

THE GNOSTICISM BOOKSHELF



APOCRYPHA
ARABICA

MARGARET D. GIBSON

Apocrypha Arabica

Margaret Dunlop Gibson

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Apocrypha Arabica, M. D. Gibson
Jazzybee Verlag Jürgen Beck
86450 Altenmünster, Germany

ISBN: 9783849621766

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GNOSTICISM

Wilhelm Bousset

Gnosticism is the name generally applied to that spiritual movement existing side by side with genuine

Christianity, as it gradually crystallized into the old Catholic Church, which may roughly be defined as a distinct religious syncretism bearing the strong impress of Christian influences.

I. The term " Gnosis " first appears in a technical sense in 1 Tim. vi. 20 (i) 1/Æv&wvνμoς γνoσoυcς). It seems to have at first been applied exclusively, or at any rate principally, to a particular tendency within the movement as a whole, i.e. to those sections of (the Syrian) Gnostics otherwise generally known as Ophites or Naasseni (see Hippolytus, Philosophumena, v. 2: Naaao voi. .. of Eavrouc FvcoartKovc a1roKaXovvrEc; Irenaeus i. 11.1; Epiphanius, Haeres. xxvi. Cf. also the self-assumed name of the Carpocratiani, Iren. i. 25.6). But in Irenaeus the term has already come to designate the whole movement. This first came into prominence in the opening decades of the 2nd century A.D., but is certainly older; it reached its height in the second third of the same century, and began to wane about the 3rd century, and from the second half of the 3rd century onwards was replaced by the closely-related and more powerful Manichaean movement. Offshoots of it, however, continued on into the 4th and 5th centuries. Epiphanius still had the opportunity of making personal acquaintance with Gnostic sects.

II. Of the actual writings of the Gnostics, which were extraordinarily numerous, very little has survived; they were sacrificed to the destructive zeal of their ecclesiastical opponents. Numerous fragments and extracts from Gnostic writings are to be found in the works of the Fathers who attacked Gnosticism. Most

valuable of all are the long extracts in the 5th and 6th books of the *Philosophumena* of Hippolytus. The most accessible and best critical edition of the fragments which have been preserved word for word is to be found in Hilgenfeld's *Ketzergeschichte des Urchristentums*. One of the most important of these fragments is the letter of Ptolemaeus to Flora, preserved in Epiphanius, *Haeres.* xxxiii. 3-7 (see on this point Harnack in the *Sitzungsberichte der Berliner Akademie*, 1902, pp. 507-545). Gnostic fragments are certainly also preserved for us in the Acts of Thomas. Here we should especially mention the beautiful and much-discussed Song of the Pearl, or Song of the Soul, which is generally, though without absolute clear proof, attributed to the Gnostic Bardesanes (till lately it was known only in the Syrian text; edited and translated by Bevan, *Texts and Studies*, 2 v. 3, 1897; Hofmann, *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, iv.; for the newly-found Greek text see *Acta apostolorum*, ed. Bonnet, ii. 2, c. 108, p. 219). Generally also much Gnostic matter is contained in the apocryphal histories of the Apostles. To the school of Bardesanes belongs the "Book of the Laws of the Lands," which does not, however, contribute much to our knowledge of Gnosticism. Finally, we should mention in this connexion the text on which are based the pseudo-Clementine Homilies and Recognitions (beginning of the 3rd century). It is, of course, already permeated with the Catholic spirit, but has drawn so largely upon sources of a Judaeo-Christian Gnostic character that it comes to a great extent within the category of sources for Gnosticism. Complete original Gnostic works have unfortunately survived to us only from the period of the decadence of Gnosticism. Of these we should mention the comprehensive work called the *Pistis-Sophia*, probably belonging to the second half of the 3rd century. Further, the Coptic-Gnostic texts of the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae;

both the books of Irenaeus, and an anonymous third work (edited and translated by C. Schmidt, *Texte und Untersuchungen*, vol. viii., 1892; and a new translation by the same in *Koptische-gnostische Schriften*, i.) which, contrary to the opinion of their editor and translator, the present writer believes to represent, in their existing form, a still later period and a still more advanced stage in the decadence of Gnosticism. For other and older Coptic-Gnostic texts, in one of which is contained the source of Irenaeus's treatises on the Barbelognostics, but which have unfortunately not yet been made completely accessible, see C. Schmidt in *Sitzungsberichte der Berl. Akad.* (1896), p. 839 seq., and "Philotesia," dedicated to Paul Kleinert (1907), p. 315 seq.

