Gnosticism and "the Gnostics"

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The term "Gnosticism" is derived from the Greek word *gnōsis*, which means "knowledge," especially in the sense of theoretical knowledge or insight. The term is customarily used for systems of thought, prevalent in the early Christian period, that (1) emphasized the spiritual knowledge about human beings' true, divine origin, and (2) regarded the visible world and the human body as created, not by the supreme God, but by an inferior creator-God (cf. Marjanen 2008: 210-11).

The term Gnosticism itself is a late invention, coined in the 17th century. There were, however, in the second century people who designated themselves as "Gnostics" (*gnōstikoi*), that is, "those in the know." They preferred myth as the venue to address the present state of affairs in the world, the human condition, and the ultimate goal of humankind. The information we have of the teaching of these people is related to their elaborate views about the divine realm, and their story of how our world came into being. In this story, a female divine being, called Wisdom (*sophia*), disturbed tranquility of the divine realm. She reached outside the boundaries of the divine world to find herself a consort. The result of Wisdom's ill-advised action was the inferior creator-God, who created a universe of his own, with heavens, angels, the visible world, and humans (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.29).

This myth builds upon, but also dramatically subverts, the Jewish tradition in which God's wisdom had been described as God's first creation and companion assisting God in the creation of the world (Proverbs 8:22-31). The myth is also indebted to the Platonic philosophical tradition in which it was held that there was a creator-God (called the demiurge, "craftsman"), who observed the preexisting world of ideas and used it as a model for the creation of our world. The very negative picture drawn of the creator-God in the Gnostics' myth, however, made their teaching distinct from the philosophical mainstream.

Some scholars propose that we should speak of "Gnostics" only in connection of these people who designated themselves as such (Brakke 2010). There were, however, other early Christian groups who taught myths similar to that of the Gnostics, but did not call themselves Gnostics. This raises the question if *we* can call them "Gnostics" (because their teaching was in part similar with that of the "original" Gnostics), or not (because they didn't use "Gnostic" as a self-designation).

The issue is even more complicated for two reasons. First, other kinds of Christians also used the term "Gnostic" in a positive way. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) described as "the Gnostic" the ideal Christian, who always knows and chooses the right course of action in different situations. Second, the scholarly usage of the "Gnosticism" can be misleading. More often than not, the impression is created that "Gnosticism" formed a front different from, and opposed to, true Christianity (King 2003). This usage blurs the fact that most people lumped together as "Gnostics" understood themselves as Christians.

Gnostic Ideas behind New Testament texts?

Gnosticism is an especially fuzzy concept in the academic study of New Testament texts. Here Gnosticism used to be connected with views that were *rejected* by New Testament authors. It used to be assumed that Paul's opponents in 1 Corinthians, who taught that "all things are lawful for me" (1 Cor 6:12), were Christians of Gnostic variety.

The contradicting statements about sin and sinlessness in 1 John are sometimes explained in a similar manner. The author of 1 John insists that those born of God do not and even cannot sin (1 John 2:4-10), but he also instructs the readers that they should *not* say that "we have no sin" but that they should confess their sins instead (1 John 1:8-9). One explanation to the contradiction between these two views is that the author embraced sinlessness as an ideal, but condemned Christians who saw in this ideal an excuse for immoral behavior.

Even though the author of 1 John does not describe his opponents' moral errors in detail, scholars have been eager to posit a link between these opponents and the Gnostic teaching, which allegedly permitted immorality for some people. The problems with this explanation are twofold: we can't be at all sure what the author's opponents taught, and the image of Gnostics as approving of, and practicing, immoral behavior is based on malevolent rumors coming from polemical texts written much later than 1 John.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that some New Testament authors, including Paul and the author of John's gospel, borrowed some ideas from Gnostic thought, such as the portrayal of Christ as the "man of heaven" (thus Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:48) and the heavenly revealer descending from, and ascending back to, God (thus John's gospel). It used to be assumed that both teachings presuppose a more elaborate myth of God's messenger on earth, and that this myth was in some way "Gnostic."

