higher angelic selves are designated male, and our lower human selves are designated female. Thus, the Valentinians talked about salvation as a reunion of male and female selves.



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In the Christian tradition, Mary Magdalene is often called “the apostle to the apostles” because she brought the good news of Jesus’s resurrection to the male apostles.

- This passage in the Gospel According to Philip refers to Wisdom producing the angels, our higher male selves, who form a kind of retinue for Jesus in the Valentinian myth. Thus, this passage seems to present Jesus and Mary as having a special relationship, but not one that symbolizes male and female divine principles. Rather, it symbolizes the relationship between our angelic male selves and human female selves. We are all Mary Magdalene—all of us are called to have a special relationship with our higher angelic self, represented by Jesus.
- The Gospel According to Philip accepts the idea that the real people Jesus and Mary had a stronger and closer relationship than Jesus did with Peter and the male disciples. Like the Gospel of Thomas, it depicts the male disciples as questioning this relationship. The Gospel of Philip makes the bond between Jesus and Mary a symbol for true salvation.
 - Consider this passage from Philip: “Three women always used to walk with the Lord—Mary his mother, his sister, and the Magdalene, who is called his companion. For ‘Mary’ is the name of his sister and his mother, and it is the name of his partner.”
 - The name *Mary* becomes a symbol for the female in relationship to God. But this is not a female divine being. Rather, we are all female in our relationship to the Lord and to our higher angelic selves.
 - When Peter and the male disciples question the relationship between Jesus and Mary, they reveal that they do not yet understand the higher meaning of this relationship. They are still in darkness, in need of the light that the Valentinian myth can provide.

The Gospel According to Mary

- Conflict between Mary Magdalene and Peter and the other male disciples becomes a primary theme in the Gospel According to Mary—the only early Christian gospel attributed to a woman. We

have two short Greek fragments of this text and a longer fragment that is a Coptic translation.

- Although the Gospel of Mary has some ideas similar to Gnostic myth, it does not contain any of the distinctive teachings of the Gnostics. It shows, in fact, more signs of contact with the Gospel According to Thomas and with Valentinian ideas.
- At the beginning of the surviving text, Jesus is teaching the disciples after his death and resurrection. When Jesus finishes his discourse, he tells the disciples to go forth and preach the gospel; then, he goes away.
 - Rather than going out to preach, the disciples become distressed and weep. They fear that people will kill them as they did Jesus. Mary stands up and tells them that God's grace will protect them; thus, they should be resolute.
 - Peter then asks Mary to reveal any teachings that Jesus gave her that he and the other apostles do not know. Mary tells how the Savior appeared to her in a vision and told her that the human soul must ascend past hostile powers to reach its heavenly home.
 - When Mary finishes her revelation, Andrew and Peter charge that she is lying. Andrew says that the ideas she claims that Jesus taught her are strange, and Peter argues that Jesus would not reveal such things to a woman in private.
 - But the apostle Levi comes to Mary's defense. He accuses Peter of being prone to anger and says that Jesus did, in fact, love Mary more than he loved the men because he knew her so well. Levi tells his colleagues that they need to go preach the good news. In the Coptic translation, the gospel ends with all the apostles going forth to preach; in the Greek fragment, only Levi does so.

- Clearly, there are two issues that cause conflict between Mary and the male disciples: the content of the teaching that she reveals, which Andrew calls “strange,” and the fact that Mary, a woman, is teaching it.
- As mentioned, in the Gospel According to Mary, the resurrected Jesus gives teachings to the disciples that are not recorded in the New Testament gospels, and what he teaches sounds similar to what we have seen in Valentinianism.
 - First, Jesus says that matter and the material world are ultimately not real. At some point, matter will dissolve and cease to exist.
 - Second, Jesus explains that what we call “sin” is actually what we produce when we fall into ignorance and turn away from the Good.
 - Third, Jesus condemns passion—meaning unhealthy emotions, such as anger or resentment—as arising from matter and ignorance. These emotions lead to immoral acts. Instead, Jesus urges his disciples to be content and inwardly peaceful.
 - Finally, the Savior tells the apostles to go and preach the good news, and he warns them not to add any rules or laws beyond the things that he has commanded.
- The secret teaching that Jesus reveals to Mary is even more similar to what we have seen among Valentinians. The Savior tells Mary that the human soul will need to ascend past certain hostile powers, such as Darkness, Desire, and Ignorance. These powers try to prevent the soul from ascending to its true home, but when the soul tells them about its true nature, it can pass them by. This seems similar to the Valentinian ritual for the dying that we studied earlier.
- The Gospel According to Mary seems to teach a theology very similar to that of the Valentinians, but one that may not actually come from the Valentinians. Instead, we see that some Valentinian

ideas, such as the origin of sin in ignorance, were shared by other Christians. And some of these ideas, especially the soul's ascent past hostile powers, were controversial among Christians. Indeed, Andrew labels the idea of the soul's ascent as "strange." He must represent critics of this idea among early Christians.

- The Gospel According to Mary also reveals a division among early Christians over the role of women in the church and the nature of religious authority in general.
 - Peter objects to Mary's revelation for two reasons: She is a woman, and she received these teachings in private, without the other disciples knowing. Doubtless, Peter represents Christians who did not believe that women should teach in the church and who questioned revelations from Christ that were not generally known.
 - In defending Mary, the male disciple Levi makes three points: (1) Peter is prone to anger—one of the passions that the Savior said Christians must renounce; (2) Mary was Jesus's most beloved disciple and, thus, the most reliable source of revelation; and (3) the apostles should follow Jesus's original teachings and not impose rules that differ from what the Savior said.
- According to the Gospel of Mary, certain other Christians have developed rules and regulations that don't follow the original message of Jesus. They have turned away from that message and the new understanding of God it brings. Most likely, the rules that this gospel condemns are those that prohibited female leadership, that restricted Christian truth to official books, and that discounted the revelations that worthy people receive from Jesus.
- Somewhat like the Gnostic Gospel of Judas, the Gospel According to Mary condemns emerging power structures in the Church that restricted authority to male priests. Mary Magdalene, the first person to see the empty tomb, became a rallying point for this protest, just as Peter, the first person to see the risen Jesus (according to Paul), became a symbol for the emerging church structure of bishops and

priests. In the long run, of course, Peter won this contest with Mary Magdalene.

Suggested Reading

King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Gospel of Mary with the Greek Gospel of Mary.”

Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did differing accounts of the resurrection support different views of leadership in early Christianity?
2. Why was Mary Magdalene a more appealing role model than Peter for some ancient Christians?

Competing Revelations from Christ

Lecture 16

Many of the writings found at Nag Hammadi call themselves apocalypses or revelations; they contain new religious truth that God has revealed. To some extent, this is no surprise because Christianity began with extraordinary experiences of revelation. The Book of Revelation, for example, records the visionary experience of a Christian named John. But people who wrote such books would later become controversial among Christians, who believed that the time for revelations had ceased. In this lecture, we'll look at some of the visions and writings that sparked this controversy, including revelations from Nag Hammadi attributed to the apostles Peter, Paul, and James.

Revelatory Experiences in Early Christianity

- Revelatory experiences and writings were central to the origins of Christianity. The Revelation to John stood in a long tradition of Jewish revelatory literature. Jewish apocalypses, such as Daniel in the Old Testament or the books of Enoch, featured symbolic visions that communicated new information from God.
- By the middle of the 2nd century, however, some Christians began to think that the era of visions and revelations had ended. They believed that the earliest gospels of Jesus contained everything that Jesus taught. The task of the church was to pass on what these gospels taught, not to come up with new ideas.
- But not all Christians agreed. In the 170s, three Christians in Asia Minor, Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla, claimed to have received the Holy Spirit. These new prophets began to speak new revelations about the return of Jesus and the arrival of the kingdom of God.
- Some Christian congregations accepted the message of these prophets and began to follow their teachings. These supporters

called their movement New Prophecy, and it spread from Asia Minor to Rome and North Africa. Other congregations rejected New Prophecy as false, and some Christian communities split over the question.

- New Prophecy Christians agreed that certain Christian teachings were settled, such as the divinity of Christ, but they believed that the Holy Spirit could reveal new things, especially new and more rigorous ethical principles.
 - The followers of New Prophecy did not limit these new revelations to the three original prophets, and they believed that women could be prophets or serve in church leadership roles just as easily as men.
 - These beliefs posed a challenge to developing structures of church authority: If God is still speaking through prophets, why should Christians obey human leaders?
- Members of the New Prophecy movement did not write new books of revelation, but some other Christians did. Several books found at Nag Hammadi present secret or special revelations, including revelations to Paul, Peter, and James. All these works were originally written in Greek, probably in the 2nd or 3rd century, then later translated into Coptic.



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The New Testament Revelation to John consists of puzzling visions that reveal the true meaning of current events and forecast what God will do in the future.

The Revelation of Paul

- The Revelation of Paul from Nag Hammadi is a short text in which the apostle Paul goes on a journey to the heavenly spheres, which were often numbered in antiquity from the first to the seventh heaven or more. Paul's journey starts at the third heaven and goes to the tenth. Along the way, he interacts with various spirits and angels, some of which try to prevent him from ascending further.
- Paul has two encounters with divine revealers. At the beginning of the text, a small child—almost certainly Christ—appears to him. This child encourages Paul to awaken his mind and to recognize the cosmic rulers that surround him, especially the one that makes bodies for souls. The child invites Paul to ascend to meet the twelve apostles, which begins Paul's journey upward through the heavens.
- At the seventh heaven, Paul meets an old man seated on a throne—the God of Israel. The old man questions Paul about his identity, his origin, and his destination. Paul is able to give the man the correct answers and to show him a sign that indicates his blessed status. The old man then allows Paul to proceed to the eighth heaven, where Paul meets the twelve apostles. But Paul keeps going, to the ninth and the tenth heavens, where he greets his fellow spirits.
- The revelations here sound similar to what we have seen in Gnostic literature. The God of Israel is not the ultimate God but only the god of this lower cosmos, which extends as far as the seventh heaven. True Christians belong to the realm above this world. The book does not, however, contain all the elements of the Gnostic myth.

The Revelation of Peter

- The Revelation of Peter from Nag Hammadi describes the Savior revealing religious truths to Peter as they sat in the Temple in Jerusalem the night before Jesus's crucifixion. In this discussion, the Savior reveals three important truths: the natures of saved and unsaved human beings, the true identity of the Jesus who will be crucified, and the future of the Christian church.

- The Savior explains to Peter that there are two kinds of human beings: those with mortal souls, who are destined for destruction, and those with immortal souls, who will eventually receive grace. According to this teaching, people do not have free will. They are born with mortal or immortal souls, and their eternal fates are predetermined. It may not be clear at the moment who belongs to which group, but eventually, it will be.

- Peter then has a vision of Jesus being crucified while another figure stands beside the cross, smiling and laughing. The Savior explains that there are actually two Jesuses. The one that Peter saw smiling and laughing is “the living Jesus,” and the man on the cross is a fleshly substitute. The Savior explains that when Jesus is arrested, the living Jesus will be set free, and only the fleshly substitute will remain to be tortured and killed. The living Jesus will stand nearby, laughing at the blindness of those crucifying the substitute.
 - Peter then sees yet another divine figure, someone who looks like the living Jesus, but who is clothed with the Holy Spirit, surrounded by a bright light, and praised by a multitude of angels. This is the real Savior, who merely revealed himself in the living Jesus. Even the living Jesus is not the real savior but the “bodiless body” in which the Savior appeared.

 - This is a fascinating way to understand the nature of Jesus and his crucifixion. As early Christians grew to believe that Jesus was divine, they sometimes had difficulty understanding how he could have suffered and died on the cross or, indeed, why he needed to eat or drink like an ordinary human being before his death.

 - Docetic Christians solved this problem by saying that Jesus was not really human at all but only appeared to be human. The Revelation of Peter takes a different approach. The body of Jesus was real, it says, but it was merely a fleshly substitute for the living Jesus. The living Jesus escaped from the fleshly body before he could be tortured and killed. Further, even the living, spiritual Jesus was only a vessel for the truly divine Savior.