On the whole, then, for an exposition of Gnosticism we are thrown back upon the polemical writings of the Fathers in their controversy with heresy. The most ancient of these is Justin, who according to his *Apol.* i. 26 wrote a *Syntagma* against all heresies (c. A.D. 150), and also, probably, a special polemic against Marcion (fragment in Irenaeus iv. 6.2). Both these writings are lost. He was followed by Irenaeus, who, especially in the first book of his treatise *Adversus haereses* (ΕΧΕ γχov Kai i.va:ponr* T1jS 1/Æ UScobyov 'yvCJQEWS Otf3XLa 7rEPTE, c. A.D. 180), gives a detailed account of the Gnostic heresies. He founds his work upon that of his master Justin, but adds from his own knowledge among many other things, notably the detailed account of Valentinianism at the beginning of the book. On Irenaeus, and probably also on Justin, Hippolytus drew for his *Syntagma* (beginning of the 3rd century), a work which is also lost, but can, with great certainty, be reconstructed from three recensions of it: in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius (after 374), in Philaster of

Brescia, *Adversus haereses*, and the Pseudo-Tertullian, *Liber adversus omnes haereses*. A second work of Hippolytus (Κατα Γρααμμάτων ἑκείνων Ἐκείνων) is preserved in the so-called *Philosophumena* which survives under the name of Origen. Here Hippolytus gave a second exposition supplemented by fresh Gnostic original sources with which he had become acquainted in the meanwhile. These sources quoted in Hippolytus have lately met with very unfavourable criticisms. The opinion has been advanced that Hippolytus has here fallen a victim to the mystification of a forger. The truth of the matter must be that Hippolytus probably made use of a collection of Gnostic texts, put together by a Gnostic, in which were already represented various secondary developments of the genuine Gnostic schools. It is also possible that the compiler has himself attempted here and there to harmonize to a certain extent the various Gnostic doctrines, yet in no case is this collection of sources given by Hippolytus to be passed over; it should rather be considered as important evidence for the beginnings of the decay of Gnosticism. Very noteworthy references to Gnosticism are also to be found scattered up and down the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria. Especially important are the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, the author of which is certainly Clement, which are verbally extracted from Gnostic writings, and have almost the value of original sources. The writings of Origen also contain a wealth of material. In the first place should be mentioned the treatise *Contra Celsum*, in which the expositions of Gnosticism by both Origen and Celsus are of interest (see especially v. 61 seq. and vi. 25 seq.). Of Tertullian's works should be mentioned: *De praescriptione haereticorum*, especially *Adversus Marcionem*, *Adversus Hermogenem*, and finally *Adversus Valentinianos* (entirely founded on Irenaeus). Here must also be mentioned the dialogue of Adamantius with the Gnostics, *De recta in*

deum fide (beginning of 4th century). Among the followers of Hippolytus, Epiphanius in his Panarion gives much independent and valuable information from his own knowledge of contemporary Gnosticism. But Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 455) is already entirely dependent on previous works and has nothing new to add. With the 4th century both Gnosticism and the polemical literature directed against it die out.

III. If we wish to grasp the peculiar character of the great Gnostic movement, we must take care not to be led astray by the catchword " Gnosis." It is a mistake to regard the Gnostics as pre-eminently the representatives of intellect among Christians, and Gnosticism as an intellectual tendency chiefly concerned with philosophical speculation, the reconciliation of religion with philosophy and theology. It is true that when Gnosticism was at its height it numbered amongst its followers both theologians and men of science, but that is not its main characteristic. Among the majority of the followers of the movement " Gnosis " was understood not as meaning " knowledge " or " understanding," in our sense of the word, but " revelation." These little Gnostic sects and groups all lived in the conviction that they possessed a secret and mysterious knowledge, in no way accessible to those outside, which was not to be proved or propagated, but believed in by the initiated, and anxiously guarded as a secret. This knowledge of theirs was not based on reflection, on scientific inquiry and proof, but on revelation. It was derived directly from the times of primitive Christianity; from the Saviour himself and his disciples and friends, with whom they claimed to be connected by a secret tradition, or else from later prophets, of whom many sects boasted. It was laid down

in wonderful mystic writings, which were in the possession of the various circles (Liechtenhahn, *Die Offenbarung im Gnosticismus*, 1901).

