Christianity Seminar
Reflections on the Category Gnosticism

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Contributors

Maia Kotrosits is Assistant Professor of Religion, Classics, and Queer Studies at Denison University in Granville, Ohio. She received her Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York and co-chairs the steering committee of Westar’s Christianity Seminar. She has published three books, the most recent of which is Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging (Fortress, 2015), and has published in a wide variety of academic venues, including the Journal of the Academy of American Religion, Journal of Culture and Religion, and The Bible and Critical Theory.


Michael A. Williams received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1977. He is Professor of Comparative Religion and Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he has been on the faculty since 1976. In addition to his numerous journal articles, he is the author of The Immovable Race (1985) and Rethinking “Gnosticism” (1996), as well as editor of Charisma and Sacred Biography (1982) and co-editor (with Martin
Jaffee and Collett Cox) of *Innovation in Religious Traditions* (1992). He is currently working on a book exploring the implications of heterodox cosmologies for social behavior in selected traditions and communities from late antiquity to the modern era.
Preface

Taking on the topic of gnosticism for the fall 2014 meeting of the Christianity Seminar was a gesture at much more than simply disposing of a single category. It was a gesture at writing the history of the first and second centuries more expansively, measuring the pulse of that period with finer instruments. We took on the arguments of the most cutting edge intellectual projects on the topic: David Brakke’s *The Gnostics*, Karen King’s *What is Gnosticism?*, and Michael Williams’s *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*. While David Brakke has circumscribed the use of the term “gnostic” into much more responsible limits, the seminar generally followed the more radical work of King’s *What is Gnosticism?* and Williams’s *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* by acknowledging that “gnosticism,” if not also “gnostic,” was a modern term that hindered rather than helped to make sense of the first- and second-century social and textual landscapes.

Our collective conversation was an exercise in continually pushing ourselves to think outside of discrete phenomena and essentializing terms—in part because they kept creeping in, even for the most diehard deconstructionists among us. We asked less about the rich contents of the texts from the Nag Hammadi codices (perhaps unfortunately) than about the problems of classification at large. But our conclusions as a seminar allow us to entertain the rich contents as we move forward in our historical reconstructive work. Thus we will build on this work in future seminars by asking the following questions: What do texts discovered at Nag Hammadi and other texts classified under “gnosticism” offer as historical sources on their own terms? How do they challenge our preconceived notions of the social and theological investments of the people we think of as “early Christians”? How do they recast the more familiar literature of the NT, for example, when put into explicit conversation with it? That is to say, this seminar on gnosticism paved the way for more integrative and grand-scale historical inquiry. Our conversation was thick and earnest, but excited and sometimes befuddled in addressing the larger question of what we might do when categories of all kinds (not just gnosticism, or heresy and orthodoxy, but Christianity itself) fall apart.

The papers published here offer a taste of this conversation, one which not only opens up the seminar’s work to myriad possibilities for new textual, social, and practical connections operating in the ancient world, but also presents us with new challenges to our traditional thinking about what the object of our study might really be.

— Maia Kotrosits
Questioning the Category of Gnosticism for the Rewriting of the History of Early Christianity

An Appreciation and Extension of the Work of Karen King

Hal Taussig

In order to comprehend the dynamic process by which Christianity was formed, it is necessary to set aside the winners’ account of that period and attempt to place ourselves in the midst of debates whose outcome was not yet certain.¹

As the Westar Institute’s Christianity Seminar begins in earnest to understand the second century and join the efforts in the larger guild to rethink the history of early Christianity without the blinders of canon and creed, we face major re-conceptualizing tasks. It turns out that the master narrative of early Christianity is neither naïve nor critical in its own construction, but rather grounded in discursive moves designed to hide at least as much as it “reveals” about the history of the first four centuries. As a Seminar we have begun to rethink categories such as Judaism, Christianity, church, orthodoxy, and heresy, although this process is far from finished. In the fall 2014 session for the first time we took on a specific and crucial term used in the twentieth-century version of the master Christian narrative. That term is “gnosticism.”

“Gnosticism,” “gnosis,” and “gnostic” have been central scholarly terms for more than a century. Although this essay primarily focuses on the term “gnosticism,” it necessarily treats to some extent the other two. This essay wants mostly to help think about whether there was an actual historical phenomenon anytime in the first through third centuries that can be fairly described as “gnosticism.” Or put in a somewhat different epistemological perspective, can the term “gnosticism” act as a reliable critical category for the analysis of first-, second-, or third-century Mediterranean history?

The last forty years have witnessed consistent, if minority, stirrings that questioned the analytical viability of the term “gnosticism,” mostly in technical

¹King, The Secret Revelation of John, 2.
studies of specific and most recently discovered texts. But in the last twenty years several scholars have brought together many of these stirrings into direct challenges to this term’s usefulness. And as a result of both the gradual trends in specific textual analysis and the larger straightforward challenges, for the first time we now see a broad range of suspicion building that “gnosticism” may not serve most analysis and reimagining of the early Jesus/Christ(ian) movements well enough.

In this essay I concentrate on the work of Karen King, certainly one of the most thorough and incisive analysts of the category of “gnosticism.” Since the fall 2014 Westar meeting also had an essay on King’s The Secret Revelation of John, I primarily concentrate on her What Is Gnosticism? and then return relatively briefly to her most recent book, The Secret Revelation of John, for the purposes of showing how both these latest books from her on this topic form a tightly woven pair of considerations. To limit the discussion to these works is simply strategic, since the unfolding of her steady scholarship on these matters in print since at least 1988 is worthy of much more attention, but beyond the scope of this discussion. Her work, both recently and in much of her more-than-two-decades of scholarship on gnosticism, has had important relationships to the work of two other fall 2014 Seminar presenters as well, and I leave here discussion of that work to those colleagues in that fall meeting.

Finally, while it becomes obvious that I find King’s work on the category of gnosticism a quantum scholarly leap forward whose importance is almost impossible to appreciate enough, I also have a few disagreements with the work. These disagreements are mostly around places where I think that her arguments need to be extended. I discuss these disagreements in my conclusion, where I attempt to draw implications for the work of the Christianity Seminar.

2. Several examples of this process include the following: (1) Minna Heimola’s 2011 book Christian Identity in the Gospel of Philip is one of many recent studies of that gospel that distance themselves from the early consensus that it was very “gnostic.” (2) Re-readings of the Gospel of Thomas in the past twenty-five years, especially in historical Jesus studies, quickly and then thoroughly led to studies of the Gospel of Thomas that had nothing to do with gnosticism. (3) First feminist, then spiritualist, readings of the Gospel of Mary took it away from its early nomination as yet another gnostic gospel.

3. In the rest of this essay as an issue of style I have now deleted the quotation marks around the word gnosticism. This is not because I have changed my mind about the inutility of the word as an adequate analytical category, but simply because of the clumsiness of the more than 170 times the word is used herein.


5. In relationship to my overview of King’s work on this subject, Michael Williams’s 1999 work, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, relates significantly to the important work he and King did during the 1990s. The Williams volume precedes King’s What Is Gnosticism? by a decade. David Brakke’s 2012 work, The Gnostics, takes King’s latest two books perhaps the most seriously in print of any recent scholar, but parses them somewhat differently than I do. Brakke’s book was also extensively treated in a book review by King.
A Summary of Karen King's *What Is Gnosticism?*

I am not used to writing book reports at this stage of my career but am happy for this essay to be considered in that genre. I claim this genre for this effort for three reasons:

1. The larger guild(s) of NT and early Christian studies has/have not caught up with this work, so I provide this as a gentle reminder.
2. *What Is Gnosticism?* is the first book of an elegant pair by King that we considered at the fall 2014 meeting.
3. I hope to have made this book report slightly more interesting at its end, as I engage more strategic questions concerning the implications of the book for both the guild(s) and the Westar Institute’s Christianity Seminar.

*What is Gnosticism?* walks its readers through the history of scholarship on its topic. King’s summary does not take shortcuts, and respect for each stage of scholarship is abundant, even when King’s assessments eventually undermine many of each stage’s assumptions and results.

**Gnosticism and Heresy**

It is significant that at the beginning of her review of the history of scholarship (a whopping sixty percent of the whole volume) King lays out her primary and basic proposal that applies to the whole of scholarship on gnosticism:

> When modern historians adopt the same strategies as well as the content of the polemicists’ construction of heresy to define Gnosticism, they are not just reproducing the heresy of the polemicists; they are themselves propagating the politics of orthodoxy and heresy. We should not therefore be surprised to observe twentieth-century historians using the category of Gnosticism to establish the bounds of normative Christianity—whether in Protestant anti-Catholic polemic, intra-Protestant debate, or the colonial politics of Orientalism ... [S]pecialists in Gnostic studies now clearly recognize the problems in defining Gnosticism, but the ways in which the ancient discourses about heresy are threaded through contemporary historiography is much less clear.

> The language, themes, and strategies of orthodoxy and heresy proved to be a powerful discourse, persisting in various forms up to our own day. My purpose in this book is to show how twentieth-century scholarship on Gnosticism has simultaneously reinscribed, elaborated, and deviated from this discourse. The first revisionary step was the one that has perhaps had the greatest effect: by substituting the term “Gnosticism” for one type of heresy, Henry More and those who followed him established this theme as a perennial topic of church history.6

King agrees with most scholarship that English theologian Henry More in the seventeenth century was probably the first person to use the term gnosticism. That is, any testimony to something called gnosticism began more than a millennium after the period in which it was alleged to have existed. But King’s chapter on “Adolf von Harnack and the Essence of Christianity” makes it clear that it was Harnack’s scholarship and leading status in nineteenth-century Germany that brought the term to the fore and identified it as the primary early Christian heresy. Here too with both equanimity and open admiration for many of Harnack’s contributions to critical scholarship on the emergence of early Christianity, King maps out what Harnack meant by gnosticism as early Christian heresy and how he arrived at such a conclusion. In this portrait it is clear that Harnack’s definition of gnosticism was quite different in content than the twentieth-century scholarship that followed him. At the same time in retrospect and with the help of King’s analysis, it is equally clear how Harnack’s ambition to define Christianity for the nineteenth century through a rhetorical embrace of gnosticism imbricated gnosticism in both subsequent scholarship and twentieth-century Christian identity discourse itself. As King lays it out:

Harnack appropriated many elements from the ancient Christian discourses of identity formation, but he adapted significant variations on these themes as well. He followed the [ancient] polemicists’ pattern of allowing a single term—now “Gnosticism” rather than “heresy”—to encompass with ease considerable heterogeneity. He was well aware of the lack of internal uniformity in the phenomena classified as Gnostic, yet he held that these phenomena shared a common culture and a common function: “the acute Hellenization of Christianity.” Like heresy, Gnosticism was not a living entity, but rather a rhetorical tool that worked to produce a normative version of Christianity.

Moreover, for Harnack “Hellenization” clearly implied pagan contamination, and he engaged in a thoroughly antisyncretistic discourse in treating this contamination … He lamented the assimilation of … the worship of saints into Catholicism, and he contrasted Christianity as a living experience in true Protestantism with Christianity as a moribund superstition tied to cult, sacraments, ceremony, and obedience in Catholicism. In this way, Harnack tended to associate Catholicism with paganism, even as Henry More had when he coined the term “Gnosticism” in the seventeenth century …

By conflating Catholicism with paganism, Harnack could exploit the polemicists’ strategies of heresy … Despite the chronological discrepancies—most notably that Protestantism is demonstrably later than Catholicism—Harnack rhetorically portrayed the goal of Protestantism as the ideal approximation of the original form of Christianity …

Harnack’s disciplined, historical analysis encompassed a stunning breadth of early Christian materials and resulted in many innovative and important insights. But we need to be aware of the ways Harnack utilized many of the rhetorical strategies of ancient Christian identity to anchor his own views of normative Christianity in liberal Protestantism … Gnosticism as “the acute
Hellenization of Christianity” was a product of all these historical insights and rhetorical intersections.7

Near the end of the book, King’s summary of how twentieth-century scholarship has substituted gnosticism for heresy draws on her processing of the history of scholarship in the intervening 150 pages:

By perceiving how thoroughly the study of Gnosticism is tied to defining normative Christianity, we have been able to analyze where and how the academic study of Gnosticism in the twentieth century reinscribes and reproduces the ancient discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. We can also see shifts in that discourse where modern discourses of historicism and colonialism have intersected it. Such shifts fit very comfortably into the pattern that Michel Foucault has led us to expect when examining the history of discourse. Rather than lines of causal continuity, we see substitutions, transformations, disjunctures, incompatibilities, and entanglements. Gnosticism was substituted for heresy as the object of the discourse. The functions of this object were transformed, at times working to establish Christian identity … Yet the function of this discourse has remained unchanged: to represent the other. The study of Gnosticism is thus imbricated in intellectual discourses and power relations that extend far beyond any notion of disinterested objectivity and often far beyond the explicit intentions of individual scholars.8

The discursive rather than analytical function of gnosticism and the substitutionary role gnosticism has for “heresy” are also underlined throughout her book by the failure of any nineteenth- or twentieth-century generation to clearly define gnosticism. She summarizes and assesses this failure in her concluding chapter:

[T]he variety of phenomena classified as “Gnostic” simply will not support a single, monolithic definition, and in fact none of the primary materials fits the standard typological definition [italics King] … Such lists are culled from a wide variety of materials and therefore do not necessarily describe any of them in particular. The same is true for “The Gnostic myth.” It too is a synthetic product that the history of religions scholars assembled from widely disparate materials in Mandaean, Manichean, Persian, and heresiological sources … [I]t in fact succeeded only in giving the false impression of a monolithic Gnostic myth spread across a wide geographic and culturally heterogeneous area.

Because none of the texts contains all the listed characteristics … [s]ome scholars emphasize a single characteristic as determinative, such as anticosmic dualism, consubstitutionality of the human with the divine, or salvation by knowledge, though a particularly popular choice has been the distinction between the true God and the creator God of Genesis. Others list a set of characteristics

whose combination signals a phenomenon to be Gnostic. This method has also
given rise to the unfortunate compromise terms like “proto-Gnosticism,” “pre-
Gnosticism,” and “Gnostoid” to refer to phenomena that contain some, but not
all (or at least not enough of) the necessary characteristics to deserve the unre-
served designation. Such terms serve to illustrate how blurry this definitional
method is and how imprecise its results … By erasing or at least submerging the
differences among Gnostic phenomena, typology hides the problem of variety
rather than resolves it … In the end, the most important problems arising from
typological method have less to do with the improper application of the method
than with its ahistoricizing, essentializing, and homogenizing effects.9

It then should not be surprising that scholarship’s steady (but mostly uncon-
scious) shifts from historical analysis to discourse and rhetoric of heresy and
orthodoxy has had the above trouble producing clear definitions of gnosticism.