- Finally, the Savior tells Peter how the Christian church will develop after his death: At first, people will listen to the truth, but then certain Christians will lead people astray and teach them to worship a dead man—the crucified Christ. These false leaders will set up a false church, and they will tell people that salvation comes only through them and their pseudo-church. Right now, these leaders oppress true believers, “the little ones,” but eventually, truth will win out, and the little ones will be vindicated.

The Secret Book of James

- The text known as the Secret Book of James presents itself as a letter written by the apostle James. The author is clear that this writing is not meant to be read by all Christians, much less all people. He tells his recipient to share the book only with those who are capable of being saved through it.
- According to the Secret Book, the revelation occurred 550 days after the resurrection, at a time when the twelve disciples were gathered together. They were remembering everything that the Savior had taught them and writing it down in books. Jesus then appeared and asked to speak only to James and Peter.
- Ironically, when Jesus has Peter and James alone, he reveals to them that the era of prophecy is over; it ended with the beheading of John the Baptist. James and Peter should not seek to prophesy even if they are asked. Christians seeking revelation should look to the books of Jesus’s teachings that the disciples wrote, especially the parables of Jesus.
 - The parables that Jesus mentions—“The Shepherds,” “The Seed,” and others—are found in the New Testament gospels. The true meaning of these parables is not always obvious, which is the point: Zealous Christians will try to decipher what the parables mean. Jesus urges James and Peter to “be eager for the word”—that is, to study the gospels and their parables carefully—but he cautions that this will be hard work.

- Jesus says, “The word is like a grain of wheat. When someone sowed it, he had faith in it, and when it sprouted, he loved it, because he saw many grains instead of just one. And after he worked, he was saved because he prepared it as food, and he still kept some out to sow.”
- The meaning of this parable seems to be that the word of God requires effort. First, to benefit from it, we must make it grow. Next, we prepare it as food and plant some more. In other words, we must first study the parables and teachings of Jesus in the books the apostles have written and gain our own salvation. Then, we should offer these teachings to others—prepare some food and plant more seeds.
- Jesus says, “This is also how you can acquire heaven’s kingdom for yourselves. Unless you acquire it through *gnōsis*, you will not be able to find it.” We gain *gnōsis* and salvation through studying and teaching the word. This is *gnōsis* through books—not just the gospels in the New Testament but also new books, including the Secret Book of James.
- This is a spirituality of education and study of written texts. Salvation comes through teachers and students reading and trying to understand the teachings of Jesus found in Christian literature. And Jesus is the model teacher. He instructs Peter and James, and he patiently answers their questions. Like all good teachers, he hopes that his students will eventually become wiser and more learned than he is.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, “Parables and Plain Speech in the Fourth Gospel and the *Apocryphon of James*.”

Lewis, *Introduction to “Gnosticism,”* chapters 17–18.

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Secret Book of James,” “The Revelation of Paul,” and “The Revelation of Peter.”

Tabbernee, *Prophets and Gravestones*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why might many early Christian leaders have found the idea of continuing revelation dangerous?
2. Do think that written revelations, such as those of Paul and Peter, reflected genuine religious experiences that someone had, or were they just made up? How might we be able to tell?

The Invention of Heresy

Lecture 17

So far, we have met a diverse range of Christians, including the Gnostics, the Valentinians, and others. In this lecture and the next, we'll discuss how some Christian leaders responded to these groups and, thus, how they began to create the Christianity that eventually emerged as Catholic orthodoxy. We can divide the opposition to Gnostics and Valentinians into two basic kinds. In this lecture, we'll look at those theologians, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon, who simply condemned the quest for higher *gnōsis* and developed the idea of heresy to demonize and stigmatize it. In the next lecture, we'll turn to others, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who offered alternative orthodox paths to *gnōsis*.

The Idea of Heresy

- The English word *heresy* comes from the Greek word *haireisis*, which meant “school of thought,” “sect,” or “faction.” It originally did not have negative connotations.
- Early Christians, however, had a strong sense that they should be a single, harmonious group. They considered themselves to be the single body of Christ, and thus, they worried about the constant divisions among them. Even in the New Testament, we find authors who condemned the existence of factions or *haireses* and blamed the devil for Christian teachings that they considered erroneous.
- Historians generally credit Justin Martyr with first developing a full concept of heresy. Justin was a Christian philosopher who taught in Rome in the middle of the 2nd century.
 - Justin argued that he and Christians like him were part of the one true church, but the Gnostics, Marcion, and the Valentinians were merely “schools of thought,” which could not be the source of truth. Truth came only from the Word of God, present in Jesus and now in the church. Justin wrote a

book, now lost, entitled *Against All the Schools of Thought That Have Arisen*.

- According to Justin, people who followed Marcion and Valentinus may have called themselves Christians, but they were not members of the church; instead, they were “godless and impious members of a school of thought”—heretics.
- Again, according to Justin, heresies were instigated by demons that had opposed God’s Son, the Word, for centuries. In Justin’s time, these demons were inspiring the Romans to persecute the Christians and inspiring such men as Marcion and Valentinus to start heresies.

Irenaeus’s Theory of Heresy

- Justin’s work had great influence on Irenaeus. At the center of Irenaeus’s view of heresy and orthodoxy was the idea of a succession of teachers and students. Irenaeus borrowed the idea of succession from Valentinian teachers—who traced their academic lineage back to the apostles and Jesus—and applied it to both the groups he opposed and the Christians he supported.
- According to Irenaeus, all heretical groups existed in a kind of family tree of teachers and students. For example, Valentinus learned from the Gnostics, and he taught Ptolemy, and so on. However, the Valentinian family tree did not go back to Jesus; instead, it could be traced to Simon Magus, a character in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles.
 - In chapter 8 of Acts, Simon appears as a magician who offers the apostles money in exchange for the superior power of the Holy Spirit. Later Christians decided that Simon must have been the first heretic.
 - As Irenaeus presented him, Simon was inspired by Satan to become the first teacher of false *gnōsis*, and all heretical teachers were intellectual descendants of Simon.

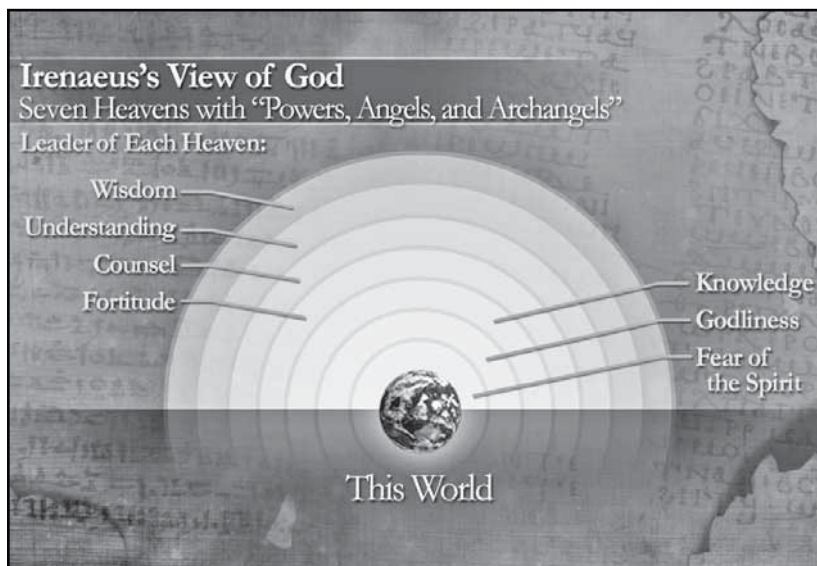
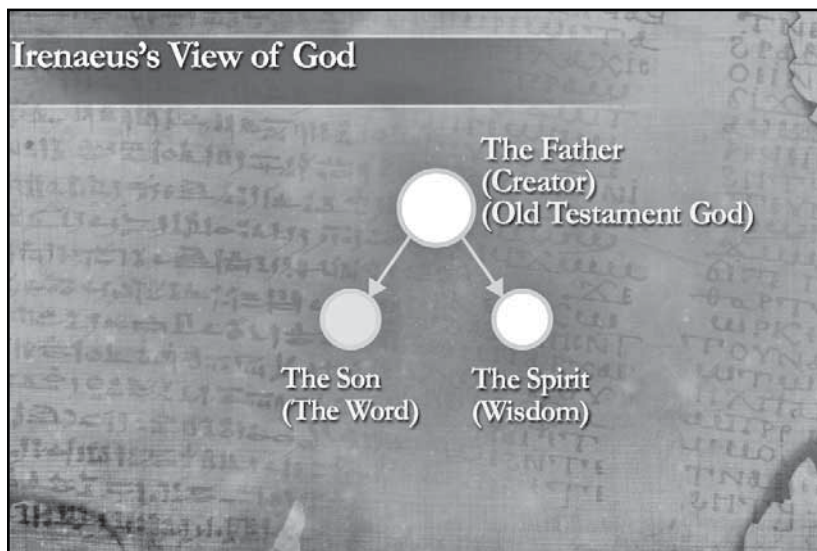
- As a succession of teachers that go back to Simon, the heretics were, according to Irenaeus, a false mirror image of the bishops—pastors who were emerging as leaders in the governing structure of many Christian groups at the time. True bishops, Irenaeus claimed, could trace their lineage back to at least one of the original apostles, all of whom were taught by Christ.
- Irenaeus also attacked the idea that Jesus taught or revealed certain secret teachings that were not available to everyone.
 - The Valentinians seem to have presented at least part of their apostolic teaching as reserved only for advanced Christians—the spiritual ones. We have seen also that such texts as the Gospel According to Mary, the Revelation of Peter, and the Secret Book of James claimed that Jesus revealed certain special teachings when he appeared to just one or two apostles.
 - Irenaeus, however, denied that the apostles had any secret teachings. If they did, they would surely have shared them with their successors, the bishops. Irenaeus also claimed that Jesus and the apostles would never have adapted their teachings to different audiences. If the apostles withheld certain advanced teachings from beginning Christians, they were effectively lying to those Christians, which of course, the apostles wouldn't do.
 - Instead, Irenaeus asserted that all true apostolic teachings are clearly manifest throughout the world and available to anyone through any true Christian congregation.
- Irenaeus also focused on the Bible in his effort to combat what he called Christian heresies. The Gnostics, we have seen, created new scriptures that retold the stories in Genesis, and Marcion rejected the Old Testament altogether. In response, Irenaeus promoted one of the first versions of what would become a Christian canon of the Bible with the Old and New Testaments.

- Irenaeus agreed that the Old Testament was inferior to the New Testament, but that was because God was gradually revealing his truth to humanity as it progressed. The New Testament improved upon the Old Testament, but both came from the same God.
- Irenaeus argued that Christians should use only the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to understand Jesus and his teachings. He accused heretical groups of relying too much on a single gospel, which tended to skew their views of Jesus. Irenaeus also considered the letters of Paul to be scripture and part of the New Testament.
- But even Irenaeus’s version of the Bible was not sufficient for opposing such alleged heretics as the Valentinians because the Valentinians used basically the same scriptures, although interpreted differently. To judge the truth or falsehood of competing interpretations of the Bible, Irenaeus relied on the “rule of faith,” a summary of Christian beliefs that he claimed the church had received from the apostles. The rule of faith stated the basic doctrines of Christianity, and any teachings that violated the rule were clearly false.

Irenaeus’s Vision of Christianity

- As we’ve seen, the Gnostics and Valentinians both taught that the ultimate God is remote from us and unknowable and that God emanates into a complex structure of multiple aeons. They also taught that the god who created this world is a lower, inferior god. Irenaeus accepted some aspects of this view but rejected most of it.
- Irenaeus agreed that the ultimate God, whom he called the Father, is unknowable (**see Figure 5**). But instead of multiple aeons, the Father has two somewhat lower aspects of himself: the Son or Word of God and the Holy Spirit, who is also God’s Wisdom.
 - It is the Son of God who makes the Father known to humans, and through him, humans gain access to the Father. The Son

Figure 5. Irenaeus's View of God



also does the work of organizing and directing the physical cosmos in which we live; he was the maker of the world.

- Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit is in charge of the spiritual powers that serve God, and the Spirit is present among Christians.
- In addition to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Irenaeus taught that many other divine beings exist between God and humanity. The earth is surrounded by seven spheres or heavens, in which multiple powers, angels, and archangels dwell. Each of the seven heavens has a guiding power, which is named. The highest heaven is Wisdom, and the rest are Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Godliness, and Fear of the Spirit.
- Irenaeus also developed a view of human salvation in response to other Christians.
 - The Gnostics, Valentinians, and the Gospel According to Thomas all taught that Jesus saves people primarily by revealing true *gnōsis* to us: Christ makes us aware of the higher God and leads us to understand our true natures as spiritual beings in this material world.
 - Irenaeus, in contrast, emphasized that the Son of God became human in order to make human beings holy or sacred. The Word of God became a real human being, and this human—Jesus—was tested by suffering and death. But the Word triumphed over these things in the resurrection. As Irenaeus saw it, human beings had become morally and physically corrupt, and it was the purpose of God’s incarnation to make us holy again.
 - In fact, Irenaeus thought that Jesus passed through every stage of human life—childhood, young adulthood, middle age, and old age—so that he could sanctify all human beings, from babies to the elderly.
 - Irenaeus called what Jesus accomplished “recapitulation”: Jesus lived like Adam, but he undid all the damage Adam did.

For example, Adam was made from virgin soil, and Jesus was born from a virgin woman. Adam's only father was God, who made him, and Jesus's real father was God. In this way, Jesus was a new Adam. Although the old Adam sinned and brought human beings into corruption and death, the new Adam—Jesus—was sinless and, thus, brought human beings into holiness and life.

- The Gnostics, the Valentinians, and the other Christians we have studied so far considered our true selves to be only our spiritual selves. Our bodies are not part of our real selves, and they will be destroyed or perish into nothingness. Irenaeus, in contrast, believed that our bodies are essential to who we are. The Son of God had to come in a real body of flesh to make us holy, and the resurrection of the dead will be a resurrection of the fleshly body that we now have.
- This resurrection of the flesh is necessary because the kingdom of God itself is not spiritual or immaterial; it will be a physical realm. In fact, it will be this world, miraculously transformed by God.
 - The saved human beings, with real bodies, will live in this earthly kingdom and enjoy its fertility. They will grow in love for God and knowledge of him. They will see God in their bodies.
 - Some special Christians, the holiest of people, will ascend to live in the heavens. But for eternity, many people will dwell in a new city of God on earth. God will be present everywhere, to everyone.

Suggested Reading

Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*.

Brakke, *The Gnostics*, chapters 4–5.

Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*.

Royalty, *The Origin of Heresy*.

Questions to Consider

1. Who claimed apostolic succession—and why—among early Christian groups?
2. What are the most important areas of agreement and disagreement between Irenaeus and his Gnostic and Valentinian opponents?

Making *Gnōsis* Orthodox

Lecture 18

In the last lecture, we saw that Christian teachers and leaders, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, opposed rival forms of Christianity by inventing the concepts of heresy and orthodoxy. Irenaeus strongly rejected the idea that Jesus or the apostles reserved any kind of special teaching only for advanced Christians. All of what Irenaeus called “true *gnōsis*” was publicly available in the preaching of bishops in apostolic succession. Other Christians joined Irenaeus in calling the Gnostics and Valentinians heretics, but they recognized the appeal of a more advanced understanding of the Christian faith. In this lecture, we’ll discuss two ancient Christian intellectuals who were anti-Gnostic yet offered Christians alternative paths to *gnōsis*: Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

Clement of Alexandria

- Clement (150–211 to 215) was a younger contemporary of Irenaeus who taught in Alexandria, Egypt, in the last decades of the 2nd century.
- Clement accepted the basic reality that not all Christians could attain the same level of ethical perfection and intellectual understanding of the faith. But unlike the Valentinians—who had divided Christians into animate and spiritual people—Clement believed that Christians are at different points on a single path leading from ignorance and sin to *gnōsis* and salvation. Every person has the possibility of making this journey, although only a few reach the final stage of perfect *gnōsis* and become true Gnostics.
- In Clement’s time, of course, practically no one was born and raised a Christian; thus, everyone started in a state of sin and ignorance. But according to Clement, God’s Word led people to Christianity in two ways: through the Bible and Jewish tradition and through Greek philosophy. God’s Word speaks through both of these, but the Word is fully present only in Jesus Christ.

- When people become Christian, they begin a process of growth. In the early stages, the Word of God teaches Christians how to achieve ethical improvement. In this process, they acquire what Clement calls “faith,” that is, belief in the basic teachings of Christianity that the church proclaims throughout the world. Like Irenaeus, Clement believed that Jesus and the apostles established a kind of rule for what Christians should believe, which Clement called the “ecclesiastical norm.”
 - Clement also encouraged Christians to move beyond mere faith to true *gnōsis*, a deeper understanding of the mysteries of Christianity. For Clement, this true *gnōsis* consisted mainly of a more spiritual understanding of the Scriptures.
 - People who have only faith understand the Bible literally and simply, but people who have *gnōsis* learn to read the Bible symbolically and to find multiple meanings in it.
- Clement presented himself as uniquely able to lead interested Christians from simple faith to advanced *gnōsis* because he claimed to have received secret teachings not written in the Scriptures through apostolic succession. But unlike the secret teachings offered by the Gnostics and Valentinians, Clement claimed that the *gnōsis* he offered perfected faith and did not violate the church’s ecclesiastical norm. It was orthodox *gnōsis*.

The Life of Origen

- Another resident of Alexandria, Origen (c. 185–c. 254), became one of the most brilliant theologians of the ancient church. Origen developed his theological vision in part to create an alternative to Gnostic and Valentinian myth.
- The young Origen was a charismatic teacher, and he became known for his opposition to the Valentinians in particular. Although he defended so-called orthodox Christianity against Gnostics, Valentinians, and other “heretics,” he eventually came into conflict with the bishop of Alexandria and was expelled from the Alexandrian church.

- Origen left Alexandria and settled in Caesarea Maritima on Palestine's Mediterranean coast. There, he opened a new school, and as a priest, he preached almost daily in church. In the 250s, Origen was arrested during a persecution of Christians. He was eventually released from jail, but the harsh treatment he received left him weak, and he died a few years later.
- This account of Origen's life reveals a complicated relationship with the organized church. On the one hand, he was a bit like Irenaeus: faithful to the church, an opponent of heretics, and a member of the clergy. On the other hand, he was also like Clement and even Valentinus: dedicated to advanced learning, eager to help people advance to higher *gnōsis*, and unwilling to close off conversation about difficult ideas.

Origen's Christian Myth

- Origen appealed to Christians who wanted a more intellectual, less close-minded approach to Christian truth, but he also understood that some people found the myths of the Gnostics and Valentinians attractive. In response, he attempted to provide a better myth for so-called orthodox Christianity—a better story of creation, fall, and salvation. In an amazing book called *On First Principles*, he laid out his comprehensive vision of Christian truth.
- Origen's story of salvation resembles that of the Gnostics in that it's a story of a fall from a blessed existence somewhere else into life in this world, then a return to union with God. But Origen's story emphasizes the abundance of God's love and the freedom of human beings—God wants everyone to be saved, and it seems that everybody will be. And Origen's story does not make this universe a mistake, nor does an inferior or hostile god rule it; instead, this universe is a good creation, made by God to help us to return to him.
- Like others we've met so far in this course, Origen believed that God is both one and multiple. There is only one God, but the unknowable, inaccessible Father makes himself known through

his Word or Son, who exists with him eternally. Likewise, there is God's Holy Spirit, which is God's immediate presence among Christians. Origen insisted that the Son and the Spirit are not emanations like the Gnostic aeons. Instead, they are integral aspects of God and have eternally existed with God.

- Long before this universe came into existence, God created and ruled over a multitude of rational beings. These were pure intellects, who contemplated God through his Word. Their very reason to exist was to be educated by God's Word. Yet these rational beings had free will and could choose to turn away from God, which they did; they began to neglect contemplation of God. This was the origin of sin: the fall of the rational beings away from *gnōsis* of God.
- Because God loves all the intellects, he wanted to bring them back to contemplation of him. And for that reason, he created this material universe through his Word. By placing the fallen intellects in material bodies, God would teach them how to overcome their physical desires, such as greed and lust. The rational beings would morally improve, advance in knowledge of philosophical and religious truth, and gradually return to contemplation of God.
- The rational beings fell away from their original communion with God to varying degrees, and thus, they needed to be healed and educated in different ways. God assigned each fallen intellect to the body and place in the universe that would be best for it pedagogically.
 - The intellects that fell away the least became archangels, angels, and other good spirits. Those that fell away to a moderate degree became heavenly bodies, such as the sun, moon, planets, and stars. The rational beings that fell away the farthest are now Satan and his demons.
 - Human beings fell away from God less than the demons but more than the angels and the heavenly beings. God has assigned each of us to be born in just the right body and at just the right time and place so that we can begin the process of improving ourselves morally and learning about God intellectually.

- One intellect, however, did not fall away from contemplating God through his Word. In fact, this one intellect loved and studied the Word so intensely that the two became fused. This intellect became the soul of Jesus. United with this intellect, the Word of God could enter a human body and live and die as Jesus. The Son of God died for the sins of all fallen beings; he showed them how to live a moral life; and he taught them about the Father. In this way, he made it possible for the fallen beings to reform their lives and return to *gnōsis* of God.
- Origen was well aware that few people actually became Christian and started their return to God. And few, if any, Christians reached the level of contemplation of God that they had experienced so long ago when they were purely intellects. The reason for this is that people have free will, and they can choose whether to live righteously and to pursue *gnōsis*. But God loves all rational beings and does not give up on them. Like a good teacher, God can lead people to love and knowledge of him, but he does not force them.
- Thus, Origen argued that after this universe comes to an end, there will be future worlds, in which the fallen intellects will continue their journey back to God. In these future worlds, the experiences that intellects have will reflect how they have performed so far in their re-education.
 - People who were wicked in this universe will have bad experiences that we call hell, and better people will have more pleasant experiences that we call heaven. But neither of these experiences is eternal.
 - Because God does not compel rational beings to love him, it will take him many ages to bring them all back to him. But he will do it. The end result will be what Origen called the *apokatastasis*—the return of all rational beings to eternal contemplation of God.
- Origen's vision was a beautiful story of a fall from God and a return to him. It explained why we suffer and why this material world

exists—for our long-term benefit. And it reassures people that God loves them and wants them to love him. It preserves both human free will and God’s love for all his creatures.

- But Origen’s grand scheme raised some unsettling questions for other Christians. For example, does the *apokatastasis* mean the return of all fallen intellects to God—even Satan and the demons? Where does the resurrection of the body fit into Origen’s cosmic vision of multiple worlds? And after the *apokatastasis*, could we fall away again?
- Origen seems to have thought that the situation at the *apokatastasis* will be similar to the original condition in which the intellects contemplated God but not precisely the same. The intellects will have both bodies and a hierarchical arrangement that will provide stability. Thus, they will love God forever—freely but without fear of falling away.

Suggested Reading

Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*, chapter 4.

Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church*.

Origen, *On First Principles*.

Trigg, *Origen*.

Questions to Consider

1. Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen are all considered “proto-orthodox,” defenders of emerging orthodox Christianity. What do these three share in common? In what ways do they differ?
2. According to Origen, why are some people good and some bad, some people highly spiritual and others less so?