The Nag Hammadi Library

Such theories about the Gnostic background of New Testament texts have become outdated since they are based on views about Gnosticism that were prevalent in scholarship prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt in 1945. This collection comprises 13 volumes of first-hand sources, that is, texts written by people whose views were previously known from their opponents' polemical works.

The Nag Hammadi Library was put together in the late fourth century CE, and all texts in it are in Coptic language (the last form of Egyptian). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that many texts in this collection were originally composed in Greek, some already in the second and the third century CE. In some cases, this can be proven beyond doubt: there are earlier Greek fragments for some texts included in the Nag Hammadi Library, some others contain grammatical infelicities that can only be due to a Greek original, and some are mentioned or referred to in texts composed much earlier than the Nag Hammadi Library.

The Nag Hammadi Library is *not* a collection of Gnostic texts only, although it is often described as such. There are a number of texts in which cosmic myths similar to those taught by the aforementioned Gnostics are related, but there are also many texts in which such myths play no role whatsoever. Most texts in the library are *Christian* in the sense that Jesus is in them the main character as the revealer of things divine, and his disciples frequently appear as recipients and transmitters of this

revelation. The most usual form of such texts is revelation dialogue, in which Jesus' teaching is interrupted by the disciples' short questions. In addition, there are many other types of texts, such as treatises, myths, prayers, and liturgical instructions.

A large majority of the texts in the library were previously unknown. The library contains no copies of biblical texts, but they are quoted and explained in some of the library's texts. There are also some non-Christian texts in this collection. One volume (NHC VI) features an excerpt from Plato's *Republic* and passages from Hermetic texts. In addition, there are other texts in this library where neither Christ nor the disciples are mentioned at all. It is debated whether their authors were Christians or not.

One of these texts, *Eugnostos the Blessed*, is an especially intriguing case: someone found it necessary to "Christianize" this text by turning it into a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples; the resulting text is called *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ.* It is striking that the latter text did not replace the former; both texts are placed after each other in one volume of the Nag Hammadi Library (NHC III).

It is important to note that the Nag Hammadi Library is not the only existing collection of this sort. There are other, smaller collections of Coptic texts with similar tenets. The most famous of them are the *Berlin Gnostic Codex* (*Berlinus Gnosticus*, BG) and the *Codex Tchacos* (CT). The publication of the latter collection in 2006 made headlines since it contains the *Gospel of Judas.* These collections show that such texts must have enjoyed great popularity in Egypt in early centuries CE.

Sethians

In light of the Nag Hammadi Library, two major strands in "mythic" early Christianity were so-called Sethians and the school of Valentinus. While the latter group was well known already prior to the library from other sources, one of the most important results of Nag Hammadi studies has been the discovery of Sethian theology and its vast importance. At least ten texts in the Nag Hammadi library represent this current (*The Secret Book of John*; *The Nature of the Rulers*; *The Gospel of Egyptians*; *The Revelation of Adam*; *The Three Steles of Seth*; *Zostrianos*; *Melchizedek*; *The Thought of Norea*; *Marsanes*; *Allogenes*; *Three Forms of First Thought*). Some of these texts show remarkably close similarities with the mythic theology of the aforementioned Gnostics.

The group of people now called "Sethians" did not use this name for themselves but they called themselves (or sometimes all humans) "the seed of Seth." Seth was in the biblical creation story the third son of Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:25). In Sethian mythology, Seth transmits to humankind the secret revelation Adam received from the supreme God.

In Sethian mythology, divinity is described as a trinity consisting of Father, Mother and Son. "Mother" is another name for Father's first thought, which set the creation of the divine world in motion. It is emphasized in Sethian texts that the Father of all cannot be grasped with human reasoning:

> The One is not corporeal and it is not incorporeal.
> The One is not large and is not small.
> It is impossible to say,
> How much is it?
> What [kind is it]?
> For no one can understand it. (*Secret John*, NHC II, 3; trans. Marvin Meyer).