The History of Religions School
In great detail King traces the interest in gnosticism by the history of religions
school from the late nineteenth century approximately in the same time as
Harnack through the work of NT giant Rudolf Bultmann. Here a major differ-
ence in approach and methodology produced under the same banner of gnosti-
cism a strikingly different portrait both in terms of would be origins and results:

Whereas Harnack had located the impetus for the development of early
Christian dogma in the Greek spirit, scholars in the history of religions school
would turn increasingly to the folk religion of Iran, Babylonia, and even India
for the keys to the origins of pre-Christian Gnosticism that would unlock the
meanings of the Gospels and Paul … History of religions scholars came to the
astonishing conclusion that Gnosticism was an independent religion whose
origin lay, not in deviant Christian heresy, but in pre-Christian, Oriental myth
and cultic piety.10

Giving credit to the creativity of their new point of departure, King’s treat-
ment of the various parties in this at least half-century-long process slowly
undoes both the method and content of the enterprise. Key to her critique at
the intersection of method and content is her application of previous work on
the problematic epistemological character of search for origins within a histo-
riographic effort. For instance, she notices how the way this research on the
so-called gnostic redeemer myth eventually ended up fashioning “a history of
the primal”11 that actually undoes historiographic integrity. Or as she says in
the conclusion to the book:

The fixation on origins has tended to distort the actual social and historical pro-
cesses of literary productions because the purpose of determining the origin of

Gnosticism is less historical than rhetorical; it is aimed at delimiting the normative boundaries and definition of Christianity.12

Ironically in King’s view, the lasting success of the school of religions’ production of gnosticism in the twentieth century may be one of the key problems of the state of current scholarship on the matter. She summarizes:

Taken collectively, the impact of … the history of religions school on the twentieth century conceptuality of Gnosticism is hard to overestimate. Their greatest achievement was to extend the study of Christianity beyond the parochial borders of church history by exploring more widely the possible intersections between Christianity and the surrounding cultures of its formative matrix. And they asked historians to consider the meaning of the Gnostic myth as a phenomenon worthy of study on its own right …

History of religion scholars left an influential legacy of innovative misconceptions and misleading characterizations of Gnosticism. Of these possibly the greatest mischief was done by the invention of the Gnostic redeemer myth, that staple of two-page summaries of Gnosticism. This stirring narrative is the product of motif-history viewed synthetically. It was constructed by taking bits and pieces from particular motifs from a variety of historical and literary contexts, and combining them into a single coherent narrative. The impression that this artificial narrative actually existed gained support from the fact that so many literary artifacts could be interpreted to fit at least some part of the myth. They then appeared as evidence for the whole story—even though in reality there is no single existing ancient literary source that gives “the Gnostic redeemer myth” as scholars have “reconstructed” (i.e. invented) it [italics King]. We might also note the irony that contemporary scholars have often characterized this myth as “artificial,” but they have seen this artificiality as the product, not of twentieth century method of historical reconstruction, but of the “half-educated” minds of ancient “Gnostics” … The fact that current scholarship has thoroughly undermined any foundation for this artificial construction has not stopped it from continuing to exert considerable influence.13

Gnosticism Reconsidered Over and Over Again

With some of the basic dimensions of the construction of gnosticism in place from her examination of Harnack and the history of religions school, King then follows carefully all of the twentieth-century considerations in her analysis. In her subsequent several chapters, her earnest and patient descriptions of a wide variety of scholarly positions are paired with assessments of each. She chronicles how despite flailing explanations and practically endless reinventions of what gnosticism was/is, the assumption that gnosticism was a real phenomenon in the ancient world nevertheless persisted. Most constructive

for our purposes, however, is the way she demonstrates a hauntingly clear picture of an idea lurching wildly, not without discipline or insight so much as tortured by fatally flawed assumptions. King’s narration and analysis showed how the various emendations of rationale for gnosticism’s reality actually form a counter-weave of various critiques from within, which (when put together) finally acts more like an undoing of coherence than an unveiling of the substance of ancient gnosticism.

She begins this stage of review with the works of two major figures: Walter Bauer and Hans Jonas. Although Bauer’s work did not concentrate on gnosticism, it is important in two regards for King. First, Bauer’s thoroughgoing critique of what he called “the ecclesiastical position” (more often called the “master narrative” in the twenty-first century) about how Christianity began has much in common with King’s (and others’) critique of the ancient and modern discursive constructions of heresy and orthodoxy. Secondly, Bauer’s push to understand Christian beginnings as very diverse and locally based opens a space for King’s case against some monolithic orthodoxy or gnostic heresy. Thirdly, Bauer’s strong objection to “the insinuation of theological interests into historical reconstruction” resembles much of King’s worry about how gnosticism has been constructed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship. King nevertheless worries about Bauer’s on-going use of the terms orthodoxy and heresy, ignoring the need for rethinking “our very understanding of gnosticism and Christianity.”

Appropriately, King’s examination of the scholarship of Hans Jonas is the longest in the book. She straightforwardly states that in her many years of considering Jonas’s work, she personally has been “profoundly affected” by the “passionate expression” she found in his work, The Gnostic Religion. She lays out in great detail the advances Jonas made in his counter to both Harnack and the history of religions school by proposing that gnosticism was neither a heretical version of early Christianity nor an artificial myth coming from the “East.” Jonas’s insistence that the “gnostic religion” be understood as an independent and authentic religious experience did indeed break through the myopic prejudices of previous scholarship. She acknowledges that his work still remains “the classic starting point for exploring this topic” and that his trust in and proposal for a genuine wholeness of gnostic experience “contributed spectacularly to the reification of Gnosticism as an independent religion and a singular

15. King, What Is Gnosticism?, 115. For a more reflective and extensive comparison of King and Bauer, cf. the paper for this meeting of the Christianity Seminar by Brandon Scott, published in this issue as “What Categories are Left? A Conversation with Karen King’s What is Gnosticism?”
monolithic phenomenon.”18 Perhaps most telling and cleverly haunting about King’s appreciation of Jonas is her quotation that he assessed the field of gnostic studies as “the atomizing, dismembering methods of previous research that leave one feeling the lack of a unified sense of a whole.”19 How ironic that Jonas himself knew that gnostic studies were atomized and that crucial agreements were lacking. As the next section of King’s summary illustrates, Jonas’s own efforts to provide a satisfactory congruence of gnosticism did not match other research in his own time and after his work.

Much of King’s assessment of Jonas develops additionally through critique of what she perceives as Jonas’s dependence on both the discourse of orthodoxy/heresy and the dominance of typological definitions of gnosticism she examined in the earlier part of the book. Her critique of Jonas is at least as thorough as her appreciation:

[T]hough Jonas passionately promoted Gnosticism as a phenomenon with its own creative impulses and religious integrity, he maintained the traditional negative evaluation of it intellectually, morally, and religiously. This is clear from his list of the characteristics that most readily distinguish Gnosticism from the other types of the “Oriental wave”: pathamorphic crisis, cosmic pessimism, impiety, artificiality, and amorality or immorality. Gnostic myth-making, he wrote, was “arbitrarily high-handed,” a “degradation of the Old Testament God … performed with considerable venom and obvious relish”; a “ruthless derogation,” it is not “tolerant” and shows a “ruthlessness of deployment,” “bold and scandalizing exegesis”; it stays “unblushing in the tradition of pagan polytheism”; it “perverts” Biblical and Platonic lore, and so on … Moreover, the Gnostics were arrogant and lacking in proper humility, especially in their claim to possess a divine nature that ensured their ultimate salvation.

These are not impartial descriptions of the phenomena but evaluative judgments based on largely unarticulated assumptions about what constitutes true religion and piety. Jonas’s own commitments to philosophical rationalism and ethical monotheism intersected with discourses of heresy and Orientalism. They could remain largely unarticulated only because they were widely shared among scholars of religion.20

While admiring the (mostly psychological) achievement of Jonas to think through what might be the inner integrity of gnostic experience, King’s own work relative to newly emerging social readings of early Christ(ian) texts helps call attention to the possibility of theological and psychological reductive tendencies in Jonas’s characterization of the texts he saw as gnostic. In relationship to both Jonas and those who follow(ed) him, King cites Virginia Burrus’s alter-

19. Jonas, Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, 1.51.
native take on the inner angst and blustery expressions in the texts that prickle Jonas’s sensitivity:

Jonas’ (suspiciously Orientalizing) syncretism and alienation are pointing toward what might be reframed as hybridity and ambivalent resistance to empire/colonialization, characteristics which arguably mark all products of early Roman (and earlier) Hellenism, yet differently and to different degrees. 21

This is an alternative reading of a wide range of allegedly gnostic texts that King develops fully in her *The Secret Revelation of John* 22 and summarizes in her response to Jonas’s puzzlements in *What Is Gnosticism*:

What if the myth of *Ap*John [*Secret Revelation of John*] was not so much an expression of the intellectual and moral vacuity arising when ideology became divorced from social reality as it was an evaluation of political rule? What if the “experience” underlying estrangement were to be analyzed less in terms of psychology than in terms of the social-political conditions of imperial violence? How then might we read a myth that describes the powers that rule the world as malign forces motivated by the will to dominate and coerce? How then might we understand the representation of these powers as evil and ignorant? What hope might Gnostic revelation of divine knowledge and salvation then be seen to offer its recipients? 23

Although politely posed in the interrogative, this perspective can be included in King’s assessment of Jonas (and much of the rest of scholarship of gnosticism). The important new dimensions in the past two decades of reading early Jesus/Christ(ian) texts socially in special connection to imperial dominance and violence support King in her intimations that Jonas may indeed be missing major dimensions of the affect and content of what he thought to be snide, impious, and alienated expressions.

Despite his breakthroughs, Jonas’s contributions (not just in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*) have not—even for his gnosticism-related colleagues—brought the field past what he himself called “the atomizing, dismembering methods of previous research that leave on feeling the lack of a unified sense of a whole.” 24

King chronicles several of the setbacks to the Jonas hypothesis, mainly how within the field itself the bases for the key element of almost all profiles of gnosticism and the “gnostic redeemer myth” have come undone. Initially, a short 1930 article by Hans Lietzmann raised serious questions about whether Mandaean material was actually pre-Christian. But as King notes, “[c]redit the


22. Cf. in this issue, Kotrosits, “But What Do We Call It? The *Secret Revelation of John* and Crises of Categories.”


final demise of the pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth belongs primarily to the German history of religions scholar Carsten Colpe in a series of works that undo many of the assumptions of dating and origin of texts on which this hypothetical “myth” was based. King describes Colpe’s response to his own conclusions, boldly challenging much of the alleged historical basis for additional elements of gnosticism in the ancient world. But he then proposes that “the constitution of Gnosis as a common human religious phenomenon and its historical localization are two different things.” King correctly and tellingly notes that this makes gnosticism into a “dehistoricized and essentialized category.” As I reflect on how Colpe’s brilliant critique of the gnostic redeemer myth and his nevertheless tenacious recalculated grip on the category of gnosticism itself (even at the cost of dehistoricizing it after his own insightful historical analysis), it puzzles me how attached scholars have remained to the idea of gnosticism. With so much wandering through mistakes and recalculations for the better part of a century, what can account for this strong faith in such a tenuous category? King’s answer seems to me the only possibility:

The reason for the continued confusion … is not the lack of material evidence but the continued entanglements of heresiological discourses in the scholarly study of Gnosticism.

Perhaps the most tumultuous reconsiderations about the viability of gnosticism as an analytical category have come from the discovery at Nag Hammadi. In two final chapters of charting the many reconsiderations about gnosticism, King examines the new issues that emerged from having so many previously unknown documents, some of which have some interesting similarities to descriptions of heresies from the second-century polemicists. Her overview is helpful:

The new riches did not provide quick or easy solutions … The decades since the discovery near Nag Hammadi have seen a flurry of scholarly activity. The sheer volume of the material and its intellectual complexity have required enormous efforts … Although analysis of the Nag Hammadi texts is still in its early stages, these detailed studies are providing exciting new insight and a sound basis for rethinking every issue related to the study of Gnosticism … The question of the Gnostic character of these works is being hotly debated … The Nag Hammadi works have also challenged scholars to reconfigure the boundaries of orthodoxy and heresy, and indeed to rethink the usefulness of that distinction for reconstructing the history of the early period. Whereas we might have expected these works to solidify the ancient distinctions between orthodoxy and heresy.

they have instead supported Bauer’s thesis that distinct varieties of Christianity developed in different geographical areas, at a time when the boundaries of orthodoxy and heresy were not at all fixed. As [James M.] Robinson argues “… ([i]n the second and third centuries) [(t)here seems not yet to be a central body of orthodox doctrine distinguished from heretical doctrine to the right and to the left, but rather a common body of beliefs variously understood and translated or transmitted … To this extent the terms heresy and orthodoxy are anachronistic.” Early Christian literature does not divide neatly into orthodox and heretical camps; there are unexpected overlaps and surprising similarities, and crucial points of difference are not always where we expect them to be …29 Predictably, the Nag Hammadi manuscripts have provoked considerable discussion about the adequacy of prior theories about the origin and typological characterization of Gnosticism, as well as the social character and location of the Gnostics. They have provided a new basis for testing previously held theses and for developing new resolutions for old problems. While the heritage of past methods, frameworks, and discourses continue to shape how scholars interpret new materials, scholars are also forging new avenues.30

One possible sign of such new avenues could be the post-Nag Hammadi emergence of four terms that seem to grapple with the diversity of literary perspectives. King charts the emergence of the terms Valentianism, Sethianism, Hermeticism, and Thomasine Christianity among scholars of the last twenty years. These terms do seem to be responding both to the new breadth of literature and the lack of clarity in the term gnosticism. But there are reasons to question how productive these developments are. For one, it is not as if all or even most active scholars in these fields have endorsed this as the primary terms to consider. Rather, at best one can say that these terms might be considered as those rising from various scholars with various methods into consciousness of some within this study. Granting that these terms “have become well established within the field,” King does worry about what they mean and contribute:

Their status with regard to Gnosticism, however, has become increasingly unclear. Should they be regarded as subcategories of Gnosticism or of Christianity, or as distinct religious phenomena, comparable to Mandaism or Manicheaeism? … None of these genealogical schema has achieved any wide acceptance, at least

29. Earlier King noted how accusations of heresy occurred in a variety of directions with a variety of meanings and that careful study of Nag Hammadi literature has challenged previous presumptions about who is orthodox and who is heretical: “[D]espite the polemicists contention that true Christians were unified against the diverse heresies, charges of heresy were flying in multiple directions by the third century. Indeed, the polemicists would have surely regarded the radically docetic and ascetic teachings of TestTruth as arch-heretical and yoked its author to the Valentinians and other such ‘heretics.’ The author of TestTruth, however, the teachings of both the heresiologists and the Valentinians as of one and the same ilk.” King, What Is Gnosticism?, 53.
partly because any such linear formulation is much too simplistic to account for the complexity of the phenomena, especially given the diversity within the subcategories themselves.

And how are we to classify the texts that do not fit into any of the four categories, such as the texts relating to the early Jesus tradition (for example, GosThom, GosMary, ApJames, DialSav, and GosSav)? Are there more streams of Gnosticism yet to be determined? Or are such “left-over” works to be considered “generically Gnostic”? Or not Gnostic at all?31

King also surveys scholars who have tried to address this larger set of questions, primarily:

1. R. P. Casey: “There is no trace in early Christianity of ‘Gnosticism’ as a broad historical category, and the modern use of ‘Gnostic’ and ‘Gnosticism’ to define a large but ill-defined movement ... is wholly unknown in the early Christian period.”32

2. Morton Smith: “primarily a phenomenon of later Platonism.”33

3. Bentley Layton: With the criterion that “the modern historian must avoid using that word [gnostikos] in any other sense [than “to use the name that a social group applies to itself”].34 because ambivalent usage would introduce disorderliness into the historical discourse.”35 Layton seeks to locate an ancient social group that used the term gnostikos as a self-designation. King summarizes the rest of Layton’s complex process:

Right at the beginning he encountered a significant obstacle: the direct testimonies to gnostikos or gnostikoi (“Gnostics”) occur only in literature written by the enemies of Gnostics. At this point, Layton made a crucial move. He noted that the polemicists associate the Gnostics with a particularly cosmological myth. This myth, in his view, can be considered a relatively reliable pointer to the distinctive character of the group. Thus, whenever one finds this myth, one has encountered Gnostics, even when the myth is not explicitly attached to the self-designation gnostikoi (Gnostics).36

Layton then developed a five-step method for deciding which materials could be included in his database.37 Perhaps one of the most significant

results of Layton’s complex scheme is that it substantially reduces the amount of literature he would consider a part of “gnosticism.”

4. Michael Williams: He proposes to replace the term “gnosticism” with “biblical demiurgical myth”:38

Biblical demiurgical myth would not be just another name for “gnosticism” because the intent of the new category would be precisely to cut free from baggage surrounding the old one. While it would be grouping most of the same myths together for study and comparison, it would not make the series of mistakes that … have been made with the category “gnosticism” … This category would not require the assertion that some particular hermeneutic program underlay all the sources involved, but would rather allow for the diversity of approaches that we encounter.39

Although King has reservations about each of these efforts, it suffices here to attend to her summary of these positions:

In the end, whether specialists work to construct subcategories, argue to eliminate the term “Gnosticism” altogether, or to use it to designate a more limited range of phenomena than the discussion portends—they all recognize the inadequacy of the term to encompass the variety of phenomena that have been assigned to it. That at least remains an assured result of current scholarly work on the Nag Hammadi literature.40

Toward the end of her massive review of research41 King updates both the origins and typological definitions of gnosticism. Her review of typological definitions considers the persistent use even in the late twentieth century of “three of the most common stereotypical characterizations of Gnosticism (radical anticosmic dualism, incapacity for true ethics, and Docetism),”42 deepening her earlier critique of them as “inaccurate and even distorting interpretations of the new materials.”43

Her update of the origins issue includes the proposal that gnosticism originated in Judaism. This review occasions her final conclusions on this matter:

Any attempt to resolve the multifarious materials into a single origin and linear genealogy is doomed to fail on its own premise. Such an approach cannot solve

38. Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”.
41. From my perspective the only major scholar of gnosticism that King does not treat expansively is Elaine Pagels. This may be due to Pagels’s most public intervention on the subject being her popular work, The Gnostic Gospels, written for a wider public. An important complementary study would assess the ongoing influence of Pagels’s The Gnostic Gospels and her other rather extensive scholarly books and articles of scholarship on gnosticism.
the problem of the origin of Gnosticism because no such monolithic entity ever existed. Because the core problem is the reification of a rhetorical entity (heresy) into an actual phenomenon in its own right (Gnosticism), the entire question of origin is a non-issue whose seeming urgency arises only because of its rhetorical function in the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. We can and should feel free to set it aside and move on, turning instead to analysis of the practices of literary production and social formation. [italics mine]44

King’s Conclusions

Although she is careful at each stage of her analysis to summarize the state of her argument, her final chapter (“The End of Gnosticism?”) provides a clear, yet understated, assessment (I will return later to the persistence of question marks in King’s book and final chapter title):

In the end, I think the term “Gnosticism” will most likely be abandoned, at least in its present usage … the discourses of orthodoxy and heresy distort our reading and present usage. Perhaps scholars will continue to use it to designate a much more delimited group of materials, such as “Sethian Gnosticism” or “Classical Gnosticism.” Perhaps not. It is important … to recognize and correct the ways in which reinscribing reconstruction of ancient religion. These distortions have both confused historiography and undermined the legitimate work of theological reflection.