Gnosticism and Judaism

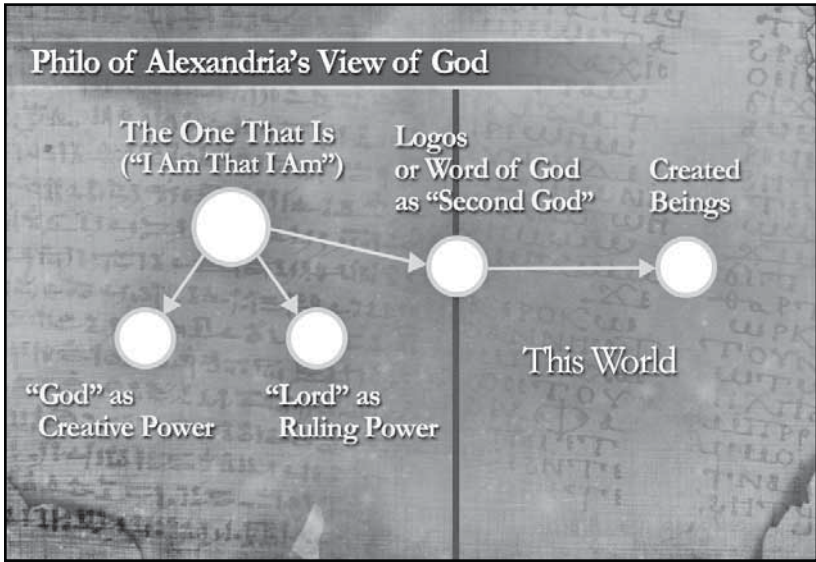
Lecture 19

Christian bishops and teachers were not the only religious leaders who worried about so-called heretics in late antiquity. In the 2nd century, just when Irenaeus and Clement were criticizing Gnostics and Valentinians, Jewish rabbis also complained about “sectarians” or even “heretics” who claimed that there were “two powers in heaven”—not one God but two. Based on these complaints and other evidence, many historians have argued that the first Gnostics were Jews. That is, these historians claim that the Gnostic school of thought started out as a Jewish religious movement and only later included Jesus in its teachings and began to seem Christian. In this lecture, we’ll explore why many scholars believe in the Jewish origins of Gnosticism.

Multiple Divine Powers

- We have already met ancient Jews who, like the Gnostics, imagined that God is both one and multiple at the same time.
 - For example, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria anticipated the Gnostics by depicting God as consisting of multiple powers and aspects and by saying that a lower, second God created this universe (**Figure 6**). Philo died well before the Gnostic school of thought began, but it’s almost certain that Gnostics read some of Philo’s works, and it’s quite certain that Valentinus and his followers did.
 - We have also seen that the Aramaic Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, a text that is later than the time of the Gnostics, presented God as having a lower manifestation or aspect called his *Memra*, or “Word.” It was the Word, says this targum, that walked around in the Garden of Eden and that caused the flood.
- What inspired Jews, such as Philo and the author of the targum, to divide God into multiple powers, rather than conceiving of a single God? In Philo’s case, Greek philosophy played an important role.

Figure 6. Philo of Alexandria's View of God



- Philo had learned from reading Plato that the most perfect God and source of all being should be highly spiritual and remote from us and, therefore, that a lower craftsman god created this world. Philo assumed that Moses taught the same thing in Genesis.
- The author of the targum probably had not read much Greek philosophy, but he was clearly worried that a God who walks in a garden and destroys humanity with a flood could not be the ultimate perfect God; surely, this must be a less divine aspect of God.
- The Jewish Bible also provided material for thinking of God as multiple powers. Consider, for example, a story found in Genesis 18. Here, the biblical author tells us that the Lord appeared to Abraham, but Abraham actually sees three men.

Philo concluded that these three men must represent the ultimate God and his two powers, the creative power and the ruling power. There are also other passages in the Bible in which people see God in some human form or forms.

- Ancient Jews came up with numerous explanations for such visions in the Bible. Human characters may have seen an angel; or perhaps the multiple figures of God are simply different forms of the one God; or perhaps there are lower aspects of God that people can see, while God himself remains invisible. This last idea is not too far from the Gnostic idea of an ultimate Invisible Spirit and aeons emanating from God.

Hypothesizing the Jewish Origins of Gnosticism

- As we know, the religions that eventually became Christianity and Judaism both started among Jews in the 1st century. The Jews whom we call the first Christians—Peter, Paul, James, Mary Magdalene, and others—heard the message of Jesus and saw him after his death. They concluded that he was the Messiah (Greek: “the Christ”), whom God had long promised to send to Israel. Certainly, in this sense, all Christian groups originated in Judaism.
- The proponents of the Jewish origins of Gnosticism argue that Jews developed the Gnostic myth without having had any encounter with, or knowledge of, Jesus. Jews came up with the story of the Invisible Spirit, the Barbēlō, Wisdom, Ialdabaōth, and the seed of Seth apart from knowledge of Jesus, and only later did Gnostics learn about Jesus and incorporate him into their mythology. The Gnostic school of thought, then, started out Jewish and subsequently became Christian.
- Among the arguments for this position is the fact that much Gnostic literature, such as the Secret Book According to John, the Revelation of Adam, and so on, is intensely engaged with the Jewish Bible, especially Genesis. Gnostic texts retell the story of Genesis multiple times. To be sure, they often “correct” the errors that Moses made, but they clearly believed that this is where religious truth could be

found. Jews are probably the best candidates for people who would be focused on the book of Genesis.

- Further, several of these same Gnostic works don't have many Christian features, or their Christian features are suspiciously marginal.
 - The Secret Book According to John, for example, presents itself as a revelation from the Savior to the apostle John after the death and resurrection of Christ. But only at the beginning and end of the book is the Savior who speaks explicitly identified as Jesus and the recipient of the revelation identified as the apostle John. The long discourse in between has few, if any, explicitly Christian elements.
 - Scholars have argued that the revelation itself was first composed by one or more Gnostic Jews, and later, someone made it Christian by creating a frame story around the Gnostic myth.
- Scholars have also noted that many ideas and incidents in Gnostic texts have parallels in Jewish literature, especially rabbinic literature. We have already seen similarities between the Reality of the Rulers and the Jewish Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. But there are other examples, in which, for example, Gnostic retellings of the creation of humanity or of the flood story resemble ideas found in Jewish texts.
- Of course, the most remarkable feature of Gnostic literature in relation to Judaism is that the Gnostics identified the God of Genesis—the God worshipped by the Jews—as the ignorant and malicious Ialdabaōth. Why would Jews have decided that the God of their ancestors was not the true God but a flawed divinity that was hostile to human beings?
 - Platonism would have convinced some Greek-speaking Jews, such as Philo, that any true God must be remote, extremely spiritual, and not subject to such emotions as anger or regret. The God of Genesis is neither remote nor particularly spiritual, and he gets angry at humans and destroys many of them in a

flood. Some Jews may have concluded, therefore, that the God of Genesis was an imperfect deity, and they may have looked for a higher God.

- Scholars also point to the devastating history of the Jews in the 1st and 2nd centuries—with multiple rebellions against Roman rule and the second destruction of the Temple—as an explanation for the tendency to turn away from their ancestral God. Thanks to Platonism, Jews were already inclined to question the divinity of the biblical God, and they now saw that God as a deluded, arrogant failure.



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- Eventually, the Gnostics encountered the Christian message about Jesus and introduced Jesus into the Gnostic myth. They also added Christian elements

God had promised King David that one of his sons would always reign in Jerusalem, but the long history of foreign rule in Judaea may have led some Jews to question God's ability to fulfill his promises.

to the beginning and end of some of their revelatory books. Christian leaders, such as Irenaeus, saw this teaching as a threat to true Christianity and attacked it. Valentinus, in contrast, found the myth fascinating, but he revised it to make it even more explicitly Christian. Thus, the Gnostic myth was originally Jewish and was later rendered Christian.

Countering the Hypothesis

- This theory of how Gnosticism originated is compelling. One of its advantages is that it sets aside Irenaeus's picture of the Gnostics as Christian heretics. Instead, they were Jews whose understandable response to contemporary events was to create a new religious movement. Despite this advantage, many historians are skeptical of the Jewish hypothesis.
- One reason for this skepticism is that many of the passages in Jewish literature that resemble elements in Gnostic texts are from Jewish texts that date well after the Gnostic writings. In addition, we can't be sure that such texts as the Secret Book According to John were originally Jewish and later made Christian. Moreover, the Gospel of Judas is one of the earliest Gnostic texts, and it is mostly Christian; the majority of the text consists of conversations between Jesus and the disciples or Jesus and Judas.
- As we discussed, those who claim that the first Gnostics were non-Christian Jews argue that Jews became so disappointed in their fate that they lost confidence in their God and concluded that he was inferior and malicious. But this claim does not seem completely plausible.
 - From antiquity to today, the history of the people of Israel has been replete with catastrophic events. Through all their pain and suffering, Jews have complained to God, but they have not concluded that he was evil.
 - Instead, the Jews have considered their suffering to be punishment for their sins, and they have repented and asked God for forgiveness. Or they have concluded that God will keep his promises to his people in the future, when the Messiah comes and God establishes his kingdom.
- It seems likely that the first Gnostics were Jews or a mix of Jews and Gentiles. The interest in Genesis in Gnostic texts points to Jewish authors. But those Jews must have heard about or had some encounter with Jesus.

- As we have seen, early Christians disagreed about almost everything, but they all agreed that Jesus represented something new—a new revelation, a new intervention by God in history, a new means of salvation. This something new called into question everything that had gone before.
- Jesus may have come from the biblical tradition and his teachings may have made complete sense within Judaism, but his followers believed that his appearance necessitated rethinking the Bible and the history of Israel.
- Some scholars believe that Jewish intellectuals of the late 1st or early 2nd century had reasons to doubt the God of Genesis. The teachings of Platonism made him seem like a lower, inferior god, and Jewish hopes for a land and a king had been frequently crushed. However, these factors appear to be necessary but not sufficient causes for the appearance of the Gnostic myth and the transformation of the God of Genesis into Ialdabaōth.
- What the Jews really needed was a new revelation that would explain and confirm their doubts and give them new hope. The most likely catalyst was the proclamation of Jesus, and the teachings of Paul and the Gospel of John were the steps that led from doubts about the God of Israel to the creation of the Gnostic myth.

Suggested Reading

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

Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*.

Smith, *No Longer Jews*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you find the arguments for a purely Jewish origin for Gnosticism persuasive? Why or why not?
2. In what ways does the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament itself suggest that there is not simply one God?

Gnōsis without Christ

Lecture 20

During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the search for *gnōsis* of a remote and perfect God became popular among educated, spiritually inclined people in the Roman Empire. The Gnostics and Valentinians appealed to this desire for *gnōsis*, as did the Gospel According to Thomas and other Christians, such as Clement and Origen. But non-Christians were part of this trend, as well. In this lecture, we'll look at two non-Jewish, non-Christian forms of *gnōsis*: Neoplatonism and Hermeticism. In each case, we will see real overlaps with Gnostic and Valentinian thought and spirituality, as well as some important differences.

Hermeticism

- *Hermeticism* refers to a body of literature associated with a divine revealer named Hermes Trismegistus. Hermes was the Greek messenger god, who brought communications among the gods and between the gods and lower entities, such as human beings. Greeks living in Egypt identified Hermes with the Egyptian god Thoth, the scribe of the gods. Egyptians praised Thoth as “thrice great,” or in Greek, *trismegistus*. Thus, the combined deity of Thoth and Hermes became known as Hermes Trismegistus.
- Hermetic literature is a set of texts that attributes its teachings to revelations from Hermes Trismegistus or one of his divine disciples. Hermetic texts can be divided into two categories: pseudo-scientific technical works about astrology, alchemy, and similar topics and teachings about God, the cosmos, and human salvation.
- The basic features of the Hermetic view are remarkably similar to the views of the Gnostics and the Valentinians.
 - According to the Hermetists, our true self is our soul or intellect, which is a fragment of the divine. Our true existence is immaterial and unchanging. Nonetheless, we are imprisoned

in this world of material change, dwelling in bodies that impede our knowledge of God and matters of eternal truth.

- Because we are divine in our true selves, God wants us to know him, just as he wants to know us. But this communion between God and human beings cannot take place as long as we live in ignorance—thinking that the material world is our true home and our bodies are our true selves.
- The first step in overcoming ignorance is philosophical study. Later, the Hermetic initiate must have an experience of enlightenment (a rebirth)—a vision of or contact with God. Through this rebirth, the Hermetist becomes divine and gains immortality. Obviously, he or she is still a composite of body and soul, still tied to this changing world of matter, but the initiate has become a god by achieving *gnōsis* of God and of the true divine self.
- In some respects, this path is not very different from what we see in Gnostic and Valentinian mysticism, which also encouraged people to turn away from the body and the material world and to engage in religious and philosophical study. The Gnostics and Valentinians, like the Hermetists, suggested that it's possible to have experiences of acquaintance with God in the present life.
- There are some differences, however, between Hermetic *gnōsis* and that of the Gnostics and Valentinians. The Hermetists did not have an elaborate myth and were not as interested in the Jewish tradition as the Gnostics and Valentinians. The Hermetists also claimed that Hermes Trismegistus revealed the truth through Egyptian gods, such as Ammon and Isis. Jesus Christ had no role in Hermeticism.