The inferior creator-God is in Sethian texts called Yaldabaoth. While it's unclear what this Semitic name means ("a child of chaos"? "the father of Sabaoth"?), this god is identified with the Jewish God described in the Hebrew Bible. The Sethian picture of this god is a very negative one. Just like God in the Hebrew Bible, Yaldabaoth claims to be the only god: "I am a jealous god and there is no other god beside me." (*Secret John*, NHC II, 13; cf. Isaiah 45:5-6; 46:9). Yet unlike in the Hebrew Bible, this self-acclamation is presented as empty boasting, only due to Yaldabaoth's ignorance of the higher God: "For if there were no other god, of whom would he be jealous?" (*Secret John* 13).

Yet another characteristic feature of Yaldabaoth and his angelic minions, who assisted him in the creation of the world, is unprohibited sexual desire. When the true God sent Eve to Adam to instruct him, Yaldabaoth "defiled" her image by having intercourse with her. As the result, the whole humankind was infected with obsessive sexual lust (*Secret John* 24). Sexual desire, however, was only one of several things by which Yaldabaoth and other evil angels sought to lull humankind into the state of forgetfulness; luxury items ("gold, silver, gifts, copper, iron, metal and all sorts of things") were also introduced for this purpose (*Secret John* 29).

Although the present state of humankind in this world is described in dark colors in Sethian texts, they also show a way out from this state. Christ is described as the heavenly revealer who comes down to "the realm of darkness" and raises humans up from their ignorance:

> I said, Let whoever hears arise from deep sleep.
> A person wept and shed tears Bitter tears the person wept away, and said, "Who is calling my name? From where has my hope come as I dwell in the bondage of prison." (*Secret John* 31, trans. Meyer.)

The conversion described here is not merely an intellectual one but it also involved a baptism, in which the awakened person was "sealed." Some other Sethian texts are very much focused on this ritual, envisaging a number of baptisms to be performed at different levels of one's spiritual progress (one example: *Zostrianos*, NHC VIII).

The origins of Sethian thought and mythology cannot be traced with certainty. The use of Semitic names for key characters in the Sethian myth suggest that its roots lie in some form of ancient Judaism. In addition, some Sethian authors seem to have been familiar with non-biblical Jewish apocalypses and share with them the tendency to rewrite and expand the biblical creation stories. It is, however, difficult to explain against this background why Sethian thought became so clearly adverse to key Jewish beliefs. For the most part, the evidence for Sethians shows Christian features (such as the crucial role ascribed to Christ as the heavenly revealer), but there are some Sethian texts where Christian traits are less clearly visible or entirely absent. It has been proposed on the basis of such texts that Sethian thought gradually became less Christian and more aligned with non-Christian philosophy (Turner 2001).

The School of Valentinus

Valentinus was an early Christian teacher who moved from Egypt to Rome c. 130 CE. He is considered the founder of an early Christian group that became quite popular in different parts of the Roman empire. Valentinus' own views are poorly

known; less than a dozen brief passages from his works survive in his opponents' works. Valentinus, however, had a few prominent followers whose views were more fully described in writings of early Christian heresy-hunters.

The Nag Hammadi Library confirms the importance of the school of Valentinus. At least eight of the library's texts come from people linked with this group (*The Prayer of the Apostle Paul*; *The Gospel of Truth*; *The Treatise on Resurrection*; *The Tripartite Tractate*; *The Gospel of Philip*; *The First Revelation of James*; *The Interpretation of Knowledge*; *Valentinian Exposition with Liturgical Readings*).