This chapter, it turns out, is more interested in “rethinking the methodologies and theoretical foundations of historiography as they are employed in the study of gnosticism” than a final adjudication of the analytical usefulness of the term itself. After the above brief conclusion about gnosticism, she addresses in a powerful and evocative manner how to begin “thinking hard and differently about religious identity formation,” which “require[s] revising our notions of tradition and history, reshaping discourse, categories, and methods, and above all, rethinking the ethically informed goals of historical analysis.” 45 For these purposes this chapter is highly recommended to all readers, but especially our Christianity Seminar. For the purposes of our current Seminar topic on the analytical viability of the term “gnosticism,” a thorough methodological and theoretical review will need to await another moment.

This is not so much that King’s conclusion is incomplete as much as her chapter-by-chapter summary assessments have already compiled a complete conclusion as to how nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship has constructed the notion of ancient gnosticism. At the intersection of Protestant polemic against Catholicism and his own ambitious liberal program for re-interpreting early Christianity, Harnack promoted gnosticism as the key error (heresy)

corrupting the transcendent message of Jesus. It seems not to have mattered that Harnack’s notion of gnosticism differed significantly from all the other definitions of gnosticism that would ensue for over the next hundred years, since Harnack’s prestige and substituting gnosticism for heresy fit perfectly into the larger and already established discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. Gnosticism’s place in this discourse continued to function for each successive generation of scholarship, even though the understanding of gnosticism varied substantially and the epistemological problems with typological definitions continued. The stability of gnosticism as an ancient reality was undergirded with appeals to and debates about its origins, even though late twentieth-century historiography had shown that study of origins could not be an historical task. Even though the first generation(s) of scholarship on Nag Hammadi assumed that the new documents were more or less totally gnostic and as such needed simply to be studied as additional examples of error, a large spectrum of subsequent close textual studies have shown that the diversity of Nag Hammadi simply cannot be accounted for by any of the definitions of gnosticism. With this broader diversity in view and a wide range of new textual studies of Nag Hammadi in place, many devoted scholars of gnosticism now acknowledge the scope of the term must at least be reduced, and a number urge it to be eliminated.

The Significance of the Companion Volume
to King’s What is Gnosticism?

Although Maia Kotrosits’ essay from the Christianity Seminar’s fall 2014 meeting focuses more directly on the King book that directly followed and intentionally companioned What Is Gnosticism?, it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of her in-depth The Secret Revelation of John.46

On one level her work in The Secret Revelation of John is straightforward and traditional. It is a classic commentary in all senses of the term. It contains a new and rigorous translation by King; an important range of manuscript technical observations and notes; extended discussion of authorship, ancient readership, possible contexts, and dating; thorough analysis of the text in its variations; verse-by-verse cross referencing of the four different manuscripts; significant review of the history of scholarship; examination of a wide range of interpretational issues; and, bundles of fresh insights into the text and its possible ancient meanings. It will certainly stand as a classic not only for this very important

46. The ancient document of the Secret Revelation of John is more often referred to in scholarship as the Apocryphon of John. King’s designation of a title that is a more thoroughly English follows a wide trend in the last decade of avoiding esoteric-sounding, non-English laden titles of Nag Hammadi books. Cf. the important changes in titles made by the gnosticizing scholar Marvin Meyer in his important editing of the most recent edition of The Nag Hammadi Library.
work discovered in twentieth century, but for Nag Hammadi literature and beyond.

Her choice of the Secret Revelation of John could hardly be more significant. It has been for quite some time viewed as the most expansive and classic example of gnosticism. As King herself notes, it is thought of as “the signature example of ‘Gnosticism.’” Its pre-Nag Hammadi discovery in the Berlin Codex was received as extremely significant. And there are an astonishing three different copies and versions in Nag Hammadi Codices II, III, and IV. As King quite intentionally decided to test her hypotheses in What Is Gnosticism? in close textual study, there could not have been a more appropriate or larger challenge than the Secret Revelation of John itself.

Furthermore, King’s close textual test is governed by requiring of herself a rigorous set of requirements relative to the problematic assumptions that the text is obviously gnostic:

The analysis of the Secret Revelation of John offered in this volume thus demonstrates how misleading such caricatures and stereotype can be when taken as an objective description of the contents and goals of the work. Even in trying to overcome these distortions, it can be difficult to escape the terms of the debate that the early polemicists set … What I have tried to do in this volume is to set aside those [gnostic-tinged] typological categories to the side and show some of the ways in which the Secret Revelation of John can be read—as a story, as social critique, and as intertextual hermeneutics.

Indeed, upon close examination of her companion volume on the text, the entire study is done without dependence on such typological assumptions about its body-hating, anti-cosmic, parasitic, and universal salvation. Rather, King takes on aspects of the text that could be readily read in such caricatures; but through insistent close reading and thorough intertextualities, more complex and quite fresh ancient meanings emerge. In other words, she makes sense of it without recourse to gnostizing assumptions.

Although much more attention to the combination of King’s paired volumes is deserved, here I simply am content to observe how the proposals she makes in What is Gnosticism? are thoroughly explored and tested in The Secret Revelation of John.

Extending King

My question especially for the Westar Institute’s Christianity Seminar has been whether the category of gnosticism is adequate for analyzing and rewriting

49. King’s work is, of course, ongoing on the issue of gnosticism. Cf. among others her articles, “Toward a Discussion of the Category of ‘Gnosis/Gnosticism’” and “Which Early Christianity.”
the history of early Christianity. As the Seminar enters its post-introductory phases, it has seemed to me that the ways the Jesus/Christ(ian) movements of the second and early third centuries have been understood for most of the last century is that the second century was the serious beginning of a definitive sorting of the good (orthodox) “Christians” from the bad (mostly gnostic and other heretical groups). My reading of leading scholarship on gnosticism over the last twenty years has been that the assumptions of the last century relative to ancient gnosticism have now been seriously challenged and that a re-examination of the issue was in order.

Obviously the context of this question has a great deal to do with the larger task of the Christianity Seminar to re-examine the master narrative of Christian beginnings. So this review of the work of a leading scholar on the question of the adequacy of the category of “gnosticism” and the papers at the fall 2014 meeting by other recognized scholars of gnosticism in the last twenty or more years are meant to orient the Seminar’s work for the next several years, especially as we try to take seriously the second and third centuries relative to writing some different histories of early Christianity.

It has been my opinion for the past eight years (since reading the prepublication manuscripts of both What is Gnosticism? and The Secret Revelation of John) that Karen King has produced the answer to my question about whether the term “gnosticism” is adequate to the analytical task within a rewriting of the history of early Christianity. A summary of positions relative to this question in King’s two works include the following (quoting King):

1. When modern historians adopt the same strategies as well as the content of the polemicists’ construction of heresy to define Gnosticism, they are not just reproducing the heresy of the polemicists; they are themselves propagating the politics of orthodoxy and heresy. We should not therefore be surprised to observe twentieth-century historians using the category of Gnosticism to establish the bounds of normative Christianity—whether in Protestant anti-Catholic polemic, intra-Protestant debate, or the colonial politics of Orientalism … The language, themes, and strategies of orthodoxy and heresy proved to be a powerful discourse, persisting in various forms up to our own day. My purpose in this book is to show how twentieth-century scholarship on Gnosticism has simultaneously reinscribed, elaborated, and deviated from this discourse.50

2. The pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth was the invention of modern scholarship; it is inadequate, when not entirely misleading, for reading the ancient material. 51

3. The fixation on origins has tended to distort the actual social and historical processes of literary productions because the purpose of determining the origin of Gnosticism is less historical than rhetorical; it is aimed at delimiting the normative boundaries and definition of Christianity.\(^{52}\)

4. Any attempt to resolve the multifarious materials into a singular origin and linear genealogy is doomed to fail on its own premise. Such an attempt cannot solve the problem of the origin of Gnosticism because no such monolithic entity ever existed.\(^{53}\)

5. Because the core problem is the reification of a rhetorical entity (heresy) into an actual phenomenon in its own right (Gnosticism), the entire question of origin is a non-issue whose seeming urgency arises only because of its rhetorical function in the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. We can and should feel free to set it aside and move on, turning instead to analysis is of the practices of literary production and social formation.\(^{54}\)

6. The categories inherited from an earlier generation of scholars … have produced inaccurate and even distorting interpretations of the new material. Although they are still widely used, specialists are becoming increasingly wary of them. It is time to rethink the entire framework for studying these texts.\(^{55}\)

7. In the end, I think the term “Gnosticism” will most likely be abandoned, at least in its present usage …\(^{56}\)

8. Gnosticism was substituted for heresy as the object of the discourse … The study of Gnosticism is thus imbricated in intellectual discourses and power relations that extend far beyond any notion of disinterested objectivity and often far beyond the explicit intentions of individual scholars.\(^{57}\)

9. The challenge before us is to propose a new framework for the study of religion in antiquity by rethinking the methodologies and theoretical foundations of historiography as they are employed in the study of Gnosticism.\(^{58}\)

10. The variety of phenomena classified as “Gnostic” simply will not support a single monolithic definition, and in fact none of the primary materials fit the standard typological definition.\(^{59}\)

\(^{52}\) King, What Is Gnosticism?, 189.

\(^{53}\) King, What Is Gnosticism?, 189.

\(^{54}\) King, What Is Gnosticism?, 189–90.

\(^{55}\) King, What Is Gnosticism?, 216.

\(^{56}\) King, What Is Gnosticism?, 218.


\(^{59}\) King, What Is Gnosticism?, 226.
11. Because none of the texts contains all the listed characteristics, typological phenomenology raises the question of how many elements of the ideal type any particular case has to evince in order to qualify as an example of Gnosticism …

12. [T]he term “Gnosticism” is an anachronism ultimately stemming from hindsight. It belongs to modern attempts to classify certain types of ancient Christianity as heresy, but the lines of orthodoxy and heresy were not so clear in the second and third centuries when these texts were composed. In order to comprehend the dynamic process by which Christianity was formed, it is necessary to set aside the winners’ account of that period and attempt to place ourselves in the midst of debates whose outcome was not yet certain.

My conclusion from my review and from these twelve quotations is found with the answer “no, gnosticism is not even close to adequacy for the tasks of analyzing and rewriting the history of early Christianity.”

But I suspect that I do injustice to King herself in my conclusion here and therefore hasten to add four additional observations:

1. In *What is Gnosticism?* King never answers the larger question definitively. Indeed, the title of her first book of the pair is a clear question, not an answer. It stands in clear contrast to, for instance, the subtitle of Michael Williams’s earlier book on the same topic: *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*. Similarly, the title of King’s last chapter in *What Is Gnosticism?* is not an answer but the question “The End of Gnosticism?”

2. King’s long and distinguished work in the academy has been consistently and movingly dedicated to deep collegiality. It may be that the tension between the twelve clear (to me) “no” answers to my question of whether gnosticism is adequate for analytical study of early Christianity and King’s more ambivalent question marks is simply an expression of her ongoing respect for her long-term colleagues who have different positions within the guild on scholarship on gnosticism. This would reflect both the profound collegial ethics of King’s scholarship and the truth that there is much to learn from the previous generations and current machinations about sub-and-counter categories of a flailing gnostic category.

3. In *What Is Gnosticism?* King occasionally uses both the terms “gnosticism” and “gnostic” with straightforward references to ancient persons, trends, and literature.

4. In personal conversation King has directly told me that she has not re-
jected categorically the term “gnosticism.”

The tension between my conclusion of King’s position on the adequacy of the
term for analysis of early Christianity and her own perhaps more nuanced opinion makes me characterize (per above) this portion of the paper as my extension of King’s position rather than King’s own position. It is an extension I make seri-
ously and as an obvious (perhaps insensitive) derivative of King’s better work.

I have five main reasons for proposing that gnosticism is not an adequate
category for the analysis and rewriting of new histories of early Christianity:

First and foremost, all of King’s analysis makes sense. The category itself of
gnosticism is discursive and rhetorical, and neither historical nor analytical.
Scholarship has not been able to agree at all on a definition of gnosticism. The
main type of definition in scholarship about gnosticism has been typological,
which brings with it serious epistemological problems for historical analysis.
The prevalence of focus on gnosticism’s origins in scholarship about gnosticism
gives it less authenticity historiographically. The substitution of gnosticism for
heresy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries imbricates such “history” in
the discursive production of orthodoxy and heresy. Specialist study of Nag
Hammadi literature, especially in the last twenty-five years, has undone many
of the assumptions and assertions of previous scholarship on gnosticism.

Generally in other cases, if only half of these important critiques of any other
basic historical proposal were accurate, the basic historical proposal would be
rejected. So the care and thoroughness of the above aspects of King’s scholar-
ship give far more than adequate reason to reject “gnosticism” as an adequate
category.

Secondly, scholarship now needs a less blunt tool/analytical category for ex-
amination of the Jesus/Christ(ian) literature of the second and third centuries.
Recent elaboration of sub-and-counter categories for the previous “consensus”
on gnosticism as the governing category for analysis of this literature signals a
need for more refined categories, although my suspicion is that the dependence
of these recent elaborations on the previous gnostic “consensus” and the ongo-
ing developments (like King’s The Secret Revelation of John) will probably make
the eventual categories different than most of the current sub-and-counter pro-
posals. At any rate, scholarship should stop using the blunt, vague, and rhetori-
cal category of gnosticism for its analysis.

Thirdly, the very success of gnosticism as a governing category during
the past hundred or more years makes it unrecoverable given the emerging
problems of using the term. Since at least five generations of scholars and two

generations of the broader American public63 have now been thoroughly taught the truth of the category, the possibility of using the term with some new, revised, or downgraded meaning is almost nil. Rather, especially for scholars, we need to relegate gnosticism and gnostic(s) to the growing list of categories we thought were dependable but were not.64

Fourthly, for the Westar Institute’s Christianity Seminar, as it stands on the precipice of earnest work about the second century, the relegation of gnosticism to the sidelines needs clear analytical categories, analogous to the decision of the Acts Seminar that the Acts of the Apostles was probably written in the second century and to the Jesus Seminar deciding to take material from the Gospel of Thomas seriously in thinking about the teachings of the historical Jesus.

Fifthly, the wealth of documents Nag Hammadi provides to both scholarship and the public has been blocked or caricatured by the imposition of the gnostic label on them. These documents offer important information to scholarship about Jesus/Christ(ian) movements in the second and third centuries and new sources of Christian piety and self-understanding to the public.

The vast majority of the work that beckons us to rethink the second and third centuries of Jesus/Christ(ian) movements can be fresher, more complex, more diverse, more crisp analytically, less pretentious, less vulnerable to outside discourses and rhetoric, more surprising, more laborious, and more creative if gnosticism is rejected fully as an analytical and re-imaginative category. It can change the picture of second- and third-century movements from that of two forces fighting with each other in a specific field to a portrait of a transparent torso with six to nine different major organs and thousands of connections, bypasses, and semi-independent vessels flowing between and around them.