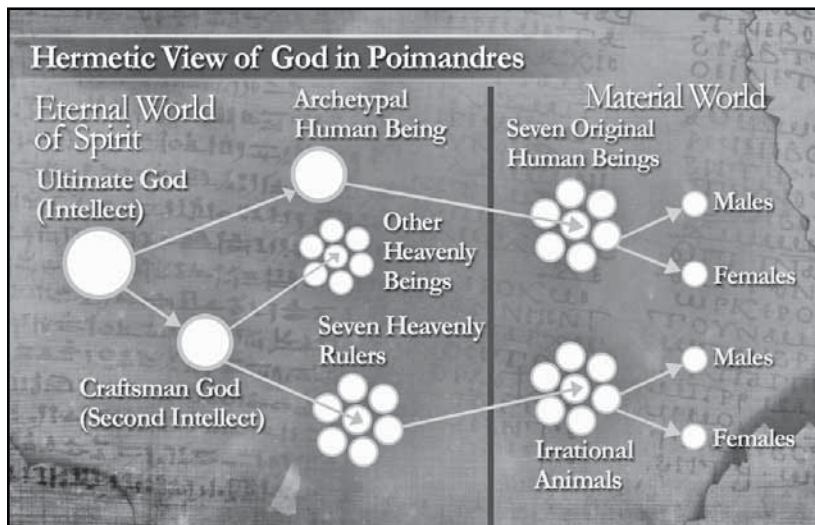
Poimandres

- The Hermetic tractate Poimandres relates the story of creation. The author of this text tells of his encounter with a divine being, who announces, “I am the Poimandres, the intellect of the realm of absolute power.” Later, Poimandres says that he is the author’s

intellect, as well. Thus, Poimandres embodies the connection between human beings and God; that connection is intellect.

- In the creation story told by Poimandres, the ultimate God engendered a second intellect to be the demiurge or craftsman of the material world (**Figure 7**). This craftsman then created seven heavenly rulers to assist him, and together, the craftsman god and his rulers created the other heavenly beings and the irrational animals, meaning all living creatures except human beings.
- Poimandres then tells how humanity came into being: “Then the intellect that is parent of all by being life and light engendered a human being equal to itself.” Humanity is equal to the ultimate God! God loved the human being and handed over to it all of creation.
- This archetypal divine human saw the created material world and felt attracted to it. He entered it and combined with it; in this way,

Figure 7. Hermetic View of God in Poimandres



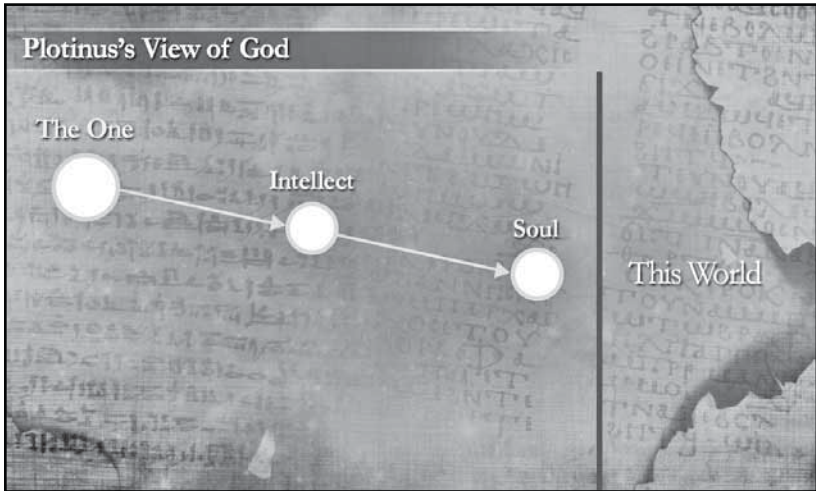
humanity is both immortal—because of its divine origin—and mortal—because of its union with the material world.

- Next, seven earthly human beings came into existence. At first, these seven human beings, as well as the animals, were androgynous, but then God separated them into males and females so that they could multiply and fill the world.
 - Poimandres explains that human beings have divided into two kinds. Some people love the body. Entangled in their physical desires, they remain in the darkness of ignorance. But other people recognize themselves as truly divine intellects, and they devote themselves to self-improvement and contemplation of God.
 - The good people will leave behind their bodies when they die, and their true intellectual selves will ascend through the seven spheres of this cosmos. As Poimandres says, “They ascend to the parent and personally hand themselves over to become powers, and by becoming powers, they come to be within God. Such is the good end of those who possess *gnōsis*: to become God.”

Plotinus

- The 3rd-century philosopher Plotinus initiated a new chapter in philosophical history known as *Neoplatonism*. Like the Gnostics and Valentinians, Plotinus sought to achieve *gnōsis* of the ultimate God, but his new approach emphasized our essential connection to God rather than our state of alienation from God.
 - Like the Gnostics, Plotinus believed in a remote and ineffable source of all that is, which he called The One (**Figure 8**). The One thinks, and his thinking produces the first emanation from him—Intellect. In turn, Intellect generates Soul, the principle that gives life to all that is.
 - From this divine triad—The One, Intellect, and Soul—all of reality emanates. It’s not quite right to say that The One exists; rather, The One is Being itself. And from The One, all being emanates through Intellect and Soul, creating new levels of

Figure 8. Plotinus's View of God



reality that are both lower than and contained in The One. Everything that exists is an emanation from or a level of reality within The One.

- Plotinus agreed with the Gnostics that the material world is not true being, but he did not believe that there was a clear separation between spiritual reality and the material world. Rather, everything exists on a continuum.
- Plotinus said that the body is not the true self, but he did not set the soul and the body in opposition. Instead, the unity and beauty of the body indicates the presence of the soul, which gives life to the body. The material world is not a flawed imitation of the spiritual forms but the visible manifestation of the world of spiritual forms. The cosmos gets its unity and beauty from the divine Soul that animates it. So, too, the body is not the true self but a manifestation of the true self.

- Further, the true self is not separated from its source. Rather, the self consists of layers of being, and the deepest or most central layer remains in The One. Even now, we exist both in heaven and on earth, both in The One and apart from it.
 - Of course, we are seldom conscious of our connection to The One. Rather than attending to our higher selves, we become distracted by lower, less real concerns. Instead, we should cultivate awareness of the true being at the center of our selves.
 - In practical terms, we should study philosophy and live disciplined lives that are not focused on material needs and concerns. We should practice contemplation and try to heighten our consciousness of our presence within The One. If we do so, Plotinus says, we can have fleeting experiences of true *gnōsis*, moments of union with The One. We do not need to wait for some future moment to return to The One: We can do so now.
- According to Plotinus’s model, The One is Being itself, and The One is also The Beautiful and The Good. To be is good; thus, as absolute Being, The One is absolute Goodness.
 - Everything that is has its being from The One. Things exist because they participate in The One and receive life from The One. They are more or less real depending on how close they are to The One or how deeply they participate in The One.
 - This means that all things that exist are also good because they participate in The One’s Goodness and receive goodness from The One. They are more or less good depending on how close they are to The One or how deeply they participate in The One. Thus, evil does not really exist; it is simply a deficit of goodness.

Iamblichus

- In the ancient world, Neoplatonism took an important turn with the thought of Iamblichus (c. 250–330). Iamblichus disagreed with Plotinus that the soul remains always connected with The One. For Plotinus, even though it may seem that the soul is far away from

God, it has not fallen away completely. For Iamblichus, the soul is completely fallen.

- Iamblichus distinguished between the soul and the intellect. We might be able to say that our intellect, because it's rational, still maintains a connection with God, but it's not fully within God. But the soul is an intermediary between the intellect and the spiritual world, on the one hand, and the body and the material world, on the other. The soul is fully descended from God, and it leads a kind of double life: It participates in both the higher spiritual reality and the lower material world.
- According to Iamblichus, because the soul has fallen away from The One, it must be purified and restored to its previous condition. As a method of doing this, Iamblichus promoted *theurgy*, that is, the performance of rituals involving material elements that can make the soul more divine.
 - Iamblichus taught that material objects, such as animals, plants, and stones, and immaterial things, such as numbers and sacred names, can serve as symbols that draw divine power to the soul. Because the soul is embodied, God has provided material means for the soul to experience the divine.
 - In this way, Iamblichus sought to bring actual religion as practiced by pagans into the philosophical life.

Suggested Reading

Copenhaver, *Hermetica*.

Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*.

Hadot, *Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision*.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*.

Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, “The Hermetic Corpus (Excerpts).”

Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, “The Discourse of the Eighth and Ninth,” “The Prayer of Thanksgiving,” and “Excerpt from the Perfect Discourse.”

Plotinus, *The Enneads*.

Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do Hermeticism and Neoplatonism share with Gnosticism and Valentinianism?
2. How does Plotinus’s view of our relationship with God differ from that of the Gnostics?

The Mythology of Manichaeism

Lecture 21

Historians have frequently depicted Manichaeism as the culmination of ancient Gnosticism. It was a Gnostic myth that went global and became the basis for a highly organized international religion. As we will see, Manichaeism shares several characteristics with Gnosticism, but the salvation described by its founder, Mani (216–274), was not found primarily in *gnōsis*, that is, in direct acquaintance with the ultimate God. Instead, Mani enlisted people in an ongoing war between Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, in which the disciplined use of the body played a central role. In this way, Manichaeism differed greatly from the Gnostic school of thought.

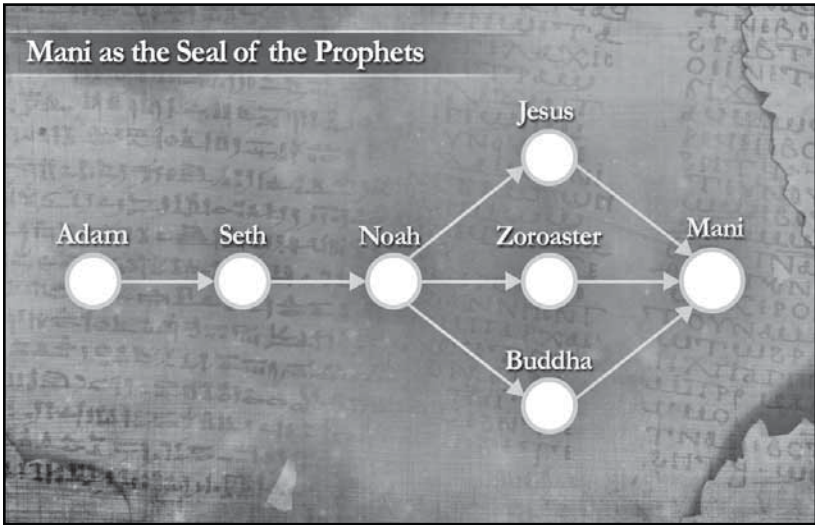
Revelation to Mani

- In the year 228, a 12-year-old Christian boy named Mani, who lived in a village near Babylon, received a startling vision. An angel called al-Tawm (“the Twin”) appeared to Mani to bring a revelation from God—the king of the Paradise of Light. From this meeting, the religion of Manichaeism was born, which would eventually challenge Christianity for supremacy in the late ancient world.
- The Christian sect to which Mani belonged was known as the Mughtasila, which means, “the ones who wash themselves.” They were also known as Elchasaite Christians because they followed the teachings of a book attributed to a man named Elchasai.
 - The Elchasaite worshipped Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, and they placed great emphasis on ritual purity. They followed many of the precepts of the Jewish Law, including circumcision and a calendar of festivals and other observances. They also put a high value on baptism, which brought forgiveness of sins, purified the body of evil spirits, and offered protection from illness and impurity.
 - The Elchasaite Christians endeavored to keep themselves in a pure and sacred state, even to the point of regulating the food

that they ate. They would not eat any food that they themselves did not plant, harvest, and prepare, and even this food required ritual cleansing in water before it could be eaten. That is, they baptized their food.