Some members in the school of Valentinus were as keen mythmakers as Sethians. Valentinians shared with Sethians the myth of Wisdom's error that resulted in the emergence of the creator-God and the creation of our world, but Valentinians were much less extreme in their interpretations of this myth. They didn't identify the creator-God with the Devil, as Sethians did. In the Valentinian myth, the creator-God is ignorant of the truly divine realm but benevolent towards humankind. In addition, Valentinians taught that the divine Wisdom constantly supervised the creator-God's work. This must mean that Valentinians didn't consider the present world an awfully bad place to live in.

Valentinians stood closer than Sethians to the forms of Christianity that won the day in history. In fact, the opponents complained that it was difficult to tell a Valentinians from an "ordinary" Christian since Valentinians attended the same meetings as other Christians.

Valentinians did compose new texts about Jesus, but they also worked on New Testament gospels. One Valentinian teacher, Heracleon, wrote the first known commentary on John's gospel, and another one, Ptolemaeus wrote a study on the Old Testament law (*Letter to Flora*), in which he supported his arguments with the teachings of Jesus and Paul. Valentinians even partially recognized the value of the Hebrew Bible: it contains the divine Wisdom's true revelation--but also parts stemming from the creator-God and other parts stemming from humans (like Moses).

The opponents described Valentinians as elitist Christians who thought more highly of themselves than of others. According to the opponents, Valentinians were inspired by Paul's division between "spiritual" and "natural" (lit. soul-endowed) Christians. For instance, Paul had said that "those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one's else scrutiny" (1 Cor. 2:15). The opponents said that Valentinians considered themselves spiritual Christians, but placed all other Christians into the inferior class of soul-endowed people. Moreover, the opponents claimed that Valentinians regarded membership in these classes as natural-born qualities, so it was impossible to be promoted from the inferior to the superior class.

The opponents accused Valentinians that they, as self-styled spiritual Christians, gave themselves license to do whatever they wanted, while they demanded strict moral discipline from others. The moral errors of Valentinians included seducing married women, eating meat offered to idols, and visiting gladiator shows. Such accusations were probably rumors rather than facts. In specific, claims about the opponents' uncontrolled sexual lives were commonplace in ancient polemics against any kind of groups of people, including those of different nationality, and those who held different convictions.

The Valentinian texts in the Nag Hammadi Library confirm that many Valentinians were interested in expressing their theology in the form of cosmic myth, but these texts give a quite different picture of Valentinian morality. Valentinian

authors encouraged their readers to show good deeds to others: "Steady the feet of those who stumble and extend your hands to the sick. Feed the hungry and give rest to the weary. Awaken those who wish to arise and arouse those who sleep, for you embody vigorous understanding." (*The Gospel of Truth*, NHC I, 3, 33.)

One Valentinian text, however, shows that at least some Valentinians approved of the distinction between more and less mature Christians. In the Valentinian *Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI, 1), those lacking the spiritual gift are included into a Christian community, but they are not entitled to speak in the community's meetings

While the opponents described Valentinians as misbehaving elitists, a closer look shows that Valentinians were interested in the cultivation of the soul in a way that made it turn away from matter and material things and towards spiritual realities. Even in the Valentinian myth, much attention was paid to mental disturbance brought about by wrong kind of emotions, and Valentinians promoted Christ as the healer of such emotions. This links the Valentinian teaching closely with the philosophers of their time who often styled themselves as doctors of the soul (Dunderberg 2008).

Secret Gospels: Thomas, Mary and Judas

The newly discovered Coptic texts also contain a number of writings that are called "gospels" already in the original manuscripts. The best known examples of such texts are the gospels of Thomas, Mary, and Judas. Only the *Gospel of Thomas* comes from the Nag Hammadi Library. The *Gospel of Mary* is included in the Berlin Gnostic Codex and the *Gospel of Judas* in the Codex Tchacos.