Or perhaps for our second- and third-century projects it is appropriate to reuse a similar alternative image, shift, and metaphor as what I proposed in 1996 in the introduction to the book Reimagining Christian Origins65 for what might lie ahead, when some of the brittle notions like gnosticism are allowed to fade away:

In the summer of 1921 at Fontainebleau, Pablo Picasso produced two paintings both entitled Three Musicians. In these paintings, the standard realist strokes and colors of classical and romantic painters are replaced by cubist angles and curves, by improbable tones and values of color. The three dimensions of realism, so much the lingua franca of earlier schools of painting, are replaced by de-
stabilizing and unlikely planes of imagery, each body seen simultaneously from four, five, or six perspectives depending upon whether one's eye lands upon the face, the shoulder, the hand, the torso, the leg, the violinist's bow, the guitarist's strings, the musical text that forms the tableau's center. The background is made up of harsh and contrasting panels of richly colored geometric figures. The details are there too—the jaunty beret and pencil-thin moustache of one musician, the skeletal structure of the face of another—for those who would take time to puzzle them out. In order to be read, the images of these paintings, so stark and antirealist, demand eyes and imaginations willing to enter the unfamiliar world of the canvas—one where geometry and color and multiple perspectives create a tensile imagery that representations steeped in realism or romanticism cannot adequately narrate …

In *Three Musicians*, as in many other paintings of that era, we saw as never before. For the first time we saw a single picture that acknowledged the variety of perspectives from which each of us necessarily comes to see. In a single picture we saw conflicting points of view—and as a result we saw more of the subject matter rather than less … [T]he painters were among the first to show how a complex understanding which involved multiple points of view could emerge …

It is not accidental that those whose allegiances were bolstered by the singular imperial or exclusive perspective have continued to object vehemently to the revolution of Picasso and company, while at the same time longing nostalgically for classical realism in art and imperial prerogative in social relations …

… [W]e are ready to take up the cubist's brush and angles of vision in order to paint a new kind of portrait of how Christianity began … [W]e have turned for inspiration to Picasso's audacious antirealist project in order to highlight the challenge brought to the current study of Christian origins … In Picasso's *Three Musicians* we find a radical challenge to those who have gone before, masking their own assumptions about the character of representation with the widely accepted conventions … Picasso's paintings insist that the viewer acknowledge the complex layers, the multiple perspectives, and the constructed character of his representation … the agonistic struggle of multiple perspectives in the ancient sources and in their modern reframings …


**Works Cited**


But What Do We Call It?
The Secret Revelation of John and Crises of Categories

Maia Kotrosits

Introduction

So now that we have pulled back from our preconceptions and begun to ask, what is Gnosticism? It seems clear that the term carries so much intellectual baggage that it must be set aside in order to begin to examine the texts afresh. How then do we talk about these texts, if we don’t label them Gnostic (or heretical or some such), but want merely to ask what they say?

In her monograph on the Secret Revelation of John, Karen King poses a version of the question I have heard easily a dozen times in my classes or from colleagues at conferences and lectures. In an obvious admission of having been persuaded by her argument in What is Gnosticism? (sometimes against their will), colleagues will say things to me like, “I know, I know. There is no gnosticism. But then what do we call it?” There is no “it,” however, King presses:

I think initially we need to refer to individual texts. That is, rather than generalize about what Gnostics believe or what Sethians believe—especially as opposed to what Christians believe—I think it best to talk about particular texts. The goal is not to create the perfect category (an impossibility in any case), but to make these texts available for critical and constructive work, whether in historical reconstruction or theology.

The persistence of the “it” in the question “what do we call it?” represents a certain attachment to the notion of a distinct phenomenon, a describable object with not-too-porous boundaries. The “it,” that which Shall–Not–Be–Called–Gnosticism (but is really gnosticism), persists to preserve another ostensibly distinct phenomenon, another describable object with not-too-porous boundaries: Christianity. And while King suggests the goal is not to create the perfect

category, she does find one serviceable for the Secret Revelation of John: it is “Christianity,” if a tangled, rich, diverse, and contested one.³

In her introduction she offers a rendition of the many ways the text fits snugly within the urban school setting in Alexandria, and she notes, “We know that Christianity reached Alexandria relatively early (probably already in the first century).”⁴ While the Secret Revelation of John evokes a wide range of traditions and discourses, most emphatically Jewish scripture and interpretive traditions, it is clear to King that the “only tradition that escapes reproach is Christianity.”⁵ Yet curiously, the only ostensible hallmarks of Christianity present in the text are references to Christ and John, which frame the text rather than substantively affect its plot. “All of these [references] could have been added long after the rest of the work was written,” King admits.⁶ But she importantly emphasizes that we must examine why these references would have been added. “The only purpose of the addition would have been to strengthen and clarify the connection of the work to (Johannine) Christianity.”⁷

For King, as well as many of the projects influenced by hers, the elimination of the category of gnosticism means an expansion of the category of Christianity. Without the “it” of a distinct (and distinctly perverse, syncretistic, esoteric, etc.) gnostic phenomenon, more texts, more traditions, and more differences come to inhabit the category of ancient Christianity. Yet her emphatic positioning of the text as “Christian” comes into crisis—not just in her acknowledgement of the possibly minor status of Christ and John in the text but, I would suggest, through her own invaluable and game-changing close textual work. This “crisis of categories” in King is no small issue and hardly belongs to King or the Secret Revelation of John alone. In fact, I think it demonstrates just how ineluctably bound the categories of gnosticism and Christianity really are, and how rigorously rethinking the former will demand rigorously rethinking the latter—not just how we imagine, describe, or name “it,” but how to think without the “it.”

Secret Revelation of John and Questions of Belonging

In King’s rendering of the Secret Revelation of John, she makes legible rhetorical moves out of what have been read as obscure speculations. The Secret Revelation of John fuses the two creation narratives of Genesis with that of Plato’s Timaeus, making the first Genesis account into an account of the “realm above” and the second account into the “world below.” The lower world is characterized

3. King similarly suggests the collection of texts of Nag Hammadi could be described as “new and widely ranging works of Christian thought.” King, The Secret Revelation of John, 2.
by pain and failure, as well as the devious and injurious nature of its creator
god, Yaldabaoth. The lower world is full of darkness, chaos, and ignorance.
It is a “counterfeit” reality in which humanity is held captive until or unless
they know of their “true origin.” The messenger of this knowledge (through
the revelation itself) is the Savior or Christ, also periodically identified with
other figures (Pronoia, the Father, or the Mother–Father). King’s reading of the
text suggests a frustrated protest of not only the casual violence of the Roman
empire, but its hypocrisy in so thoroughly contradicting Roman republican
ideals. She describes the text’s use of creation motifs and figures as generating
a “devastating critique” of imperial rulers and the lived world, as well as a
utopian (if compromised and assimilated) vision of justice, goodness, and “true
humanity.”

She parses with an intense literary meticulousness the ways the Secret
Revelation of John uses, interprets, and departs from its sources. She outlines
its steep juxtaposition of order with chaos and its anguished (but hardly nega-
tive) relationship with bodily life. She lends the figures and narrative pathos,
locating the overriding sense of alienation and anger, not only within some
very difficult political circumstances, but alongside hopeful counterclaims and
imaginations of an otherwise/elsewhere. What King has done, in fact, is show
the text to be a very relatable entrenchment in the conundrums of not just em-
pire, but social life at large—full of savvy negotiations, twists, and vindications
of received wisdom and caught in the necessary ideological contradictions of
socio-political life.

It turns out that the political valences of the text go beyond even King’s as-
sociations. The reference to the Father’s realm as a “monarchy with nothing
above it” (4:2), for instance, suggests counter-belonging and desires for sover-
eignty embedded in the “world above.” Likewise, Christ in the Secret
Revelation of John is the savior of humankind, bringer of peace, and one through whom the
world is created, calling to mind the Priene inscription that notably includes the
figure of Pronoia, also a key figure in the Secret Revelation of John.8 In the paper
I presented at the spring meeting of the Christianity seminar, I noticed the way
a number of the texts from the Nag Hammadi codices, including the Secret
Revelation of John, On the Origin of the World, and the Apocalypse of Adam, elabo-
rate and interpret Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah also juxtaposes the superiority
and legitimate creative work of a singular God with the flailing and counterfeit

8. The Priene inscription reads: “Since Providence [Pronoia], which has ordered all
things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us
Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a
savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things,
and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all
previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has
done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for
the world that came by reason of him.”
work of the maker of idols, who, like Yaldabaoth, presumptuously takes up the divine claim “I am, and there is no other.” In that paper, building on scholarship that has observed the way that the sudden and unprecedented singularity and height of YHWH is a compensation for the stark “demotion” and helplessness of Israel after the Babylonian exile, I suggested that the Secret Revelation of John similarly adjusts for the loss of (what was left of) Israel’s political coherence by the late first and early second centuries. The purity, oneness, and sovereignty of the Father’s realm in the Secret Revelation of John is, I suggested, a projection of socio-political ideals and belonging “upward,” an imagination of a homeland that remains untainted and whole against the odds and despite the machinations of evil rulers/lesser gods.9

The cue for my own reading came in part from the beginning of the text itself: the entire revelation to John is framed by John’s confrontation with a Pharisee as he is on his way up to the temple. He is accused of abandoning the tradition of his fathers, and he turns away from the temple saddened, asking himself questions about origins and belonging:

How was the Savior appointed? Why was he sent into the world by his father who sent him? Who is his father? And of what sort is that aeon to which we will go? He told us that the aeon is modeled on that indestructible aeon, but he did not teach us about what sort the latter is. Just then, while I was thinking these things, behold the heavens opened, and the whole creation below the heaven was illuminated ... (Sec. Rev. John 3:1–210)

This is where King’s assessment of the text as having a vehement interest in “Christian tradition,” so much so that all other traditions it evokes receive scouring critique, breaks down. While King suggests that the text lampoons the “Jewish creator God” of Genesis 2 (and this is true), the text only does so in order to preserve the singularity, purity, and height of the divine figure in Genesis 1. Likewise, it does so through a reading of Second Isaiah framed by a scene that is haunted not only by conflicts over what constitutes “true tradition” within the collectivity of Israel, but by one cohering symbol of Israel (the temple) that is gone by the time the Secret Revelation of John is written. It seems that rather than having any kind of investment in Christian belonging, the text is grappling with the uncertainty of belonging to Israel. It is grappling, I want to emphasize, not because the text is somehow inherently “Christian” and wonders whether Christianity belongs to the traditions of Israel, but because the question of what it means to belong to Israel at all in the late first and early second centuries (the period in which King locates the text) is not just contested (as it always had been to varying degrees) but in crisis. The Secret Revelation of John is full of dia-

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sporic melancholy.\textsuperscript{11} It begins with an episode evoking the question of origins and impossibility of a geographic homeland and then proceeds to imagine and describe “true” origins in a world above.

Building on that work, I would like to notice just how much this diasporic reading of the \textit{Secret Revelation of John} readjusts our vision around the categories of “gnosticism” and “Christianity.” Inspired by some of the diasporic characteristics of the \textit{Secret Revelation of John} (heavenly recapitulation of homeland; Christ as providing knowledge of “true origins”), I will offer a reorientation to a broad swath of literature from both the NT and the Nag Hammadi codices that contain consonant themes that will hopefully move us forward in thinking without either “it.”

**Heavenly City, Heavenly Temple, and Transcendence of Place**

Particularly in the late first century, alternate and transcendent visions of Jerusalem intensify, and it is no coincidence that this is just after the destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple in the Jewish-Roman war. In the canonical book of Revelation, the New Jerusalem, for example, comes in the package of a vengeful redirection of violence against Rome-as-Babylon. A heavenly Jerusalem, a hyperbole of opulence and purity, actually descends to the “new earth,” appearing as a physical restoration for the holy who have avoided idolatry, other forms of impurity, and being deceived by Satan. The text regularly reads as a poignant account of and consolation against the loss of Jerusalem, the trauma of the war, and the abandonment of God it implied:

\textsuperscript{11}. As I suggested in the spring meeting, I am not using diaspora here to suggest a state of separation from homeland, as studies by John Barclay and John Collins, e.g., have understood it. Barclay, \textit{Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora}; Collins, \textit{Between Athens and Jerusalem}. Following work in diaspora theory (Rey Chow, Grace Cho, Brian Keith Axel, Stuart Hall, David Eng, and others), it seems that conceptualizing diaspora as (only) separation from homeland, naturalizes the borders and content of that homeland, as well as the collective that is said to have originated from it. Homeland is constructed by and out of diasporic circumstances rather than the referent from which diaspora identity naturally derives. The concept of “belonging” importantly includes experiences and articulations of \textit{not} belonging, a continual negotiation of and repositioning of oneself relative to boundary-marking practices. So diaspora then refers to a range of social improvisations and creative constructions of collectivity within and across fractures and in the wake of colonization and/or national boundary-making. My use of diaspora here with reference to first- and second-century Israel means to include a whole host of reconsidered and colonially structured relationships to Israel, no matter where one might have actually lived. Likewise, “Israel” does not refer only or primarily to the ancient geographical instantiation, but to sets of histories, traditions, practices, texts, and cultural orientations, ones that are appealed to in an inconsistent, expressive, and impromptu fashion. Thus, to belong to Israel at all was to belong to a diasporic imaginary, a collective that constantly produced and reproduced itself by stitching up gaps in time, space, and circumstance and that naturalized such work as expressions of an always-already belonging.
See, the home of God is among mortals! He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (Rev 21:3–4)

Those who are marked for saving are, notably, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (7:4–8), as well as are the nations (“from all tribes and peoples and languages”) that stand before the throne and the lamb (7:9), a universalism deep in Israel’s history of visions of itself, if also conflicted in its implications.12 While I will discuss the role of Christ in Revelation further on, the very fact that the theme of judgment, conquest, and destroying impurity are capped with a New Jerusalem suggests an imagination of idealized national reconstitution, the reality of which is articulated as concrete, but elsewhere in the sense that it arrives from heaven and is a projection into the future. Its larger-than-life size and impossible perfection highlight how the transcendent nature of the New Jerusalem not only thumbs its nose at the Romans with a magnificent comeback, but perhaps resolves some of the colonial ambivalences surrounding Jerusalem in the first place. Jerusalem and the temple were hardly pure places from a colonial standpoint (especially since, as in the case of Pompey and Hyrcanos, high priests were sometimes directly appointed by the Romans). The absence of a temple in the New Jerusalem, for instance, may not be an indictment of cultic practices as much as a statement about the absolute purity of the New Jerusalem itself. Just as the city requires no sun because God is its light (21:23), what would the need for a temple be in a Jerusalem in which “nothing impure will enter it” (21:27)?

In Hebrews one finds a similar set of rhetorical and imaginative flourishes. Juxtaposing the earthly temple with a heavenly “more perfect tent” in which Christ is figured as both the high priest and once-and-for-all sacrifice, Hebrews would seem to be negating the earthly temple, its cultic practices, and the priesthood in favor of a universalizing Christology. This fits well with the general characterization of Hebrews as a letter concerned with issues of Christian belief or ecclesiology. But the very use of this imagery suggests an attachment to the temple as a central symbol with ongoing significance. Likewise, while many scholars have shown interest in the very rich theological resonances of the verse “[w]e have no lasting city here, but we are looking for the city that is to come,” few have explored the possibility that this refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, which would not only situate Hebrews as a text steeped in mourning, but significantly change the valence of these imaginings of a heavenly temple.13 In fact,

12. Regarding universalizing and particularizing as compatible, rather than opposite, tactics for Jewish self-understanding, especially as they intensified around the first century, see Baker, “From Every Nation Under Heaven,” 79–100.
13. An exception to this is Schenck, “The Levitical Cultus.”
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an integral part of the contrast between heavenly/earthly is not simply perfect/imperfect, but destructible/indestructible. The text of Heb 12:18–29, for instance, claims that God has promised the removal of “what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.” “Therefore,” it goes on, “since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks ...” (Heb 13:27–28). Like Revelation’s New Jerusalem, the heavenly temple represents an adjustment for the loss of the earthly temple, an indestructible and perfect recourse for the clear contingencies of and colonial compromises around the physical one. The difference in Hebrews is that the temple remains heavenly and is expressed as the always-already image on which the physical temple was modeled, even as it is not yet accessible. This retrojection and futurization is part of the heavenly temple’s untouchability. It is an idealization that creatively repairs the threat of Israel’s dissolution, allowing for a constitutive piece of Israel’s sense of collective identity to remain intact.