- Notice here the close connections among the body, food, and salvation. For the Elchasaites, the body was where good and evil came into conflict. By baptizing the body, they expelled the demons of Satan, and by baptizing their food, they kept themselves pure from pagan uncleanness. Mani's religion would have similar features.
- After his vision of his divine Twin, Mani began to doubt some of the teachings and practices of his Christian community. As the years went by, he gradually understood the full implications of the revelation he had received, and he came into greater conflict with Christian leaders.
- Finally, after 12 years, at the age of 24, Mani received a new revelation from his divine Twin: God was calling Mani to be his apostle and prophet. It was Mani's mission to bring the gospel of truth to all people—in fact, to show that all previous religions were leading to the new gospel that Mani would proclaim.
 - Mani learned that he was the Comforter, or Paraclete, that Jesus had promised he would send to his followers. In the Gospel of John, Jesus explains that the Paraclete would teach people all things and remind them of everything that Jesus said. The Paraclete would chastise the world for its sin, teach it about righteousness, and bring it judgment.
 - Not only was Mani the Paraclete, but he was also the seal—or completion—of all prophecy (**Figure 9**). God had sent the entire human race prophets, beginning with Adam, Seth, and Noah, but prophecy had then taken different paths in different areas of the world. In the Mediterranean world, God spoke through Jesus, but in Asia, India, and China, he spoke through the Buddha. In Persia and Babylonia, God's prophet was

Figure 9. Mani as the Seal of the Prophets



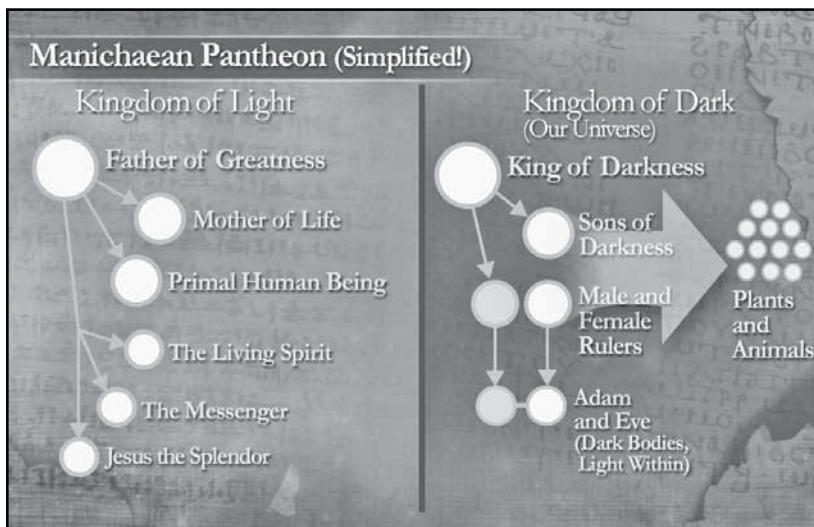
Zoroaster. Mani was sent to unite all these religions into one Gospel of Truth.

- Mani traveled to bring his Gospel of Truth to central Eurasia and India. In Iran, he at first found sympathy from the Sassanian rulers, even if they did not convert to his new religion. Later, however, Mani ran afoul of the Zoroastrian priests and was imprisoned and tortured. He died in 274 at the age of 58.

Mani's Teachings

- Like the Gnostics and Valentinians, Mani presented his teachings in the form of a myth about the structure of God and the origin of the universe in which we live. The Manichaean myth (**Figure 10**) is extremely complex, but its central theme is the struggle between Good and Evil or between Light and Dark. We are still engaged in this struggle today.

Figure 10. Manichaeian Pantheon (Simplified!)



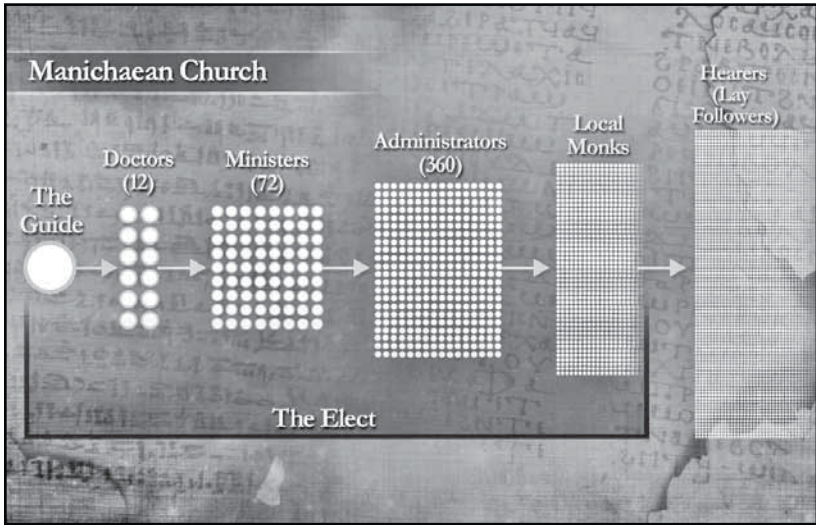
- We can see why the Manichaeian myth might have appeal: It provides a clear explanation for the existence of evil and suffering.
 - According to Mani, evil is real because it has existed from the beginning. God—the true God, the Father of Greatness—did not create evil or let it come into being. Instead, Evil or the Dark has always been, and we now find ourselves in the realm of evil.
 - Pain and suffering are equally real because there are many particles of light trapped in the realm of Dark that is this universe. According to Mani, all living beings, including plants and animals, contain fragments of light. When we hurt another living being, we are causing pain to the light contained within it.
- Manichaeism also explains why we are attracted to both good and evil. Our evil impulses arise from the body, which is composed of the dark and draws us to do evil acts. At the same time, our souls are composed of light and draw us to do good.

- In Mani's view, Paul captured this problem in Romans 7: "I know that nothing good dwells within me. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ... I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" (18–23).
- Indeed, Mani says that there is a war within each of us and all around us—a war between Good and Evil, Light and Dark. Our own selves are the battlefields of that war, as the light of our true selves battles with the dark of our bodies.
- In Romans, Paul laments, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from the body of death?" (24). Mani claimed to have the answer to Paul's question. He organized his church precisely so that it could win the war between Good and Evil and rescue the light from the dark.

Manichaean Church Organization

- The Manichaean church was an international organization with a well-organized hierarchy (**Figure 11**). The supreme leader was considered Mani's successor, and he was called The Guide. Below The Guide, Manichaeans were organized into five ranks, but these five ranks were placed within two larger, more significant groups: the Elect and the Hearers. The distinction between the Elect and the Hearers and the interactions between them are at the heart of how Manichaeism worked.
- The Elect comprised the top four ranks. The first three of these ranks formed the church hierarchy and were limited in number. The fourth rank consisted of monks who filled a variety of roles in local congregations: preachers, choirmasters, scribes, and the like. Local members of the Elect lived together in monastic communities and committed themselves to live in absolute purity. If they did so, their souls of light would escape their bodies of darkness at death, and the light would return to the realm of Light.

Figure 11. Manichaeian Church



- Most Manichaeians, however, were Hearers, not the Elect. The Hearers practiced a less rigorous version of the Elect's lifestyle. In general, they were expected to lead a conventional moral life by avoiding sin, but they could get married and have sex with their spouses. The Hearers had a less restricted diet than the Elect, but they still had to refrain from alcohol and meat. They were expected to give 10 percent of their income as alms to the church in support of the Elect and of poor Hearers.
- Both the Elect and the Hearers participated in a regular schedule of fasting—not eating or drinking until after the sun went down on Sundays and at other times. There was also an annual 30-day fast that led to the holiest Manichaeian festival, the Bema. The Bema commemorated Mani's death and return to heaven. By sharing periods of fasting, the Elect and the Hearers expressed their solidarity with each other.

- Because the Hearers did not live a life of complete purity, their light did not return to the realm of Light when they died. Instead, their light fragments were reincarnated in new human bodies. In their next lives, they might be Elect and, thus, could escape this realm of darkness.
- Nonetheless, the Hearers had a crucial role to play in the liberation of light from the darkness. First, by supporting the Elect, they enabled the Elect to live completely purely and free their souls of light. Second, by bringing fruits and vegetables to the Elect, the Hearers helped the Elect to liberate the light in those plants.
 - The Elect had rendered their bodies so pure that when they ate the food brought by the Hearers, their digestive systems would separate the light from the dark and enable the light to escape upward toward the realm of Light.
 - During the current period of war with the realm of Darkness, the rulers of Dark are oppressing the fragments of light. But the Manichaean church and its rituals continually liberate light and send it back to the realm of Light.
 - In fact, the Manichaeans believed that they could actually see this process taking place in the waxing and waning of the moon. As light leaves the earth, it travels upward and gathers at the moon, and the moon's light gradually grows as more light arrives there.
 - When the moon's light gets full, the light heads to the next stop, which is the sun, and the moon's light slowly diminishes. The changing patterns of the sun's path and of daylight are also functions of liberated light traveling from here to the realm of Light.
 - In the sky, Manichaeans believed that they could see their religion at work—a dramatic confirmation of the truth of their message.

Suggested Reading

BeDuhn, *The Manichaean Body*.

Gardner and Lieu, *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*.

Tardieu, *Manichaeism*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did Mani's explanation of evil differ from that of the Gnostics, Origen, and Plotinus?
2. How would a Manichaean Hearer have lived his or her religious life?

Augustine on Manichaeism and Original Sin

Lecture 22

Saint Augustine (354–430) is one of the most important figures in the history of Christianity. He was the bishop of the North African city of Hippo and a brilliant theologian, yet he was once a heretic—a Manichaean. He later became a Christian, but Manichaeism did not leave his life and thought. Augustine developed many of his teachings about Christianity in opposition to Manichaeism, but even in his own lifetime, his critics said that he never really escaped his Manichaean past: His doctrines of predestination and original sin might as well have been Manichaean. Whether that’s true or not, there is no doubt that Manichaeism, a religion that no longer exists, profoundly shaped important elements of Western Christianity.

Augustine’s Search for Wisdom

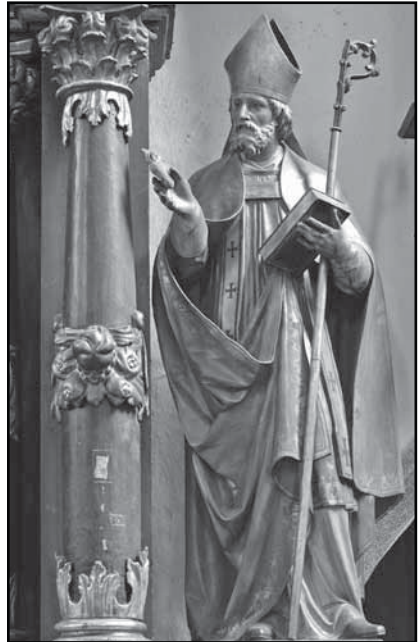
- Augustine’s mother, Monica, was a devout Christian, but his father was not. His mother prayed that Augustine would become a Christian, but Augustine had a mind of his own. As a student in his late teens, he was influenced by Cicero, who had argued that people find true happiness only in the pursuit of wisdom—philosophy. Augustine was inspired to seek true wisdom, but he immediately ran into two problems.
 - First, according to Monica, Christianity was the highest form of wisdom, but when Augustine turned to the Bible, he found that it was not particularly well written and that many of its characters engaged in acts that were clearly immoral.
 - Second, Augustine may have been inspired by Cicero’s claim that true happiness comes from philosophy, but he found it difficult to give up other forms of happiness, such as sex and other sensual pleasures.
- Manichaeism provided solutions to both of these problems.