All these gospels are different, each in their own way, from New Testament gospels, for they offer no consistent narrative from Jesus' baptism to his death and resurrection. The *Gospel of Thomas* comprises 114 sayings of Jesus; only a few of them contain short dialogues between Jesus and his disciples. The *Gospel of Mary* offers an account of Mary's vision, in which Jesus imparted her privileged information that Mary now, after the resurrection, transmits to other disciples. The *Gospel of Judas* is an account of Jesus' discussions with his disciples in the week preceding his death.

"Gospel," thus, was not yet a fixed literary genre when these texts were written. The gospels of Mary and Judas are in many respects similar to other texts that are variably entitled as "revelation" (*apokalypsis*) or "secret book" (*apocryphon*), and even some later "acts" of individual apostles contain similar elements.

The *Gospel of Thomas* was put together in the end of the first century or in the beginning of the second. There are a few Greek fragments of this gospel, the earliest of which is from around 200CE. The fragments show that the Greek version of this gospel was in circulation already in the second century. Some sayings in the gospel may be dependent on the synoptic gospels, but there are no clear signs that its author(s) knew John's gospel. Most scholars agree that the *Gospel of Thomas* does not offer much new information about the historical Jesus' teaching. (The Jesus Seminar, which is sometimes accused of being too friendly with the *Gospel of Thomas*, lists only one saying in this gospel that has no synoptic parallel as possibly going back to Jesus!)

The *Gospel of Thomas* is more valuable as a witness to a form of non-apocalyptic early Christianity in which Jesus' role as a teacher of spiritual insight was emphasized. The *Gospel of Thomas*, however, is not a Gnostic gospel. It neither

contains cosmic myths similar to “Gnostics’” nor does it embrace the idea of an inferior creator-God.

The *Gospel of Thomas* encourages the reader to reflect upon the teaching stored in it: “Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.” (*Gos. Thom.* 1). The apocalyptic expectation of an other-wordly kingdom is ridiculed and replaced with the idea of self-knowledge: “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. . . . When you know yourselves, you will be known and you will understand that you are children of the living Father.” (*Gos. Thom.* 3; cf. 113)

The self-knowledge is based upon the recognition of one’s divine origin: “We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself] and appeared in their image.” (*Gos. Thom.* 50.) The true self is one’s inner human being. The Gospel of Thomas does not propagate a real hatred of body (Uro 2003), but it is concerned with the soul that clings to “the flesh” (*Gos. Thom.* 112), and it sees in the visible world a carcass (*Gos. Thom.* 56).

The *Gospel of Thomas* is very critical of traditional Jewish practices, such as circumcision, fasting, and even prayer. Still, the gospel illustrates the original state, to which all humans should return, with images referring to the biblical account of the paradise: “For there are five threes in paradise for you; they do not change, summer of winter, and their leaves do not fall. Whoever knows them will not taste death.” (*Gos. Thom.* 19.) The idea of paradise also forms the background to the view that God’s kingdom is realized when the distinction between male and female disappears (*Gos. Thom.* 22). This teaching reflects a Jewish tradition that the very first human comprised both sexes, and that the sexual difference came about only Eve was created; *Thomas* teaches the return to the most original state of humankind, at which this difference didn’t yet exist.

The *Gospel of Mary* was composed sometime in the second century. The Coptic version of this gospel is not complete; a number of its pages have disappeared. Two short Greek fragments (from the third century) show that the text was originally composed in Greek. Just like the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary* is not a Gnostic gospel: cosmic myth plays little role in it, and the inferior creator-God is entirely absent. The *Gospel of Mary*, however, shows clearer signs than the *Gospel of Thomas* of being dependent on New Testament gospels.

The *Gospel of Mary* portrays Mary of Magdala as the closest follower of Jesus who after his departure encouraged other disciples: “Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you and will shelter you.” (*Gos. Mary* 9.) What is striking in this gospel is that it addresses the value of women’s teaching. Peter first compliments Mary as one whom the Savior loved “more than all other women” and asks her to “tell us the words of the Savior” (*Gos. Mary* 10). Yet after having heard Mary’s account of how the soul defeats its adversaries, Peter (together with other disciples) is not at all pleased but heaps scorn at Mary because she is a woman: “Did (the Savior) . . . speak with a woman without our knowing about it?” (*Gos. Mary* 17) Mary must defend herself, and Levi (Matthew) joins her: “Assuredly the Savior’s knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why he loved her more than us” (*Gos. Mary* 18).