In fact, retrojection and futurization are part of Hebrews’ work of creating a sense of continuity for Israel in the face of acute rupture. For instance, while the exhortation to “faith” in Hebrews is typically understood as referring to a belief in Jesus, it is more likely referring to a flagging confidence in Israel’s God (both understandable and common in the wake of the Jewish-Roman war). The chapter on faith is in fact a recounting of various models of faith through Israel’s history (Abel, Enoch, Moses, Rahab, Abraham ...), but it also suggests the faith of the ancestors happened in the face of travails and tests by God, ones that are to be rewarded, together with the faithful readers of Hebrews, with the always-already heavenly city:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw them and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13–16)

Hebrews reinterprets the history of Israel’s Promised Land, itself full of interruptions and exile, through the lens of a traumatic social upheaval in which geographical place is no longer viable as a touchstone for belonging. Thus Israel’s past and present generations are restored together in a way that aims to even surpass political or national restoration—they are restored into the “rest” (katapausis), a term that gestures not only the land in Israel’s history, but to a condition of perfection and (it would seem) relief as well. 16

14. Cf. also, e.g., Heb 1:10–12.
Such claims to a heavenly homeland need not only be seen as recourse for the destruction of Jerusalem however. Paul’s figuration of a heavenly Jerusalem suggests that it filled other diasporic needs. In Galatians 4, Paul contrasts the Jerusalem “now” with the Jerusalem “above,” as part of an argument about how to think about the relationships between “Jews” and “gentiles” and about the question of who might be considered “heirs” or “sons of God.” “Jews” and “gentiles”/nations are not necessarily clear or obvious categories, as Cynthia Baker has pointed out, and “gentiles” sometimes specifically refers to Jews living outside of Israel. In the confusion of belonging, Paul seems to be struggling to sort out the several ways in which one might understand belonging to Israel (genealogy, homeland, circumcision, devotion to Israel’s God), and choosing among them to suit a diverse constituency gathering under the aegis of YHWH outside of Israel. “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith” (3:26), he writes, following with the baptismal formula and noting, “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:29). Abraham is carefully distinguished as a figure through which “gentiles”/the nations might belong to God and thus to Israel, but not through circumcision: Abraham is a model of faith (3:6). Israel’s universality and particularly combine in Paul to produce his somewhat awkward allegorization of Sarah and Hagar: his interpretation instantiates belonging to Israel and its God through shared lineage, but not through physical genealogical lines—born “according to the spirit” rather than “according to the flesh” (4:29). Thus Paul’s “Jerusalem above” offers a spiritualized homeland, a “true origin”: a mode of belonging to Israel that seeks to override not only questions of physical markers of belonging, but perhaps the problems of physical distance from and/or colonial involvement in Jerusalem (as the “enslaved” woman) as well.

In an interpretation of not only Paul’s experience of being called by God (Gal 1:15) and his having been “caught up to the third heaven” (2 Cor 12:2–4) but his envisioning of the New Jerusalem, the Coptic Apocalypse of Paul in the Nag Hammadi codices describes Paul’s ascent through the heavens. In this relatively short text Paul encounters a small child and asks him, “By which road shall I go up to Jerusalem?” The child shows him the way “up to Jerusalem” to join the twelve apostles, who are “elect spirits.” Notably Paul encounters a figure in the seventh heaven and tells him, “I am going to the place from which I came.” “Where are you from?” asks the figure, an old man who rules the principalities and authorities below. Paul replies (with some redundancy), “I am going down to the world of the dead in order to lead captive the captivity that was

17. Baker takes Pentecost, in which Jews of “every ethnos” (Acts 2:5) are gathered in Jerusalem, as her starting point in examining the ways “Jews” and “gentiles” were not mutually exclusive or obvious categories. Baker, “From Every Nation Under Heaven.”
18. The “circumcision of the heart” (Rom 2:29) is perhaps another awkward moment of trying to renegotiate physical representations of belonging.
led captive in the captivity of Babylon.”¹⁹ This text makes explicit the connection between heavenly origins and diaspora, describing Paul quite pointedly in terms of Israel’s restoration.

Another and rather lyrical text from the Nag Hammadi codices, the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, is worth recounting at more length. Framed as a parable about the rich and the poor, it begins when the apostles find a ship moored on the shore, ready to set sail, and they ask the sailors if they can go with them. The apostles sail for a day and a night, after which the wind brings them to a “small city in the midst of the sea.” The name of the city is “Habitation,” associated with “foundation” and “endurance.” They encounter a pearl merchant who is not an inhabitant of the city but a “stranger” like Peter and the others. The rich of the city ignore him, but the poor pay attention to him. The merchant offers, “Come to my city, so that I may not only show it before your very eyes, but give it to you for nothing” (4:10–15). Revealing the allegory, Peter asks about the “hardships” on the way to the city, because they are “strangers and servants of God” (5:10–11). The merchant suggests that no one can travel that road, because they must give up everything. Peter sighs in response, saying, “If only Jesus would give us power to walk it!” The merchant says that he too knows Jesus and that Jesus indeed gives strength.

After the merchant disappears, Peter asks an old man sitting nearby if the name of the city is really “Habitation.” The old man confirms it, saying, “We inhabit here because we endure.” “Justly [...] have men named it,” Peter says, “because by everyone [who] endures his trials, cities are inhabited, and a precious kingdom comes from them, because they endure in the midst of the apostasies and the difficulties of the storms. So that in this way, the city of everyone who endures the burden of his yoke of faith will be inhabited, and he will be included in the kingdom of heaven” (7:6–19). Peter and the others travel the road, evading some of the obstacles, and then are greeted by Jesus, the Savior and “son of a great king,” who reveals himself to be the pearl merchant and becomes a physician for the apostles, healing them from their hardships. Rather than a text about “Christian persecution” (a case difficult to make for the second century at all), we might see the road to the “other” city, one embarked upon by a group inherently symbolic of Israel (twelve apostles), as a diasporic return. It does not seem as if the city “Habitation” refers to a specific city (it does not hint at anything like the earthly Jerusalem or Babylon), but nonetheless it is presented as the grim, unjust other of the promised city.

These projections of a new or heavenly city or temple as an attempt at transcendence of place might be associated with some other rhetorical moves that are less explicitly geographical in reference. There is, for instance, the Gospel of John’s recourse to a Jesus whose origins are cosmic, not geographical, and

whose kingdom is “not of this world” (18:36), which might be understood as not just a pitching of “homeland” upward, but as an attempt to circumvent the complexities of place by delocalizing altogether. In John 4, for example, Jesus’ proclaiming of a God who should be worshipped “as he truly is” (i.e., irrespective of place) is introduced through an encounter with a Samaritan woman who questions why he is speaking to her, since Jews do not associate with Samaritans. Pressing the distinction between the two, the Samaritan woman says that her ancestors worshipped “on this mountain” but Jews claim they must worship in Jerusalem (4:19). “Believe me,” Jesus says, “there will be a time when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain or Jerusalem ... A time is coming when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (4:21, 23). Considering when the Gospel of John was composed, for the readers of John the claim of a placeless God is haunted by the loss of not just one but both temples it mentions. Placed in a dialogue with a Samaritan woman, it also provokes long running questions (or anxieties) around Israelite diffuseness and cultural purity.20

The *Gospel of Truth* too generously invites (and sensuously describes) a return to the Father, a true reality of fullness described as “the Totality,” over and against being lost in ignorance to nightmares and violence. In Ephesians, which imagines Jesus as being seated “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (2:21), readers are promised, as heirs to the Father, an inheritance of riches, fullness, and grace, and are thus (as in the *Gospel of Truth*) relieved of alienation, darkness, and ignorance.21

A return to the Father, the Father’s realm or kingdom as one’s origin, may be ethereal and delocalized, but that itself should be seen as a specifically diasporic move. The vagueness of such visions is typically rendered as abstract, speculative, or spiritual, but it seems that nebulous quality of these transcendent imaginations might have some experiential reverberations. Grace Cho (borrowing from Hortense Spillers) describes the psycho-social conditions attending slaves on slave-ship voyages to unfamiliar places, for example, suggesting that the suspense in the non-place of the ocean produces, or is at the very least a metaphor for, an “oceanic feeling,” a sense of identity loss and erasure that comes with being “culturally unmade.”22 Importantly, Cho argues, “the vessel’s movement toward an unknown destination implies not only the vulnerability and erasure, or unmaking, of the subject but also a moment of radical possibility.”23 One might then easily read the vague, undulating, plump, and oceanic

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20. Once the capital of the Northern Kingdom, but largely de-populated by the Assyrians (cf. 2 Kgs 17:6), Samaria held a dubious but distinct relationship to Israel as part of its history and self-understanding.


space or experience envisioned in these texts as a re-valancing of such diasporic senses of being dislodged.

Christ, Sovereignty, and Citizenship

In the *Secret Revelation of John*, Jesus/Christ (again associated with or called Providence/Pronoia) is a divine spark of light, the “autogenes” or self-generated one (who is an emissary of the divine realm and offers the knowledge of the God above all) and humanity’s luminous origins. While light is figured in the text as divinity itself, it regularly also becomes a diffuse form of divinity that inhabits or is inhabited by humanity. In a retelling of the story of Noah, the text describes the flood as an act of the Chief Ruler and his powers. Noah, however, is instructed by Providence, the reflection of the divine light, and she shelters him (and others) from the “immovable generation”:

They were sheltered by a luminous cloud. And [Noah] recognized his sovereignty along with those who were with him in the light which illuminated them, for darkness flowed out over everything upon the earth. (*Sec. Rev. John* 24:26–29)

Light is both a metaphor for knowledge, a quality of individual subjects, and the very location of one’s origins, entangling knowing one’s belonging with the fact of belonging itself. Christ is clearly special, embodying light, but also engendering knowledge of belonging to the light. It is important to note how closely the light is connected to sovereignty—both in the more specific reference in the story of Noah, as well as in the more implicit reference to a “self-generated” one. That is to say, the text seems to evoke both the sovereignty of Israel in its monarchical histories and in its broader connotations of agency and invulnerability. Christ, though clearly a special and idealized figure, is also the figure through which “the immovable generation,” a term with deep resonances in the LXX, recognizes its own sovereignty against a cruel world full of darkness, violence, and separation, enabling its return to its true origins.

Wisdom/knowing/instruction has a long history in the Israelite tradition of not only associations with sovereignty, but (not unrelated) a mode of forming ideal subjects or citizens. The *Secret Revelation of John’s* description of Sophia as a figure who ruptures divine wholeness by acting “out of place,” and thus

25. Michael Williams has written on “the immovable race” and a wider range of similar terms, including stillness, stability, and rest, as they occur in a number of Nag Hammadi texts (including *Gospel of the Egyptians*, *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Secret Revelation of John*). In this work he has noted not only the perhaps more obvious Platonist contexts for these concepts, but resonances between these notions and the OT/LXX notions of the people, city, or king being unshakable/immovable because they have placed their hope in YHWH, though he focuses on the former. Williams, *The Immovable Race*. 
must herself be saved, is a familiar (highly gendered) way of allegorizing and working out questions of Israel’s subjection and loss of sovereignty: the rules of God’s patriarchal household were violated. But it is of course notable that Jesus, associated with another wisdom figure, Pronoia, performs restoration of a kind of sovereignty through knowing.

Of course, Jesus is a figure who regularly promises or symbolically performs the restoration of a whole. It is through the vulnerable, injured, glorious, sovereign Jesus that Paul’s mixed and diaspora communities become “one” under Israel’s God, for instance, that Israel fulfills its promise as the true Israel, drawing people far and wide in Acts, and that the New or heavenly Jerusalem is available or initiated. Although the Secret Revelation of John does not specifically mention Jesus’ death, many other texts associate Jesus’ delivery of knowledge of true origins with his death. The Concept of Our Great Power, for example, recounts the destruction of a worldly kingdom and its rulers, and the salvation of “the pure” to the “Great Power,” which (much like the Father in the Secret Revelation of John and others) is the power above all powers, divinities, and rulers. It is the “immeasurable, universal one” whose light makes souls holy (47:10–15). The text introduces the Logos, who “knows the Great Power,” “speaks in parables,” and “opens the gates of the heavens with his words” (40:25–41:10). The rulers try to destroy the Logos in order to gain access to the Great Power. The text emphasizes the specialness of some (the seed of the Logos and those who wish to follow him, those who are uncircumcised), though suggests the final salvation of all, saying that all those who know the truth find rest in the heavens (42:30–31) and come to reside in the “unchangeable age” (48:13–14). Similarly, the Gospel of Truth strikingly describes the cross of Jesus turning into a tree in which, in a play on and reversal of the garden of Eden, Jesus becomes the “fruit of the knowledge of the Father,” a way of drawing the Father’s children back to “the Totality.” The plot of the Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles not only relies on him as a figure who endures suffering, but (through the narrative of the pearl merchant) figures him as the purveyor of a knowledge that leads one to the city.

In each case, Christ/Logos/Savior has a socially productive value and one different from his assumed place catalyzing Christianity. Jesus’ social productivity might be understood in a specifically diasporic vein, as seen through Brian Keith

27. This motif immediately calls to mind some other figurations of Israel’s infidelity or its possibilities as female sexual unruliness or impurity, such as Hosea 2, the “strange woman” of Proverbs, etc.
28. Compatibly, one of Paul’s better known rhetorical inversions is the contrast between the wisdom of “this age” versus God’s secret wisdom: “Yet among the mature, we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:6–8).
Axel’s work on the Sikh diaspora. In Axel’s essay “The Diasporic Imaginary,” in which he notes how analytics of place have been over-emphasized in studies of diasporic identity and belonging, he suggests that for many diaspora groups place/place-of-origin is not necessarily the most pressing matter. He instead highlights violence as a “key means through which the features of a people are constituted.”

This proposal is “intended to account for the creation of the diaspora, not through a definitive relation to place, but through formations of temporality, affect, and corporeality.” His use of the term “imaginary” is not meant to recall Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” (often cited in diaspora studies), but recalls Lacan’s mirror stage, in which identification plays out in constructions of time and images of the body.

Axel analyzes the Sikh diaspora in relationship to the Indian national state and government. He discusses the notion of “Khalistan” (meaning “land of the pure”), a wished-for Sikh homeland “to set against constructions of India and Pakistan,” conceived in the 1940s, and revitalized in the 80s and 90s when as many as 100,000 Sikhs had been killed in conflict with the Indian government. Khalistan in its more recent evocation, however, is meant not to describe a geographical location, but rather a “global reality” of identification. Particularly in the 80s and 90s, Sikh men were picked up, unlawfully imprisoned, tortured and killed. He describes the way this state-inflicted violence and torture of Sikhs was a crucial component of the Sikh diasporic subjectivity. The importance of and common display of graphic images of the tortured or dead bodies of shahids (Sikh martyrs) worked to produce the Sikh subject “through gruesome spectacle … the authority of this spectacle, moreover, is elaborated through reference to a monstrous, inhuman Other: the Indian nation state.”

Axel tracks the gendered and sexualized implications of torture, employing the Lacanian notion of le corps morcelé (“the body in bits and pieces”). For Lacan this fragmented body presents a “time before” against which the wholeness of the nation is constructed. “Countering this national fantasy,” he writes, “the sight of the tortured body within Khalistani practices of subject formation provides the opportunity to elaborate repeatedly a time before the apotheosis of the Indian nation-state, before contemporary violence, and before a history of movement and mobility that scattered the members of an integral Sikh quam—a desire of the total body politic.” Importantly, the tortured body belongs in a certain way to both the Indian state and Khalistan. The victim of torture is

32. Axel, “The Diasporic Imaginary,” 425. The temporal dimension of this might shed some light on Hebrews and the always-already heavenly city as well. In my recent monograph, Rethinking Early Christian Identity, I use Axel’s work to think about the letters of Ignatius, particularly his archaizing of christianismos against ioudaismos, as well as some dimensions of the Secret Revelation of John.
both disciplined citizen and abjected other of the state, as well as the “abject subject” through which Khalistan re-emerges (as if dormant) in one and the same move.\textsuperscript{33}

Axel’s work crystalizes the work of Jesus’ martyrological inferences (as one who died “for us”) specifically, but more generally the weighted importance of the subjected, even sometimes gruesome, dimensions of his death. He is at once a disciplined subject under “the rulers” and the ideal citizen of Israel, a diasporic projection sustained and revived in part through elaborations of a new and heavenly homeland, a “land of the pure” in its own right. As Paul puts it, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Phil 3:20–21). The ideal citizen of the diasporic collective, Jesus/Christ/Logos/Savior concretizes not only the subjugation attending diasporic self-understanding, but the fantasies of power, self-determination, and belonging that attend it as well. As the Concept of Our Great Power claims, “And he was victorious over the command of the rulers, and they were not able by their work to rule over them” (42:6–10).