- Recall that Mani presented his religion as a higher form of Christianity. He agreed that the Old Testament and its view of God are problematic, and he called his followers to a deeper understanding of the message brought by Jesus and Paul. With this perspective, Augustine saw some connection to Christianity but without the difficulties he had identified earlier.
- Recall, too, that Manichaeism had two kinds of adherents: the Elect, who led celibate and morally pure lives, and the Hearers, who led normal married lives. In Manichaeism, Augustine found a group that valued celibacy and moral purity but made a place for those who wanted to have sex and lead less demanding ethical lives.
- In addition, Manichaeism explained why Augustine wanted to pursue philosophy yet not give up certain physical pleasures. On the one hand, Augustine is a fragment of the Light, which makes him aspire to the Good. On the other hand, he is enmeshed in the Dark, particularly his body, which draws him away from the Good. The conflict between Light and Dark at the heart of Manichaeism explained Augustine's own conflicting desires.
- For all these reasons, Augustine became a Hearer. After a few years, however, he began to have doubts about Manichaean teachings. In 384, he moved to Milan and discovered new perspectives that furthered his break with Manichaeism.
 - First, he encountered the writings of Plotinus, which gave him a new way to think about good and evil.
 - Second, Augustine heard the preaching of the Christian bishop of Milan, Ambrose (339–397). Ambrose interpreted some of the morally dubious activities of characters in the Old Testament symbolically and, in this way, helped Augustine see that Christianity could be philosophically sophisticated.

- In 386, Augustine declared his conversion to Christianity. He later returned to North Africa and ultimately became the bishop of Hippo, although Manichaeism continued to shape his thought.

Augustine on God, Evil, and Sin

- Augustine devoted many of his early writings to refuting Manichaean ideas, particularly those related to God, evil, and sin.
 - The Manichaeans taught that Good, represented by God, and Evil, led by Satan, are both eternal principles. They were originally completely separate, but when Evil attacked the Good, fragments of the good Light became trapped in the Darkness of evil.
 - Human beings experience this mixture of good and evil in their very persons. Our true selves are fragments of the good Light, but our bodies are composed of the evil Darkness. For this reason, we feel torn between good and evil.
 - Our goal should be to live our lives so that Light will eventually be liberated from the darkness and return to the Light realm, enabling Light and Darkness—Good and Evil—to be fully separate once again.



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Manichaeism shaped the theology of Saint Augustine, which in turn dominated Western Christianity for centuries—and remains highly influential today.

- In response to these teachings, Augustine argued that the Manichaeans' God could not truly be God because he was vulnerable to evil. Any true God should be omnipotent and almighty, and the Manichaean God was not because Evil had been able to seize and trap some of the Light. The only God worthy of worship, Augustine said, would be all-powerful and not vulnerable to evil.

- What, then, is the origin of evil? The Manichaeans argued that Evil had always existed, alongside the Good. It was an active, independent force, present in our bodies and other things in the world. But Augustine learned from Plotinus that evil is simply a lack of good. Everything that exists—animals, plants, our bodies, and even Satan—is good by virtue of its existence. The evil in these things is their lack of good—their failure to be fully and completely good.

- And why do humans want to do both good and evil? The Manichaeans explained that we are a mix of the good and evil elements that are at war with each other, but Augustine said that was far too simplistic.
 - People do not find themselves torn between two alternatives, good and evil. Rather, we have multiple, complex, and ambiguous desires. Our will is divided among many things that we want, only some of which are good.

 - For true happiness and goodness, we should desire and love only one thing—the ultimate good, God. If we did that, all the things we desire would sort themselves out in a proper order, and we would reject the bad things.

 - Instead, our will, our center of desire and loving, has turned away from God. We may want to love God wholeheartedly, but we cannot; we still have persistent desires for lesser good things and for bad things.

 - This turning away from God results in a lack or deficit in our love for God—the definition of evil.

- Thus, in opposition to the Manichaean teaching that evil and sin come from an enduring principle of evil, Augustine argued that they arise from a lack of good and from the human will turning away from God.

Augustine on Original Sin and Predestination

- One objection to Augustine's view of evil is that none of us remembers a time when we loved God completely but then began to desire other things. Augustine would respond that we didn't turn away from God as individuals; rather, we turned away at the beginning of creation—in Adam!
- In Augustine's interpretation of Genesis, God made Adam and Eve completely good. They loved God completely and were without sin. But they also had free will. They could freely love God forever and live forever, or they could choose to turn away from God, which as we saw, is evil.
- In response to their turning away from him, God justly and rightly sentenced Adam and Eve to death—but not only Adam and Eve. Somehow, in a spiritual way that Augustine never quite explains, all the human beings that would ever live were present in Adam and Eve; we also turned away from God, and we, too, were justly condemned. Thus, when we are born, we are already sinful; we inherit the original sin of Adam.
- If Augustine had stopped there, probably few would say that the idea of original sin is Manichaean. But when Augustine was pressed by his critics to explain how and why original sin is transmitted, he focused on sex.
 - In the Garden of Eden, before they committed sin, Adam and Eve could have had sex, but for them, sex would have been perfectly rational and controlled.
 - But when Adam and Eve turned away from God, their wills became divided, and they lost control of their bodies. For Augustine, the fact that we lose control of ourselves in sex—

that our desires seem to take over—shows precisely how sin has damaged our nature. Sex is dominated now by what Augustine called *concupiscence*, which is love or desire that has gone astray. Because sex is clouded by concupiscence, the conception that results is clouded by sin.

- The Manichaeans had a negative view of sex because conception entangled more fragments of Light with the evil Darkness of bodies. Augustine seemed to be tying sinfulness directly to sex and the body, just as the Manichaeans did. We can see from Augustine’s view that he had to explain in some way how it is that everyone ends up turning away from God: Once he decided that all humanity turned away from God in Adam and Eve, then sexual reproduction became the means by which we are all connected to these earliest humans.
- If original sin explains how we ended up with our perverse and divided will, how can we escape from sin and be saved?
 - Augustine’s answer is that we can do nothing to help ourselves. Our will is hopelessly divided, and as much as we may want to, we cannot learn to love God wholeheartedly on our own. We will always have competing desires that will distract us and pull us away from God and the Good.
 - The only solution is for God to give us the grace to be saved. God must choose to heal a person’s divided will and bring him or her back to loving God. This means that God must choose which human beings he will save and which he will not. This is predestination—the idea that God decides which people will be saved and that people can do nothing on their own to give up evil and love God completely.
- For Augustine, predestination was good news; it was a blessing to believe that his salvation depended fully on God. Augustine had found it difficult to give up sex and other pleasures and devote his life to God. Only when he felt God empowering him could he do so. Predestination is also a logical result of the belief that God is

omnipotent. If God is almighty, then nothing can happen without God willing it to happen, including human beings giving up evil and turning back to God.

Suggested Reading

Augustine, *Confessions*.

Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*.

Fredriksen, *Sin*.

O'Donnell, *Augustine*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did the Neoplatonism of Plotinus turn Augustine away from the Manichaeans and shape his view of evil and sin?
2. Augustine believed that his own experience confirmed that human beings cannot turn away from sin on their own but must have grace from God. Is Augustine's story idiosyncratic, or does it seem universal?

Gnostic Traces in Western Religions

Lecture 23

What happened to the ancient Gnostics and their ideas? Did they simply disappear until Gnostic texts in Coptic were discovered in the 20th century? We have already seen that Gnostic ideas influenced orthodox Christianity, ancient Judaism, Platonism, and the development of Manichaeism. Although the classic period of “Gnosticism” was over by 450, key themes and ideas from ancient Gnosticism persisted into the Middle Ages and beyond. In this lecture, we’ll look at three primary facets of Gnostic and Valentinian thought, myth making, *gnōsis*, and dualism, that emerged in the later religious history of Europe and the Near East.

Myth Making

- The Gnostics and Valentinians created complex myths that explained who God is and how this universe came into being. Unlike Greek or Roman myths, Gnostic and Valentinian myths do not feature human-like gods with personalities or traditional stories. Instead, they are highly philosophical. Gnostic and Valentinian myths may appear to be overly complicated, but that complexity may have been part of their appeal. As believers learned more about the myth, they gained a sense of personal knowledge of divine secrets.
- The Mandaeans, a religious and ethnic community in modern Iraq and Iran, carry on this tradition of myth making to the present day. The Mandaeans may have originated in the 4th or 5th century, and today, they probably number around 10,000 to 15,000.
- Because they are so few in number and have lived in relative isolation, Western scholars did not know much about the Mandaeans until the 20th century. A deeper understanding of the Mandaean religion came with the work of an English scholar named Ethel Stevens (Lady Drower), who lived in Iraq and brought many Mandaean manuscripts to Great Britain.

- The myths of the Mandaeans resemble those of the Gnostics, Valentinians, and Manichaeans. Like that of the Manichaeans, Mandaean myth distinguishes between a realm of light and a realm of darkness. Supreme deities and lower emanations rule both realms. For example, the Lord of Greatness or King of Light rules the world of light, along with numerous lower beings. The lowest divine being is Ptahil, the god who created the cosmos in which we live.
- The Mandaeans achieve contact with the world of light through rituals involving water. A Mandaean temple must have a pool, called a Jordan after the Jordan River in Palestine. Baptism in this pool connects a person with the realm of light.
- John the Baptist plays an important role in Mandaean mythology and ritual as a teacher and priest. Because the Mandaeans came into conflict with Christians, Jesus Christ sometimes plays a negative role in their mythology; at other times, he's a good character.
- The Mandaeans have existed for nearly all of their history under Muslim rule, and for the most part, they have enjoyed the freedom to practice their faith as a "religion of the book," similar to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam itself. The Mandaean community provides a living link with the ancient period of Gnosticism.

Gnōsis

- A second key feature of ancient Gnosticism was, of course, *gnōsis*, firsthand acquaintance with God. The quest for *gnōsis* continued in the Christian tradition apart from the groups that became known as heretics. Already in the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria taught that Christians should aspire to transcend mere faith in the doctrines of the church and to achieve *gnōsis* with God. The ideal Christian, Clement said, was the true Gnostic.
- One of Clement's greatest admirers was the Christian monk Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345–399). After a brief career as a church official, Evagrius became a monk in the Egyptian desert, where

he attracted many disciples and became the greatest teacher of spirituality in early monasticism.

- Evagrius taught that the monk goes through two stages in his spiritual life. For the first and longer period, he is an ascetic practitioner. Through fasting, celibacy, prayer, and scripture reading, the practitioner seeks to overcome his sinful desires and to achieve freedom from negative emotions. Then, the monk can become a Gnostic, someone who engages in higher contemplation of the Bible, the universe, and ultimately, God himself.
- For Evagrius, the goal of the monastic life was to achieve a vision of God that was beyond all concepts or images. Evagrius believed that the ideas and pictures that fill our minds are sometimes good, but ultimately, they distract us from God, who is beyond anything we can say or imagine. Evagrius described the experience of *gnōsis* as seeing one's mind as a sapphire-blue sky. The goal is to rid the mind of everything so that it's a blank screen on which God can project himself, somehow without any images at all.
- After his death, Evagrius's teaching became an object of controversy, and he was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 553. Nonetheless, his teachings lived on because monks considered them too profoundly helpful to be lost.
- Another milestone figure in the history of mystical knowledge of God in Christianity is the mysterious Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. This author combined the Bible with Neoplatonist philosophy and monastic traditions; in so doing, he created a new tradition of mystical theology for Christians.
 - Pseudo-Dionysius believed that we know God in two ways. First, because God pours himself into the creation and because everything emanates from God, we learn about God through images and names that are drawn from the creation and that appear in the Bible. This is called *kataphatic theology*, in

which assertions are made about God to achieve growth in understanding him.

- The second way of knowing God is by negating everything we assert about him. Because God is beyond all our names and images, through this *apophatic theology*, we un-know everything we have asserted about God.
- The Christian mystic must engage in both kataphatic and apophatic ways of knowing God, oscillating between saying things about God, then denying those things. This creates a space within us, a place of un-knowing, that God's divine energy can fill.
- In this form of *gnōsis*, believers negate their own minds and selves so that God can take over. Ultimately, they gain *gnōsis*—knowledge—of God through *a-gnōsis*—non-knowledge.

Dualism

- As we learned earlier, dualism is the division of reality into sharply distinguished pairs—Good versus Evil, Light versus Dark, and so on. Dualism appears in both moderate and strict forms, and both forms could be found among the Cathars, a movement that spread in Western Europe in the 12th century.
 - The Cathars took their name from the Greek word meaning “pure ones” and claimed to represent a higher form of Christianity, purer than what they saw as the corrupt and polluted Roman Catholic Church.
 - The Cathars believed in two gods: a good and loving God of the New Testament and an evil and vengeful god of the Old Testament. They also believed that this material world is evil and that Christ came to free our spiritual selves from imprisonment.
 - The Cathars organized themselves as the Manichaeans did, into two levels of membership. The Perfect gave up sex and private

property, and they abstained from meat and dairy products. When they died, their souls would escape this world. Ordinary believers supported the Perfect and lived less ascetically. When they died, their souls would be reincarnated in new bodies.