In short, Gnosticism, in all its various sections, its form and its character, falls under the great category of mystic religions, which were so characteristic of the religious life of decadent antiquity. In Gnosticism as in the other mystic religions we find the same contrast of the initiated and the uninitiated, the same loose organization, the same kind of petty sectarianism and mystery-mongering. All alike boast a mystic revelation and a deeply-veiled wisdom. As in many mystical religions, so in Gnosticism, the ultimate object is individual salvation, the assurance of a fortunate destiny for the soul after death. As in the others, so in this the central object of worship is a redeemer-deity who has already trodden the difficult way which the faithful have to follow. And finally, as in all mystical religions, so here too, holy rites and formulas, acts of initiation and consecration, all those things which we call sacraments, play a very prominent part. The Gnostic religion is full of such sacraments. In the accounts of the Fathers we find less about them; yet here Irenaeus' account of the Marcosians is of the highest significance (i. 21 seq.). Much more material is to be found in the original Gnostic writings, especially in the *Pistis Sophia* and the two books of Ieu, and again in the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, the *Acts of Thomas*, and here and there also in the pseudo-Clementine writings. Above all we can see from the original sources of the Mandaean religion, which also represents a branch of Gnosticism, how great a part the sacraments played in the Gnostic sects (Brandt, *Mandäische Religion*, p. 96 seq.). Everywhere we are met with the most varied forms of

holy rites - the various baptisms, by water, by fire, by the spirit, the baptism for protection against demons, anointing with oil, sealing and stigmatizing, piercing the ears, leading into the bridal chamber, partaking of holy food and drink. Finally, sacred formulas, names and symbols are of the highest importance among the Gnostic sects. We constantly meet with the idea that the soul, on leaving the body, finds its path to the highest heaven opposed by the deities and demons of the lower realms of heaven, and only when it is in possession of the names of these demons, and can repeat the proper holy formula, or is prepared with the right symbol, or has been anointed with the holy oil, finds its way unhindered to the heavenly home. Hence the Gnostic must above all things learn the names of the demons, and equip himself with the sacred formulas and symbols, in order to be certain of a good destiny after death. The exposition of the system of the Ophites given by Celsus (in Origen vi. 25 seq.), and, in connexion with Celsus, by Origen, is particularly instructive on this point. The two " Coptic leu " books unfold an immense system of names and symbols. This system again was simplified, and as the supreme secret was taught in a single name or a single formula, by means of which the happy possessor was able to penetrate through all the spaces of heaven (cf. the name " Caulacau " among the Basilidians; Irenaeus, Adv. hoer. i. 24.5, and among other sects). It was taught that even the redeemer-god, when he once descended on to this earth, to rise from it again, availed himself of these names and formulas on his descent and ascent through the world of demons. Traces of ideas of this kind are to be met with almost everywhere. They have been most carefully collected by Anz (Ursprung des Gnosticismus, Texte and Untersuchungen xv. 4 passim) who would see in them the central doctrine of Gnosticism.

IV. All these investigations point clearly to the fact that Gnosticism belongs to the group of mystical religions. We must now proceed to define more exactly the peculiar and distinctive character of the Gnostic system. The basis of the Gnostic religion and world-philosophy lies in a decided Oriental dualism. In sharp contrast are opposed the two worlds of the good and of the evil, the divine world and the material world (an), the worlds of light and of darkness. In many systems there seems to be no attempt to derive the one world from the other. The true Basilides, perhaps also Saturnil, Marcion and a part of his disciples, Bardesanes and others, were frankly dualists. In the case of other systems, owing to the inexactness of our information, we are unable to decide; the later systems of Mandaeism and Manichaeism, so closely related to Gnosticism, are also based upon a decided dualism. And even when there is an attempt at reconciliation, it is still quite clear how strong was the original dualism which has to be overcome. Thus the Gnostic systems make great use of the idea of a fall of the Deity himself; by the fall of the Godhead into the world of matter, this matter, previously insensible, is animated into life and activity, and then arise the powers, both partly and wholly hostile, who hold sway over this world. Such figures of fallen divinities, sinking down into the world of matter are those of Sophia (i.e. Ahamoth) among the Gnostics (Ophites) in the narrower sense of the word, the Simoniani (the figure of Helena), the Barbelognostics, and in the system of the Pistis Sophia or the Primal Man, among the Naasseni and the sect, related to them, as described by Hippolytus. A further weakening of the dualism is indicated when, in the systems of the Valentinian school, the fall of Sophia takes place within the godhead, and Sophia, inflamed