It bears mentioning that the production of an idealized and abstracted (and usually “pure”) collective such as Khalistan, the New Jerusalem, the Father’s realm, etc., through representations of violence and martyrrological discourses, resonates with the history of the production of \textit{ioudaismos}, a term that, however ambiguous in its content, first appears in martyr discourses as the abstracted entity giving significance to the martyr’s death.\textsuperscript{34} That is to say that \textit{ioudaismos} may very well do the work of homeland, a diasporic projection of counter-belonging in the face of social fracture and disciplinary states.

While scholarship has typically read phrases such as “the immovable race,” notions of election, and retellings of primal genealogy (e.g., the seed of Seth) as indicators of a specifically gnostic self-understanding, they are better understood, I think, alongside these instances as ways of working out ideals and histories of sovereignty, crises of belonging, notions of Israel’s election, its abandonment by God, or being lost at large. This focus on diaspora also presents us with new possibilities for understanding the rhetoric of purity/defilement that have again been given a rarefied spin in gnosticizing scholarship.

\textsuperscript{33} Axel writes: “Torture enacts a drama of contestation between the ‘real’ people of India and the people of an ‘illusory’ Khalistan. Such divisions of peoplehood notwithstanding, the performative act of torture produces its object, the body, as both Indian and Sikh, as both citizen and traitor, and both as belonging to the state and something that exceeds the state. Conjoined to Punjab, the ‘disturbed area’ and the ‘sensitive border state,’ the tortured male Sikh body has become a sign of the fragility of the national territory.” Axel, “The Diasporic Imaginary,” 420.

\textsuperscript{34} As Judith Lieu argues. Lieu, \textit{Christian Identity}, 251–52.
If neither “gnostic” nor “Christian” is a suitable category for these texts, we might simply dispense with them for a broader, more diffuse and more accommodating (not to mention much more historically viable) heading: that is, diasporic literature. I am suggesting “diaspora” here rather than “construction of Jewish identity” for several reasons. For one, the limits of the term “Jewish” for the first and second centuries have been well noted. Second, in addition to the individualized implications of “identity” to describe texts as constructing an identity at all applies a single, totalizing category to the text. While the notion of constructions of Christian identity arose to intervene in the essentialisms inherent to notions of “Christian origins” and to enable topography of “early Christian” diversity, fluidity, and contestation, the term “construction” itself suggests solidity that is at odds with its very initiating impulse. In other words, while “identity construction” gestures to the messiness of selfhood, it falls short of accommodating very much of it.

On the other hand, diaspora and belonging as conceptual terms (at least in terms of recent diaspora theories) tend to make room for more complicated, qualitative assessments of social life: the manifold forces giving shape to senses of belonging, the experiential intricacies involved in one’s attachment to a given entity or entities, and the ways those attachments constantly re-form themselves. Diaspora assumes not “hybridity” over against some kind of cultural purity, but that articulations of “pure” cultural belonging involve, paradoxically, multiple belonging from the outset, since diaspora collectives are always already entangled in colonial or imperial intervention, mapping, racialization/minoritization, and violence. As such, diaspora theory tends to eschew such locational politics, seeing interest in precise positioning and mapping as partaking of the diasporic rhetoric of authenticity (who is “really” in).

While Karen King attaches herself to an expanded notion of Christianity (a rich, diverse, and contested phenomenon), what King enables is a reading of ancient literature against even her own categorical inclinations. In an exquisitely precise way, she attends to the ways the text resources traditions and themes that would otherwise seem categorically at odds with one another: its simultaneous engagement of Genesis and Platonic themes generates not only a burning critique of life under the Roman empire, but an almost conservative vision of Roman republican values. Even more significantly, at least from my point of view, is the way she enables a reading of the text that de-emphasizes

36. Rey Chow has made the point about diasporic rhetoric of authenticity quite powerfully in her book, Writing Diaspora.
the diagnostic reductions that have plagued gnosticizing scholarship in favor of questions about experiences of captivity, nostalgia, idealization, and suffering.

King’s most exploitable point is that gnosticism as a category will always uphold some version of an orthodox Christianity. And it turns out that “Christianity” itself is an orthodox category, one that presumes certain directionality in the flow of history and that seeks to crowd out complex and multidirectional affiliations in the name of a certain overarching social coherence. Without an intense scrutiny to what we label as Christian and why, orthodox coherence and directionality will be the implicit underwriter of our histories. Thus the collapse of gnostic categorical assumptions will require the collapse of Christian categorical ones, as well and a rigorous attention to the poignant, pressing, and more textured questions of human experience at the fusion of various powers, histories, and commitments.

Works Cited

Karen King’s *What is Gnosticism?* has clearly and decisively problematized the category of gnosticism. Her arguments are complex and frankly my knowledge of the literature she surveys is only sufficient to follow her discourse, not sufficient to critique it. I find her argument convincing for two reasons:

1. Her control of the data and exposition of the history of scholarship is compelling.
2. Her argument coheres with other problematic areas we are uncovering as we explore the rise of the Christian movement(s).

Gnosticism is one more problematic category in a long list of problematic categories, all calling for a thorough revamping of how we reconstruct the emergence and development of the Christian movement.

King charges that gnosticism was a construct of scholarship based upon the dogmatic categories of the heresiologists, principally Irenaeus:

> The ancient discourse of orthodoxy and heresy has affected not only the goals and substance of the study of Gnosticism but its methods as well. I suggest that in the development of modern historical scholarship the concerns of ancient discourse with origins, essence, and purity were transformed into disciplinary methodologies.¹

She demonstrates that the gnostic redeemer myth, a favorite of German scholarship, was a complete fabrication. Furthermore, scholars attempted to shoehorn the newly discovered Nag Hammadi documents into the procrustean bed of the gnostic model. After following her careful analysis, I began to wonder if what these documents had in common was the jar in which they were found.² I take away a set of correlated conclusions from King’s analysis:

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² In a similar way I have wondered if what the books in the canon of the NT have in common is that they are in the canon.
1. Historical categories must not be determined by dogmatic concerns.
2. The categories should arise out of the material itself.

**Plato is the Problem**

At the heart of King’s charge against the scholarly gnostic model is its dependence upon the dogmatic categories, especially those of Irenaeus. Ultimately it is a dogmatic model, not an historical model. Thus her argument is another in the long line that attempts to free the study of early Christianity from the grasp of dogma and theological needs. This debate extends back to the origins of our discipline—back to Hermann Samuel Reimarus, David Friedrich Strauss, and Ferdinand Christian Bauer. It has been a long and difficult struggle, always being refought in each generation. Gains are never as complete as we think, and the task always remains unfinished.

King argues that the categories of the heresiologists were determined by dogmatic needs. Since they sought to define who was in and who was out, these needs were also political:

Thus his [Irenaeus’] refutation was two-pronged: to describe the false teachings and to provide the true. In so doing, his work *Against the Heresies* not only laid the basis for what would later become Christian orthodoxy, but also set a pattern for attacking one’s opponents that would persist to the present day.

This is essentially correct, but it can be pushed deeper. Irenaeus seeks to protect and prove the truth of Christianity by following the ancient Greek model of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He is after the essence of Christianity, which he maintains the heretics have defiled. For Plato, the form or (in Aristotle’s terms) the essence precedes or pre-exists existence. It is eternal, perfect, and change-

3. This dogmatic prejudice is easily seen in debates concerning the *Gospel of Thomas*. To identify it as gnostic means that it is not historical, not reliable, as though canonical meant the opposite. John Meier is a good example of this tendency. He assumes that “among first-generation Christian leaders, there was a common gospel message on which all of them agreed,” pointing to 1 Cor 15:11. Likewise, “from the very beginning of Christian preaching about Jesus, there was a certain ‘biographical’ thrust that formed the Jesus tradition in a direction that ultimately produced the canonical Gospels.” Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1.118. This biographical thrust is anti-agnostic. Notice the implicit use of Irenaeus’ model: the pure the essence of the gospel handed on in the canonical gospels. In Meier’s discussion of the *Gospel of Thomas*, showing that it is gnostic is what resolves the question of its use as a historical resource for the historical Jesus (see 1.125–6). Jonathan Z Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, called out this duplicitous way of reconstructing history.

4. Hans Conzelmann in the first sentence of his classic RGG article “Jesus” states: “The historical and substantive presupposition for modern research into the life of Jesus is emancipation from traditional Christological dogma on the basis of the principle of reason.” Conzelmann, “Jesus.” 5. Joseph Bessler, *A Scandalous Jesus*, argues that Martin Kähler’s Christ of faith is an effort to make faith and the churches safe from the political challenges and loss of power opened up by the historical understanding of Jesus.

What Categories Are Left?

less. What we see in this world is defective and error prone, yet it reflects that perfect other world. Our senses perceive these perfect forms, but only in a reflected way. This model is often referred to as essentialism.6

Irenaeus has adopted and adapted this model for his apologetic purposes. The pure essence is handed on through the unbroken chain of apostolic succession, what King calls the argument from genealogy. He lays this out in Haer. 3.1.1:

It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world.7

Like an eternal, unchanging form, the truth is contained in a guaranteed vehicle, “in the tradition of the apostles.” This truth they took care to hand on:

We are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times.

Like the forms themselves, those who were entrusted with handing on the truth “should be very perfect and blameless in all things.” The chain from the apostles to the bishops is like the chain of a perfect philosophical school. From Christ the perfect philosopher, to the apostles, to the bishops, a perfect and unchanging essence is handed on to perfect and blameless successors. This chain of succession (genealogy) guarantees the truth of what they hand on:

[They] taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to the perfect apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves.

The truth and those who pass it on are perfect and unchanging. Those are the marks of truth. The heretics “rave” and are disordered and have changed the unchangeable, thus proving they are not true.

Irenaeus has co-opted Plato’s model for his understanding of the truth of Christianity. That truth must be a perfect, unchanging essence. The heretics have evidently corrupted that pure, eternal, and perfect essence. In fact, their lack of moral perfection is proof of their heresy, because ethics and ontology are interchangeable.

The underlying power of Plato’s model is evident in Irenaeus’ defense of why there must be four and only four gospels. The number four in his analysis is the number of perfection:

6. For an excellent summary article, see Teresa Robertson and Philip Atkins, “Essential vs. Accidental Properties.”
It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh.

There is only one Gospel but four gospels, so the four gospels represent the perfect representation of the one— their very “fourness” demonstrates their perfection:

It is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit. As also David says, when entreating His manifestation, “Thou that sittest between the cherubim, shine forth.” For the cherubim, too, were four-faced, and their faces were images of the dispensation of the Son of God. For, [as the Scripture] says, “The first living creature was like a lion,” symbolizing His effectual working, His leadership, and royal power; “the second [living creature] was like a calf,” signifying [His] sacrificial and sacerdotal order; but “the third had, as it were, the face as of a man,” — an evident description of His advent as a human being; “the fourth was like a flying eagle,” pointing out the gift of the Spirit hovering with His wings over the Church. And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated. For that according to John relates His original, effectual, and glorious generation from the Father, thus declaring, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Also, “all things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made.” For this reason, too, is that Gospel full of all confidence, for such is His person. (Irenaeus, *Haer. 3.11.8*)

Like a pure Platonic form, the Word is one and the Gospel is one with four manifestations. But unlike a Platonic form, it is clearly manifest here and now in the apostolic tradition. The heretics who deviate and corrupt this pure, changeless form correspond to the imperfect shadows on the cave wall.

As King demonstrates, Irenaeus’ model has not only had a great influence on the scholarly construction of gnosticism, but it has set a course for all succeeding Christianity. Christianity has sought to define its pure essence and to eliminate those who did not conform.

On a personal note, my doctoral dissertation was on the debate between Adolf von Harnack⁸ and Alfred Loisy⁹ concerning the essence of Christianity. Ironically, Harnack, a Protestant and defender of Marcion, sought the pure es-

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sence of the Gospel, while Loisy, a Roman Catholic, maintained that Harnack’s pure essence was an illusion. Harnack employed the analogy of the fruit with its seed. Remove the fruit and find the seed, the pure essence. Loisy thought maybe Harnack’s fruit had metamorphosed into an onion—one kept peeling away the layers until there was nothing left. For Loisy the more correct analogy was the tree that organically grew from an acorn. But the acorn was not the essence of the category “tree,” only a beginning, and the tree was constantly changing.¹⁰

Darwin as Guide

It is important to appreciate the fundamental intellectual debt of Western thought to the doctrine of essentialism. Showing that Irenaeus was wrong and that we should not use dogmatic categories is not sufficient. We need to be careful not to fall into an unthinking essentialism of our own. I take King’s study of the Secret Revelation of John to be an effort to do just this. She analyzes it on its own terms, not as a representative of some “type” or “essence” of a religion.¹¹

But Irenaeus has implanted essentialism in the DNA of Christianity, just as Plato has embedded essentialism into the DNA of Western thought. It constitutes a major struggle to free ourselves of this intellectual habit. An example from biological science demonstrates the power of essentialism and the effort required to overcome it.

According to Ernst Mayr (1904–2005), Charles Darwin’s rejection of essentialism was a critical aspect of his achievement, and the lingering strength of essentialism was central in preventing biologists from accepting Darwinism. Mayr was in a unique position to pass judgment on this issue. The opening paragraph of the Wikipedia article “Ernst Mayr”¹² summarizes his importance:

[He] was one of the 20th century’s leading evolutionary biologists. He was also a renowned taxonomist, tropical explorer, ornithologist, and historian of science. His work contributed to the conceptual revolution that led to the modern evolutionary synthesis of Mendelian genetics, systematics, and Darwinian evolution, and to the development of the biological species concept.

A long time professor at Harvard, he was one of the most important formulators of the Darwinian synthesis that triumphed in modern biology in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹³ Mayr sets the problem up as follows:

¹⁰. King takes note of this debate in a long endnote and devotes chapter 3 to Harnack. King, What is Gnosticism?, 291 n. 14.
¹¹. See in this issue, Kotrosits, “But What Do We Call It? The Secret Revelation of John and Crises of Categories.”
¹³. De Queiroz, “Ernst Mayr and the modern concept of species.”
Hindsight suggests that enough facts were available soon after 1859 to have permitted the universal acceptance of Darwin’s theories, yet they were not universally adopted until about 80 years later. What could have been the reason for this long resistance?¹⁴

Mayr suggests a number of factors slowed the acceptance of Darwin’s theories until the late 1940s. Early on, the literal interpretation of the Bible was certainly important. But Mayr does not think this was all that critical, as evidenced by the rapid acceptance of Darwin’s theory of common descent.¹⁵ Much more important for him was the dominance of essentialism:

Essentialism was the almost universally held worldview from the ancients until Darwin’s time. Founded by the Pythagoreans and Plato, essentialism taught that all seemingly variable phenomena of nature could be sorted into classes. Each class is characterized by its definition (its essence). This essence is constant (invariable) and sharply demarcated against all other such essences.¹⁶

For Mayr, Darwin’s real intellectual breakthrough was his rejection of essentialism, which is also what delayed Darwinism’s acceptance by biologists for eighty years. Darwin was in point of fact rejecting the common sense of his day, the common sense of most of Western intellectual history, and the common sense of most folks until this very day.

Dictionaries are predicated on essentialism. In defining each and every word, they provide the user with the word’s essence. But modern dictionaries also demonstrate the triumph of Darwinism. They provide multiple definitions and, over time when new definitions arise, they duly record them. Language mavens (linguistic conservatives) often become agitated over a dictionary’s refusal to support the “correct,” that is, the essential, definition.¹⁷ I. A. Richards labeled this “the proper meaning superstition,” the insistence that words have one and only one proper meaning. He marked that this understanding of words assumes “that water, for all its virtues, in canals, baths and turbines, were really a weak form of ice.”¹⁸ He was attacking the rhetoric of his day that was gov-

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¹⁴. Mayr, What Evolution Is, 74. Mayr is referring to the acceptance by sciences, not the public at large.
¹⁵. Common descent is part of evolutionary theory but was accepted by many biologists while rejecting the mechanisms that Darwin proposed. Thomas Huxley, Darwin’s bulldog, disagreed with Darwin on the issue of essentialism. See Mayr, What Evolution Is, 79; Browne, Charles Darwin, 92–93, 104–6.
erned by essentialism precisely during the eighty-year period that essentialism also was blocking the acceptance of Darwinism by biologists.