Such features in the *Gospel of Mary* may be understood as a critical response to the policy recommended in the Pastoral epistles that women should remain silent in the meetings of Christians: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a meen; she is to keep silent” (1

Timothy 2:11-12). It should be noted that the *Gospel of Mary* does *not* portray Mary as Jesus' wife or lover; she's depicted as his most perceptive disciple instead.

The *Gospel of Judas* became known only when the Codex Tchacos (named after the owner of this collection) was published in 2006. The gospel was marketed as revealing that Judas was Jesus' star disciple, but nobody considers this text a historically reliable account of the relationship between Jesus and Judas. This gospel was composed in the second century, for Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, knew of it already in c. 180CE.

The *Gospel of Judas* is closely linked with the Sethian theology described above; a major part of it is dedicated to a cosmic myth of Sethian bent. But why does this gospel single out Judas as Jesus' confidant? Judas was chosen for this role because the gospel's author was very unhappy with the form of Christianity that had claimed apostolic authority. The choice of Judas served to ridicule that authority: even the betrayer understood Jesus better than the apostles.

The gospel's point, thus, was not so much to rehabilitate Judas as it was to lay bare the errors of one kind of Christianity. One of the issues was probably martyrdom. We know from other sources that many Christian teachers urged their audiences to be ready to die for their faith. In the *Gospel of Judas*, the martyrs' zeal is turned into a horror vision of men, women, and children waiting to be slaughtered on an altar, where the disciples perform as priests. Human sacrifice is considered, in an apocalyptic fashion, as one sign that the last day is near (*Gos. Jud.* 38-41).

Judas himself is an ambiguous figure in the gospel bearing his name. On the one hand, he is the only one disciple who understands Jesus and whom Jesus teaches in private. On the other hand, this gospel agrees with New Testament gospels that Judas betrayed Jesus and handed him over to authorities for money (*Gos. Jud.* 58). Judas is also subject to the error of stars, just like other disciples and humans in general, and Jesus denies him the access to the divine realm. Judas thus seems to belong somewhere between the completely ignorant disciples and the ideal followers of Jesus. The ambiguity has led to a long scholarly debate whether Judas is in this gospel a bad guy or a good guy.

Conclusion

A closer look at groups designated as "Gnostics" shows considerable diversity among them; some groups stood closer than others to the form of Christianity that won the day in the fourth century and is for this reason best known to us.

As regards Gnosticism and the New Testament, it is very difficult to trace any reliable links between the mythic teachings described above and the theology (or polemics) of Paul and John. The only case where such connections can be seriously considered is that of the pastoral epistles, which may have been written no earlier than the beginning of the second century.

The opponents described in 1 Timothy had clearly marketed their teaching as "knowledge" since the author of this epistle combats this claim in speaking of "the profane chatter and contradictions of what is *falsely called knowledge* (*gnōsis*)" (1 Tim. 6:20). The author's other comments on the opponents suggest that they were mythmakers: the readers are warned against those teaching "myths and endless genealogies" (1. Tim. 1:3; "myths" are also mentioned in connection with rejected opinions in 1. Tim. 4:7; 2. Tim. 4:3-4). Such comments would make a good sense in connection of the Gnostic Christians described above. Yet even here the evidence remains spurious. We are not informed more closely what kind of myths the

opponents taught. One particular problem is the claim in 1 Timothy that the opponents "demand abstinence from foods" (1. Tim. 4:3); this detail would fit better with Christians who had adopted a Jewish lifestyle, while there is little evidence for such instructions among the Gnostics.

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