- By around 1200, the Cathars had gained many followers in southern France and northern Italy. People found Catharism attractive because, like Manichaeism, it offered a clear explanation for the existence of evil and suffering, and it provided a systematic plan for gaining salvation. The Cathars also allowed women to preach and serve as leaders and criticized the corruption of Catholic bishops and priests.
- Not surprisingly, the Catholic Church saw Catharism as a threat. In 1209, Pope Innocent III called for a military campaign to wipe out the Cathars in southern France. This campaign is known as the Albigensian Crusade, and it persisted for 20 years. By the early 1300s, Catharism had disappeared.
- At precisely the same time that Catharism arose in Western Europe, a Jewish form of esoteric religion appeared in Provence and northern Spain—Kabbalah. Kabbalah shows some remarkable similarities to Gnosticism.
 - Kabbalah teaches that the ultimate God is completely unknowable. He is Ein Sof (“No End”), and he emanates into lower manifestations called *sefirot*. Much of Kabbalistic literature is devoted to speculation about the *sefirot*—what their characteristics are and how they relate to one another. The *sefirot* also serve as a ladder of contemplation: That is, the Kabbalist gains greater *gnōsis* of God by contemplating each of the *sefirot*.
 - Kabbalah is not dualistic in the way Manichaeism or some Cathars were. Everything comes from the Ein Sof. But the Kabbalists do take evil seriously. There are a series of negative emanations from God that form an evil counterpart to the divine *sefirot*.

- Kabbalists devoted themselves to speculation and mysticism based on folklore and learned study. They claimed to find many of their teachings in the Bible, which they did not interpret literally but as pointing to higher, deeper meanings.

The Survival of Gnostic Teachings

- Kabbalah resembles Gnostic myth in several important ways, which might prompt us to ask whether Gnostic teachings somehow survived “underground” for centuries. But no one has been able to show any continuous line of tradition from the ancient Gnostics to the Kabbalists of the 12th century.
- In fact, there seems little need to posit underground streams of tradition to account for the emergence of mythological speculation, dualism, or interest in *gnōsis* at different times and places in Western religious history. The biblical tradition itself invites and encourages such responses.
- The Bible, especially Genesis, is filled with stories that raise questions for curious readers. Why is humanity created twice? Who are the “sons of God” we met earlier who mate with human women? And why did God command Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil?
 - Although many Jews and Christians may have been content with simply accepting these stories, others have questioned them. This questioning has led to new stories—myths that try to explain the true nature of God and the origins of ourselves, our world, and the evil that causes pain and suffering.
 - In addition, there have always been people who have not been satisfied with the basic teachings of their religious tradition, whatever it may be. These people have yearned for a closer, more intimate connection with the ultimate source of all being. In other words, they have sought *gnōsis*.

- It's unlikely that these impulses to question tradition, to tell new stories about human existence and our world, and to seek *gnōsis* of God will ever disappear.

Suggested Reading

Barber, *The Cathars*.

Evagrius of Pontus, *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*.

Harmless, *Desert Christians*, chapters 10–11.

Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*.

Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*.

Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*.

Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*.

Questions to Consider

1. What elements of Gnostic and Valentinian teaching have persisted in Western religious history?
2. How might we explain the appearance of similar religious ideas and stories in very different times and places?

“Gnosticism” in the Modern Imagination

Lecture 24

After the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in 1945, translations of these sources appeared throughout the 1960s and 1970s and struck a chord with many people. During this period of questioning, people were drawn to Gnosticism’s suggestion of rebellion against orthodox Christianity and its new ways of thinking about God. In the last decades of the 20th century, somewhat darker Gnostic ideas have resonated in popular culture, including the possibilities that the existence we know is not real, the powers that rule this world are malevolent, and our own identities are uncertain. In this lecture, we’ll explore how fascination with *gnōsis* and ancient Gnosticism has manifested itself in our own time.

Gnosticism in Popular Culture

- The science fiction novels of Philip K. Dick (1928–1982) are an excellent example of the appeal of Gnostic ideas in popular culture. Dick’s novels feature mega-corporations that exert great power over our lives and authoritarian governments that limit our freedom. He was also interested in altered states of consciousness and esoteric philosophy, and the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi gave him new ways to think about these themes.
 - *VALIS* was one of Dick’s last and most popular novels. It appeared in 1980, well after Dick had read the Nag Hammadi writings. The central character of the book is a man named



Some modern fiction expands on the Gnostic idea of the hostile powers of this world; thanks to technology, the evil rulers can now watch us more closely and control events more fully than ever before.

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Horselover Fat, who suffers a series of disappointments and losses in his life. But just as the world seems to him increasingly meaningless and hostile, Fat begins to receive revelatory messages.

- The novel suggests that Horselover Fat may not be who we think he is—or who he thinks he is. This introduces an important theme from the Gospel According to Thomas and Valentinian Christianity: Until we gain *gnōsis*, we are divided from our true selves. We live an alienated existence, in which our surface self is not our true self. Only *gnōsis* or, in Horselover Fat's terminology, *plásmate* can end this self-alienation and make us whole again.
- The psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) was another source of inspiration for Dick and other modern thinkers. Jung posited that each individual has his or her own consciousness, made up of that person's specific experiences. But beyond or beneath each individual consciousness is what Jung called the *collective unconscious*.
 - The collective unconscious is a repository of patterns, forms, and symbols that enable us to make sense of our experience through the collective wisdom of humanity. Certain key symbols, called *archetypes*, recur in human culture because they carry with them healing messages from beyond our own selves.
 - Dick and other 20th-century thinkers considered the central ideas of Gnosticism to exemplify mythologically what Jung taught. Each of us may have individual experiences, but there is a higher or deeper wisdom that is seeking to communicate with us. This wisdom transcends any specific individual, yet we all participate in it. Like Jung's collective unconscious, the Barbēlō wants to communicate spiritual truth to us; she can because we have spiritual power within us and, thus, can participate in the Barbēlō.

- We can also see themes of the collective unconscious in the 1982 film *Blade Runner*, which was based on one of Dick's short novels, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Androids—robots that seem to be human—work well with Gnostic themes because they raise the question of what it means to be truly human: What makes a human being human? Is a soul necessary? Is it possible to think that you're a human being when you're not?
 - Gnostic myth raises the possibility that some people lack the spiritual element that makes us part of the divine Entirety. Such people may think they are real, but they are doomed to perish into nothingness. Indeed, before they are saved, even the saved people don't know who they really are. They think they are people who belong to this universe, but they are actually spiritual beings who belong to the Entirety.
 - In *Blade Runner*, people who seem to be human may actually be "replicants," bioengineered beings who are designed to last only four years. The main characters are Rick Deckard, whose job is to track down rebellious replicants but who may be one himself, and Rachel, a replicant who realizes her true nature during the course of the film. The Gnosticism of *Blade Runner* lies in the theme of knowing or not knowing who you really are.
- A movie that has an even clearer relationship to Gnosticism is *The Matrix* (1999). In this film, the main character is named Neo, an anagram for One. Neo is the One who is called to save people.
 - People in the story do not live in the real world but in the matrix, a computer program designed by robotic life forms to trap human beings. Rulers police this world to keep human beings in their place. Human beings are, in fact, in a kind of coma state, with their brains plugged into the virtual world that they think is real.
 - But Neo and his friends have come out of their comas, unplugged from the matrix, and learned that they live in a bleak, post-apocalyptic world controlled by machines. This knowledge enables Neo and his companions to reenter the

matrix and act with new freedom within it. They can literally bend this world to their will because they have gained the *gnōsis* that this world is not real.

Gnosticism and Modern Religion

- The discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices inspired not only novels and movies in pop culture but also new religious movements. In fact, there is now a Gnostic Christian church, known as the Ecclesia Gnostica.
- Although this church calls itself Gnostic, in its theology and practice, it more closely resembles Valentinian Christianity. The religion is highly liturgical and, following the Valentinian Gospel According to Philip, believes in five basic sacraments, or mysteries: baptism, chrism, eucharist, redemption, and bridal chamber.
- The Valentinian character of the church appears in its devotion to Sophia, or Wisdom. These Christians believe that Sophia fell into this lower created world and continues to be active in it, caring for human beings and helping them return to the Fullness from which they came.
- The scriptures of the Ecclesia Gnostica include the canonical Bible; the Nag Hammadi texts; and Manichaean, Mandaean, and Hermetic literature. The church combines formal, traditional Christian ritual with a passion for seeking *gnōsis* wherever it may be found.

Ongoing Debates about Gnosticism

- Once historians read the Nag Hammadi texts, they were impressed by the great variety of ideas, stories, and genres found. And they noticed that few of the texts matched the reports about so-called Gnostic groups in the church fathers. Rather than clarifying Gnosticism, the Nag Hammadi codices vastly increased the diversity of thinking about the religion. This great diversity animates the most important debate today among scholars of ancient Gnosticism: Is there a real category of “Gnosticism,” and if so, what is it?

- In 1966, an international group of scholars met to discuss the problem of Gnosticism. They decided that we should distinguish carefully between *gnōsis*, the claim to have divine knowledge, and *Gnosticism*, a system of belief.
 - Gnosticism, according to these scholars, has two primary ideas. First, there is a divine spark in human beings that comes from the spiritual world and that we must become aware of. Second, some aspect of the divine has moved into this world to recover lost divine energy.
 - According to this definition, Gnosticism is not to be identified with such religions as Judaism or Christianity, although it interacts with them.
- More recently, some scholars have argued that the single category Gnosticism includes too many different texts and groups. It gives the mistaken impression that all of these instances of Gnosticism formed a single religious community, which they did not. These scholars also argue that the idea of Gnosticism distorts our understanding of the texts and traditions we include in it. People tend to have certain preconceived notions of what Gnosticism is, and they impose those ideas on everything that's called Gnostic.
- Another group of scholars believes that Gnosticism is still a useful category of analysis. It brings together religious groups and texts that share certain features, even if they did not all make up a single religion.
- Still other scholars believe that there really was a religion called Gnosticism, and almost everyone we have studied in this course belonged to it. There were many varieties of Gnosticism, but there are also many varieties of Christianity or Islam, yet we still speak of them as a single religion.
- Finally, there is a small group of scholars who agree that there never was a single religion called Gnosticism and find it problematic to lump together so many different texts and traditions in a single

category. Yet these scholars also believe that there was an original group called the Gnostics—those who produced certain texts and who developed the myth of the Invisible Spirit, the Barbēlō, and Ialdabāōth.

- According to this view, the other people and movements that we have studied share certain themes and ideas with the original Gnostics: the idea of saving *gnōsis*, the power of myth to express where we came from and where we're going, and the hope of achieving union with the divine, both within ourselves and with the realm above us.
- Yet these later groups and movements—the Valentinians, Manichaeans, Cathars, and so on—were not part of one religion called Gnosticism; instead, they were new attempts to express religious insight using the sacred books, philosophies, and rituals of the past.
- It's important to note that the texts and groups that we have studied do not belong to a religious tradition that's lost or that is different from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or other religions.
 - Instead, we need to recognize that the quest for *gnōsis*, the creation of mythology, and the desire for mystical union with God have been present in Western religious history since ancient times. Setting these elements apart as a separate thing called Gnosticism helps us to see that this tradition exists, but the danger is that we will fail to see that it's part of the Jewish and Christian traditions, as well.
 - What the people we have studied in this course would want us to do is to read their texts, to consider with open minds what they teach us, and to pursue our own quests for the truth about God and ourselves—that is, to seek our own *gnōsis*.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, *The Gnostics*, chapter 1.

Dick, *VALIS*.

Ecclesia Gnostica, <http://gnosis.org/eghome.htm>.

Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, “‘Wake Up!’ Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*.”

King, *What Is Gnosticism?*

Markschies, *Gnosis*.

Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*.

Questions to Consider

1. Can you think of other recent novels, television programs, or movies that feature Gnostic themes?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of considering so many different teachers, writings, and groups in the single category of Gnosticism?

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