Darwin rejected looking for the essence and studied instead a population. “What we find among living organisms, he said, are not constant classes (types), but variable populations.” Darwin was not seeking the essence of a species, some eternal, unchanging (fixed) form, but variability in a population. Where species had been fixed in the older essentialist model, species now became a problem: just what was it? To this day this is a debated problem in biology and its related disciplines. The answers are not a matter of essence, but of statistics. The most popular, but by no means universal, understanding of a species is the one originated by Mayr:

Perhaps the most widely accepted species concept is known as the Biological Species Concept (BSC). According to this definition, proposed by the evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr in the mid-20th century, species are groups of actually or potentially interbreeding natural populations which are reproductively isolated from other such groups.

In developing his model for evolution, Darwin introduced the concepts of population thinking, chance, and history. Natural selection is the process that makes evolution work. Population thinking, chance, and history refuted essentialism. They eliminated in one fell swoop Plato’s forms, Aristotle’s essences, the common sense of essentialist thinking that had dominated and in many ways continues to dominate the West.

Is the evolutionary biological model applicable to the study of early Christianity? There is much we can learn from it. Understanding and adopting its anti-essentialist method is an important corrective to our essentialist heritage. As King has shown, modern scholarship on gnosticism has been led off track by falling prey to Irenaeus’ dogmatic categories of heresy and orthodoxy. That is, scholarship proceeded along an essentialist line. What King appears to me to be proposing is a model based on population thinking. There is a population with variability. Within that population there will be a great deal

20. As a birdwatcher this debate affects the identification of birds. For example, are the Eastern and Western Meadowlarks two species or one? They are now classified as two separate species, although in the field they can only be distinguished by voice. Historically they were one species that was separated by the last ice age into the eastern and western populations. But should you be birding in an area where the two populations meet, you will encounter mixed birds that confound classification. This is true of a number of birds, e.g., the Dark-eyed Junkos, Northern Flickers, Eastern and Spotted Towhees, etc. Classifiers are divided into lumpers (those who want to reduce the number of species) and splitters (those who want to increase the number of species). Thirty years ago the tendency was towards lumping, but now with DNA testing the tendency is toward splitting. So it is highly debatable as to how many species of birds are endemic to the continental United States.
22. See Stuart-Fox, “Two Views,” for an intriguing survey of the issues involved.
of similarity, seldom (if ever) identity, and at its edges a great deal of difference. King has begun to suggest a way to describe the variability in that population. But what is missing (it seems to me) is the process, the equivalent of natural selection. Taking King’s work seriously requires reconsidering more than the category of gnosticism. We must abandon the use of the essentialist model, and with it go many, if not most, of our categories.

Example: Debate at Antioch

The debate between Cephas and Paul at Antioch as Paul reports in Gal 2:11–21 provides a good example of how essentialist categories have distorted our understanding. I will follow Brigitte Kahl’s “Peter’s Antiochene Apostasy: Re-Judaizing or Imperial Conformism?” because I find it the most convincing and cogent analysis of this confrontation in Antioch and because it was positively received in an earlier meeting of the Christian Origins Seminar.

The traditional interpretive model employed to understand Paul was essentialist and juxtaposed Christianity to Judaism, gentile to Jew, faith to works, uncircumcision to circumcision, and freedom to slavery. This model has been used to understand Paul’s accusation against Cephas: “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal 2:14 NRSV). Hans Dieter Betz’s analysis of this passage in his Hermeneia commentary on Galatians is typical of the traditional understanding:

By changing back to the observance of Jewish custom and law, the Jewish Christians have only reversed their emancipation from Judaism. When they gave up the observance of the Torah, they also admitted that as a Christian one can be saved without the Torah. Returning to the Torah cannot simply eliminate that first step of denying the existence of Torah observance.

As Kahl shrewdly notes about Betz’s analysis, “to live like a Gentile” means “to live like a Christian.” Cephas’ hypocrisy lies in asking gentiles to live like Jews. Betz’s interpretation keeps the traditional model firmly in place, equating gentile with Christian and understanding it to be opposed to Judaism. Betz clearly sees Cephas and Paul at the meeting in Jerusalem abandoning Judaism in favor of Christianity (shifting from one type or essence to another), but then at Antioch Cephas reneges. That model, however, is an inappropriate, anachronistic misreading of Paul. Paul did not convert from Judaism to Christianity, nor did Christianity even exist in this period. The essentialist categories “Judaism” and “Christianity” have misled Betz and distorted his reading.

23. I have dealt with the episode in Antioch in a fuller fashion in my The Real Paul, 77–90.
24. Betz, Galatians, 112.
Moreover, Kahl notes that this reading destroys the rhetoric of Paul’s argument. Since Paul is confronting Cephas face to face, one expects a strong rhetorical attack. Instead as Kahl remarks, “Paul all of a sudden becomes exceedingly polite, diplomatic, and pussy-footed.”

Instead of confronting Cephas, Paul gives him “a limp and very strangely worded applause for being a good Christian.” This misreading results from misunderstanding the Greek *ethnikōs* as “gentile,” that is, Christian, not Jewish.

The rhetoric of Paul’s argument would suggest that *ethnikōs* should be understood in a negative sense as an insult to Cephas. Actually this Greek word root does have a negative sense in the NT. The root *ethnik-* is used four times in the NT, always in a negative sense, which illustrates Paul’s usage.

And if you greet only your friends (*lit*: brothers) what have you done that is exceptional? Even the pagans (*ethnikoi*) do as much, don’t they? (Matt 5:47 SV)

The contrast between brothers and pagans makes it clear this is a contrast between insiders and outsiders or, as we might say colloquially, between “us and them”:

And when you pray, you should not babble on as the pagans (*ethnikoi*) do. They imagine that the more they say, the more attention they get. (Matt 6:7 SV)

Then if he or she refuses to listen to them, report it to the congregation. If he or she refuses to listen even to the congregation, treat that companion like you would a pagan (*ethnikos*) or toll collector. (Matt 18:17 SV)

In each of these cases the *ethnikoi* are those outside, foreigners, and they are viewed as negative examples, definitely lower in status from the perspective of honor. One should do more or better than these foreigners, the pagans (or nations), do. The implication is: we are better. In Matthew’s gospel this negative view of the nations/*ethnikoi* leads directly to the gospel’s conclusion: “make all the nations (*ethnē*) your disciples” (Matt 28:19 BBS). Thus Matthew’s community/readers who have seen the nations as their inferiors are now told that their fate lies among them—they are to make them their disciples. Even though Matthew’s gospel was written considerably later than Paul’s letter, his usage helps us understand how this *ethnik-* word group is employed.

**Not as a Jew**

When Paul says that Cephas is living like one of the nations and not as a Jew (*ethnikōs kai ouchi Ioudaikōs*), he is not commending Cephas but condemning him. The next verse exposes the Jewish presupposition: “We may be Jews by birth and we may look at people of the nations as ignorant and corrupt” (2:15

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SV). From the Jewish point of view, the nations are natural-born sinners, and literally in the Greek Paul refers to them as “sinners” (hamartōloi; Gal 2:15 BGT). Kahl draws what is the “natural interpretation” of Paul’s condemnation of Cephas:

You, Peter, have made a big public show of being a Jew, but in fact I, Paul, tell you, you live like a Gentile sinner, a goy: ethnikōs. And as a Jew, as you and I know, you should not. You should live Ioudaikōs, not ethnikōs.28

In Kahl’s reconstruction of events, Cephas (and I would add James) has become concerned about the ramifications of these mixed meals in Antioch. How will the imperial officials judge them? Kahl catches the claustrophobic atmosphere of life in the Roman Empire:

In a situation where everything is over-determined and colonized by civic religion and most of all imperial religion, nothing, not even Jewish law, Jewish identity, and the Jewish God can escape the omnipresent grip of the Roman empire and its idols: Sin, in Paul’s terminology.29

The perspective from Jerusalem may have had to shift when confronted with the realities of Antioch. Eating together in Syrian Antioch in the period after the meeting in Jerusalem sometime in 47–48 CE is a very different situation than in the Jewish homeland where Judaism is the dominant religion. The young movement is still experimenting. In Antioch the Roman imperial presence is much more prominent than in Judaea and Galilee. As James, and then Cephas, see the situation, the mixed meals in Antioch are too dangerous. They are apparently withdrawing from the meals to minimize the danger. They are proposing that those of the nations have three choices:

1. They can perform some of the rituals that are required by the imperial religion as part of one’s civic duties. Judaism had long worked out an accommodation on this issue.
2. They can become fully Jewish by accepting circumcision.
3. Cephas and the Jews must withdraw from table fellowship.

The first option does not appear to have been seriously considered. For Cephas and James the second solution, circumcision, is a pragmatic solution to a dangerous situation, a solution that has the advantage of fitting with established tradition. If neither one of these options is accepted, then the third choice would be obvious:

Paul rejects this offer from a Jewish perspective and accuses Cephas of behaving not as a Jew, but as goyim, ethnikōs, a heathen. Ironically both Paul and Cephas

see themselves as acting from a Jewish perspective. For Paul the proposal of Cephas is idolatry; it violates the oneness of God. For Jews the defining characteristic of the nations is that they worship idols. In Paul's earliest letter he commends his converts as having "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9 NRSV). Or again in the debate about food offered to idols, Paul's position appears clearly:

What is my point? That meat sacrificed to a pseudo-divinity really is what it is alleged to be, or that an idol is what it is alleged to be? Not at all. My point is that such sacrifices are actually offerings to demons and not to God. I don't want you to become involved with demons. (1 Cor 19:19–20 SV)

Paul argues that the solutions offered by Cephas and James return the nations back to the worship of idols. Their solution acknowledges the primacy of the idol Caesar against the call of the one true God. God has called the nations from the worship of idols to the worship of the one true God in the name of the Anointed. Any backtracking on this call is a violation of God's oneness, an act of idolatry.

Kahl's proposal moves away from the essentialist categories of Christianity versus Judaism as represented by Betz's analysis. She examines the passage on the basis of its rhetorical expectations. In her analysis it turns out not to be a debate about Christians abandoning the freedom of the gospel and falling back into Jewish practice, but to be intra-Jewish debate on how to deal with the Roman empire in a context in which Jews and members of the nations are eating together in the name of the Anointed.

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Kahl has examined the population and taken the language it used seriously, trying to understand it within its own context and not in the context of later theological debates, as was the case with Betz. She saw that population as mixed, made up of Jews and members of the nations who were eating together while not observing required imperial demands. She does not assume that these are Jewish Christians who lapse back into Judaism. She analyzes the situation within its context. The driving force becomes the empire. Meeting or not meeting the demands of the empire is what drives the debate forward.

Marcion

Jason BeDuhn in his penetrating study of Marcion, *The First New Testament*, has drawn an inference not unlike King's. I quote DeDuhn's conclusion because its points are so reminiscent of King's:

In short, the acceptance by modern researchers of the claims made about Marcion's handling of the texts included in his New Testament is an example of uncritical adoption of polemic as history. First, Tertullian and his associates in this charge against Marcion are working from an anti-Marcionite bias that
shapes their assumptions. Second, they are writing from a position in time that makes it impossible for them to have any sure knowledge of the state of either anything like a New Testament canon or its constituent books at the time of Marcion. Third, we know for a fact that several of their assumptions are incorrect: there was no New Testament canon before Marcion, from which the latter rejected parts unsuited to him; there was no larger Pauline corpus from which Marcion excised the Pastorals; there was no universal, undisputed orthodoxy from which Marcion diverged. All of these are anachronisms that Marcion’s later critics project back into the circumstances of his activity. In many cases, Tertullian and Epiphanius claim erroneously that the particular wording of the Evangelion or Apostolikon is Marcion’s invention, when in fact we find the same wording in catholic biblical manuscripts. The almost canonical status afforded the accusations made against Marcion, therefore, shows a remarkable lack of critical historical assessment among modern researchers.30

In BeDuhn’s reconstruction Marcion turns out to be not a deviation from pure orthodoxy, but a creative force in the transformation of the movement. The question that now needs to be on our agenda is what drove Marcion in the creation of his NT? And what drove Tertullian and Epiphanius to attack him?

**Other Problematic Categories**

I suspect a major driving force in the period after 70 CE in the emerging self-understanding of Christianity was hostility within the empire to Judaism. At least I would propose as a hypothesis that the Christian movement’s response to the empire’s hostility to Judaism is a major force in the evolution of Christianity.

This reminds us that Judaism itself is a problematic category. Jacob Neusner has long rejected the notion of normative Judaism and has argued that scholarship needs to “learn how to respect the plurality of Judaic religious systems and speak of Judaisms, not Judaism, or ‘a Judaism’ when we mean a specific religious system.”31 Normative Judaism is a type of essentialist thinking applied to Judaism, just as orthodoxy is a type of essentialist thinking applied to Christianity. Daniel Boyarin has been pursuing the borderlines between Judaism and Christianity in an especially intriguing way.32

Lest I be accused of Christian exclusivism, Christianity itself is a problematic category. If gnosticism is problematic, then Christianity is equality so, since Christianity created gnosticism as “the other” as a way to identify itself. The

32. See especially Boyarin, *Dying for God* and *Border Lines*. 
same of course can be said mutatis mutandis about Judaism. Pagan\textsuperscript{33} and gentile\textsuperscript{34} are likewise problematic.

This list of problematic categories could and should be extended, and we must begin to come to terms with how to name things. But we need a descriptive method that considers the variation in a population and is not worried about the essence. We must lay out this variation within the population as it develops over time, showing how change responded to various influences, both internal and external.

To move forward, we need to invent our categories anew and discover our method. But King has clearly demonstrated that the essentialist categories are dead.

\textsuperscript{33} “Pagan” is an especially problematic term, since it was only used in the Latin west by ecclesiastical writers. In the East, Hellene or ethnikos (“gentile”) was used. Paganos continued in its secular sense. See Peter Brown, “Pagan,” 625.

\textsuperscript{34} As Christopher Stanley points out, “in social terms, there was simply no such thing as a ‘Gentile’ in the ancient world.” Stanley, “Neither Jew nor Greek,” 105.

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"Are you, or have you ever been, a gnostic?" Caricatures, Blacklists, and Understanding the Aspirations and Lives of Real People

Michael Williams

I have been asked to provide a summary of principal theses in my books *The Immovable Race* and *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* and an update on how my views have evolved during subsequent debates regarding the usefulness of “gnosticism” as a critical category for reconstructing Christian origins. I am certainly honored by this invitation and I offer my sincere thanks to Lane McCoaghy and the steering committee of the Westar Institute’s Christianity Seminar for the opportunity to be included in this discussion.

A confession at the outset: the connection in my title of the term “blacklists” with the topic of so-called “gnostics” is an application I have borrowed from a just-published book by Geoffrey Smith, *Guilt by Association*, a fine and important study that I had the privilege of examining somewhat in advance of its publication. I do not recall that Smith actually conjures up Joseph McCarthy by means of any explicit reference, and certainly Smith’s intriguing thesis about what is going on with Irenaeus of Lyons is far subtler than a heavy-handed blacklisting of the bishop himself as a theological “McCarthyite.” But Smith’s study is one of the many helpful analyses by new generations of scholars from whom I have learned an enormous amount about a topic that has preoccupied me for almost five decades. And as I was reflecting on themes for this paper, Smith’s use of “blacklists” struck me as something worth stealing for inclusion in the caption. I offer a little more about his study later on.

I became interested in Nag Hammadi studies already as an M.A. student at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio), mentored by the late Roy Bowen Ward. I wrote an M.A. thesis (1970) exploring the nature and possible motivations for reinterpretations of the Jewish creator God as a flawed figure. In my Harvard dissertation (advisor George MacRae) I turned to the theme of “stability, immovability” in Nag Hammadi and related sources and to the context for this in Platonic tradition and in Platonizing sources such as Philo of Alexandria and others. I almost published that dissertation, but then decided after a while that I wanted to frame things quite differently.

1. This is a version of his Princeton dissertation.
Over the period between the completion of my dissertation and the publication of *The Immovable Race*, I had learned an enormous amount from my colleagues in other disciplines (sociology, anthropology, etc.) at the University of Washington and had begun to ask new questions of this material. I remained very interested in the relation of mythemes in Nag Hammadi and related sources to Middle and Neoplatonic traditions. But I had begun to feel that my work on these themes needed a tighter organization, so I pulled out material related to one particular self-designation: “the immovable race.” I attempted to locate such a self-designation not only against the background of Platonic theorizing about the changelessness/immovability of the invisible realm of forms, but also within social worlds expressing admiration of “immovable” heroes (e.g., philosophers; certain Christian monks).

In addition, because I was focusing on a single and rather rare self-designation, I explored possible implications for sectarian social history. I was still using the term “gnostic,” by the way, but already in this book I was beginning to squirm against the limitations of some conventional boxes. As I expressed it in the very last paragraph of that book:

> If this study has contributed something to the understanding of the historical significance of a sparsely attested gnostic designation within the wider flow of late antique spirituality, then perhaps I will be forgiven for the presumption of devoting an entire monograph to the topic. In part my courage for doing so has been drawn from the conviction that when members of a religious movement call themselves something we ought to pay at least as much attention to that designation as we do to things other people call them or to the devising of our own designations and categories, for frequently such self-designations condense in compact form the most important dimensions of a religious community’s self-understanding.²

In my last chapter (“The Immovable Race and Sectarian *Sitz im Leben*”) I was pushing back a bit against Frederik Wisse’s resistance to the sorting of Nag Hammadi texts according to sectarian labels familiar from heresiological texts, but also (on the other side of this argument) against some aspects of the “Sethian” gnostic model under which Hans-Martin Schenke had classified four of the “immovable race” texts (*Apocryphon of John*, *Gospel of the Egyptians*, *Zostrianos*, *Three Steles of Seth*)—but not the fifth (*Wisdom of Jesus Christ*).

Already in *The Immovable Race* my engagement with some of the sociological research on sectarianism had also begun to intensify my dissatisfaction with certain features in conventional descriptions of “gnosticism.” This was especially the case with the topic of soteriological determinism versus free choice. Of course, resistance to that generalization had already been mounted by other researchers.³ But I was focused specifically on a select group of texts and

³. E.g., Schottroff, “Animae naturaliter salvandae.”
concluded that all of them in one way or the other expressed open-endedness to membership in the “immovable race.” This involved a kind of paradoxical assumption that one could be converted to a race that was also somehow “elect.” In hindsight I think this element in *The Immovable Race* anticipated what evolved into a more fundamental preoccupation that drives a lot of my work today—that is, looking beneath the abstractions of theological or mythological formulas to ask about how real people behave. In that study I was exploring how converts might have thought about the social act of joining a community that espoused the notion that members belonged to a preexistent “seed”—that is, did that make “conversion” and expectations for post-conversion behavior different from most other proselytizing groups?

But over the decade between *The Immovable Race* and *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* my inquiry had expanded to a wider range of related issues. In various paper presentations and published articles I wrestled with how Nag Hammadi and related sources treated themes such as the body, sexuality, gender imagery, ethics in general, the material cosmos and social engagement. This was also a period in which I worked on some quite concrete features of Nag Hammadi manuscripts—namely, handwriting and scribal habits. There were social-historical implications to this technical analysis of paleography. Building on earlier studies by others, I was trying to fine-tune inferences about how many scribes had been involved in the production of the Nag Hammadi books, and then I eventually collated this with other evidence pointing to possible compositional design in individual codices.

Aspects of all this work came together in *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*. The fundamental argument of the book was that the ways in which “gnosticism” had come to be used and abused as a category were not merely confusing—that much had been obvious for a long time and had been commented upon by many. More importantly, in my opinion, was that assumptions and assertions about the character of “gnosis,” “gnostic,” or “gnosticism” inherent in prevailing uses and definitions of this category had coalesced into a chant of easily repeated stereotypes that too often drowned out the actual voices of our sources.

4. See Williams, *The Immovable Race*, 158–85 (“The Inclusiveness of the Immovable Race”). An earlier version of this conclusion was developed as “Conversion to Chosen Races in Gnostic Literature” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL, San Francisco, 19–20 December 1981). Of course, this is no more paradoxical than the assumption by other writers or traditions of the necessity for conversion and appropriate behavior, even though “election” is also an integral theme (e.g., Paul; Calvin; et al.). It pertains to the issue of free will versus determinism addressed in various schools of ancient Mediterranean philosophy (e.g., the Stoics), but with a very long history in various cultures to the present day. But this was partly my point—i.e., that somehow shoving “gnosticism” into some kind of special deterministic corner ignored how real people in analogous traditions have behaved. The other part of my argument was that prior expectations of “gnostic determinism” (due to stereotypes) actually prevented recognition of explicit open-endedness in some of these myths.

5. Thus bibliographic information for my prior articles on these various areas can be found in the bibliography of *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*. 
Thus, in the central chapters of *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* I targeted what I felt were some of the more important of these assumptions and assertions:

1. A conventional wisdom had emerged that “gnosticism” was a religion whose heart and soul was a gleeful “protest,” a systematic reversal of all values in scripture, an “inverse” or “protest exegesis.” In fact, I argued, inversion of values is not at all consistent or systematic in such sources. What reversals of value do appear tend to be targeted at resolving problematic or ambiguous texts (e.g., embarrassing anthropomorphisms where God appears jealous, capricious or ignorant).

2. “Gnosticism” had been characterized as a “parasite” religion, infesting and feeding off hosts such as Judaism or Christianity or other traditions. But I argued that this is merely a prejudicial metaphor that describes the fact that most of the movements in question did not turn out to be successful new religious movements. The “parasite” metaphor offers no explanatory power for accounting for this general lack of success. In fact, it tends to preempt sociological analysis of this question by creating the notion of a single organism called “gnosticism” that was simply genetically parasitical.

3. Among the most common features alleged for “gnosticism” is a virulent anticosmism, a distinctively radical depreciation of the material world and society. “Gnostics” supposedly had no sense of beauty or order in the cosmos and above all no sense that the material cosmos could function positively to reveal the nature of God. World-rejection allegedly meant that these people were in explicit revolt against the political structures of their age or were apolitical and showed little or no interest in surrounding society—they were anti-social dropouts. This important dimension in the usual definition of “gnosticism,” however, is seriously misleading. Much of the evidence we have for social behavior by members of such movements suggests persons who were evidently less inclined toward social deviance than many of their (“orthodox”) critics and more interested in the reduction of sociocultural tension. For example, some are criticized for avoiding martyrdom, or for their lack of dietary scruples (eating

6. For convenience, in the following portion I draw on elements of a summary I presented in Williams, “Was There a Gnostic Religion?”


idol meat) and their willingness to continue normal social interaction associated with community religious festivals or public entertainment (attendance at gladiatorial games), or for their introduction into their teachings of material from the theater or from poets and philosophers.13 If “anticosmism” is meant to imply a high level of world-rejection in the form of sociocultural deviance and tension with surrounding society, it is precisely the wrong description.14

4. Closely associated with the notion of “gnostics” as world-rejecters is their reputation as body-haters, having nothing but contempt for the irredeemable “prison” of the material human body and positive interest only in the spirit.15 Once again, however, it is the complexity and variety in our sources that such a cliché tends to obscure. We do find language in some sources that is disparaging of the material body, but this is only part of the story. Even the physical body is sometimes portrayed as bearing something of the divine likeness, as actually being an important medium of revelation, and even as being potentially transformable.16 So setting up readers of “gnostic” sources to expect hatred of the body as an obvious feature can stand in the way of even noticing the surprisingly rich real-life diversity in perceptions and sensibility about life in the body among these traditions.17

5. There may be no cliché with respect to “gnosticism” that had been more commonly repeated than the claim that “gnostic” myth typically produced either fanatical asceticism or the debaucheries of libertinism—either the systematic denial of the material body or the systematic violation of the ethical laws imposed by its creator(s).18 There is also probably no cliché more completely erroneous. There are indeed texts with an emphasis on asceticism, though of varying types, but there are also sources assuming the importance of marriage, procreation and family life in general. And the reliable evidence for licentious practices among these groups is slim to none. It is not possible to distill the ethics of the sources in question into one neat “gnostic” program. There are several genuine ethical concerns in such texts, including communal values, idealization of the family, aspirations for personal growth and achievement.19

13. E.g., Irenaeus, Haer. 1.6.3; 1.24.5; 1.26.3; 1.28.5; 2.14.1–9.
15. E.g., Filoramo, History, 91–92.
16. An example of the one-sidedness so common in the construction of “gnostic” body hatred is Giovanni Filoramo’s discussion of Valentinian teaching about the body being the abode of demons. So Filoramo, History, 98–99. He is correct that this was Valentinian teaching (and also that of a wide spectrum of other groups in antiquity!), but he leaves out any discussion whatsoever of the rest of the story, the good news. Hippolytus, e.g., says that the Valentinians teach that the body can be cleansed of its demons. See Hippolytus, Ref. 6.34.4f.
18. The assertion has been too common in the literature to require specific citation here. For several examples, see the citations in Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, 292–93 nn. 1–6.
6. Often coupled with the cliché about asceticism or libertinism and the assumption of the lack of any serious ethical concern is the assertion that “gnostics” were determinists. They considered ethical behavior irrelevant for themselves, since they were automatically destined for salvation because of their fixed, inner divine nature. As one scholar has put it, “One cannot become a pneumatic, but rather one either is or is not one.”

Though there are possible instances of some type of determinism in certain of these sources, most of the texts normally classified as “gnostic” conceive of the possibilities for humans as being far more open-ended in principle. For example, precisely the writing that is often identified as the example of “gnosticism” par excellence, the Apocryphon of John, presents a decidedly non-deterministic typology of souls and their responses to revelation, with eventual damnation reserved only for those who have once known the truth but then later have rejected it (Ap. John II 25,16–27,30). Contrary to past conventions in scholarship, soteriological determinism is useless as a defining characteristic for the writings usually categorized as “gnostic.” Not all of them, and probably not even very many of them, actually share this feature.

In the next-to-last chapter of Rethinking “Gnosticism” I touched on the famously difficult debates about “gnostic origins.” It is fair to say that I did not solve the problem so much as suggest that many of its difficulties derived from viewing it as a single problem. That is, if one is imagining “gnosticism” as a single (“parasitic”) organism, then one ends up seeking to trace the origin of its genome. But if there is no single organism, and many of its alleged DNA base pairs are not there in the first place, then one does have a problem. I suggested that the various phenomena usually lumped under the category “gnosticism” probably derive from multiple origins, multiple innovations. We might do better by breaking down the task: how to account for the origins of Valentinian speculations, for example? At least we know there was a Valentinus, and we know the names of some historical figures at least associated by others with his name (Ptolemy, Heracleon, Theodotus, Marcus, etc.) whose teachings share some distinctive overlapping features.

And in the final chapter I developed some of the implications of my work on scribal hands in Nag Hammadi manuscripts into hypotheses about the rationales for composition of individual codices. The details in that chapter cannot be summarized here given the space limitations, but I will cite my overall observations that the producers of at least most of the Nag Hammadi books

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22. Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, 235–66. This chapter developed material from an earlier paper. See Williams, “Interpreting the Nag Hammadi Library.”
seem to have been persons (1) who accepted the biblical demiurgical proposition that the cosmos was not created as a result of the initiative of the highest God,23 (2) who were intensely interested in speculation about the true nature of divinity and the supra-cosmic realms, (3) who were focused on the soul’s eventual transcendence of the created order and on patterns of spirituality that would contribute to this goal, and (4) who saw nothing un-Christian in these views.24

Here I was invoking the admittedly somewhat awkward term “biblical demiurgical” to describe a specific feature rather than a sect. I argued in the book that perhaps we would do better not to use the terms “gnostic” or “gnosticism” as though we were indicating a commonly agreed-upon religion or religious type, since (1) there has not in fact been any common agreement on the definition of “gnostic”/“gnosticism,” (2) these labels have been used so diversely that confusion has gathered on them like tar on boots, and (3) too many past attempts at clarity in definition have incorporated clichés such as the ones mentioned above that I had discussed in the central chapters of the book. Given this situation, tag a text as “gnostic” and the likelihood that it will be misunderstood is immediately elevated.

Thus I was not suggesting simply a new name for the same thing, but rather a new analytical approach that takes more seriously multiple movements and innovators. One can continue to make progress in mapping specific individual movements and traditions that fall into recognizable clusters due to their use of specific sets of mythemes and doctrinal and ritual jargon (e.g., “Valentinian” traditions or the cluster of sources that some scholars call “Sethian”). One can also employ a specific feature such as “demiurgy,” but without front-loading it with an assortment of expectations. Instead, we can observe that a variety of figures and movements have held to demiurgical cosmologies and can explore the variety of factors accounting for this and possible implications for other doctrines, as well as for communal formation, ritual performance, social engagement, and so forth.

Karen King’s What is Gnosticism? appeared a few years after my Rethinking,25 and the two have come to be cited together quite often. Over the years I had been involved in several conference projects or committees in which King was also member or leader. We had shared ideas, and I had benefited from her work. Her book voiced fundamental views that at many points overlapped with my own, but her overall approach was quite different. I had been focused primar-

23. Today I would word this first point more cautiously and introduce an important caveat: whether the fourth (or fifth?) century CE producers of the codices were attentive to the fact or not, several of the demiurgical texts in the Nag Hammadi books do effectively trace initiative for the creation of the cosmos to the highest God (e.g., by reassuring that everything took place in accordance with the will of God).
25. King, What is Gnosticism?
ily on how typological definitions of “gnosticism” had come to be impediments too often blocking recognition of the actual content in original sources. I think King agreed with those arguments, but her main focus was aimed instead at the history of how modern scholarship constructed those obstacles—how it had constructed “gnosticism.”

Therefore our two studies are in many respects complementary, though King expressed some dissatisfaction with my conclusions. From her point of view I had climbed out of a pit only to slide back down on another side. She felt I was merely “jettisoning the term ‘Gnosticism’ and replacing it with ‘biblical demiurgical,’ a designation that would, nonetheless, still ‘classify most of the same myths together for study and comparison.’”26 Though she stated that my goal was laudable, in the end I was only privileging “one mythic element over all others as the determinant characteristic” and that in justifying this choice on the basis of the importance of demiurgy as a catalyst of controversy in late antiquity, I was still taking my lead “from the polemicists about which features are most important to focus on in reading these texts.”27 This is an important and appropriate caution, but I have always felt that it missed my point. Or it could be the case that on this point we do have different views. I confess that it was hard for me to tell. For I was suggesting a heuristic classification that might help explore and appreciate variety, not a new name for some rigidly defined heresiological box. And King herself seems to be looking at a similar roadmap when she says:

> the most important problems arising from typological method have less to do with the improper application of the method than with its ahistoricizing, essentializing, homogenizing effects. Trying to fine-tune application will not resolve these difficulties. This means, not that we should dispense with typologies altogether, but rather that their purposes and positionalities need to be clearly articulated and their provisionality recognized.28

I thought I had been suggesting much the same. It could have been that in addition to the level of importance I accorded to demiurgical cosmology as a provisional classification, she was also disappointed with my characterization of demiurgical speculations as failed new religious movements. I did not intend this as some sort of triumphalism but rather as an observation about numerical outcomes, and perhaps predictable ones in sociological terms.29 Central to King’s argument is the completely legitimate observation that modern constructions of “gnosticism” are heir to ancient constructions of “heresy.” But she

29. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, 236–41 (cf. 103–13). Here I was drawing on theory elaborated by sociologist Rodney Stark and his various collaborators.
argues that my suggestion of grouping demiurgical sources for comparison only repeats the mistake, because the “study of the materials continues to be governed by the traditional approach, established by the polemists and re-inscribed into scholarly study.” ³⁰ Here we may simply disagree. Comparing and contrasting varieties of chiliastic eschatology, for example, might privilege for the purposes of analysis something cherished by Irenaeus of Lyons but later attacked by Dionysius of Alexandria. Such a study, however, would not necessarily traduce either bishop. I am suggesting that we approach demiurgical myths in the same manner.

I turn now to the still different approach proposed by Bentley Layton and David Brakke. Layton’s important 1995 article, delineating a new model for defining the “gnostics,” was published too late for me to take into account when I was writing Rethinking “Gnosticism”, ³¹ but I did have occasion to discuss his approach in a later article. ³² Layton proposed restricting the term “gnostic” to a specific historical “school of thought” rather than a kind of doctrine. He suggested that the place to start was by labeling “gnostics” those who called themselves this, and given my own final words in The Immovable Race (quoted above), Layton’s approach would in theory held a certain obvious attraction for me. Layton’s argument was reprinted, updated, and very significantly developed fifteen years later in the excellent book by David Brakke. ³³ If the conventional practice in scholarship had always been to use “gnostics” as Layton and Brakke apply the term, I assume that I still would have written some book in the 1990s, but it would not have been Rethinking “Gnosticism”. ³⁴ As was true with King’s book, here I cannot do full justice to these works by Layton and Brakke but can only comment on my general stance toward their fundamental theses, granting most attention to Brakke’s volume.

As I mentioned, both scholars argue that we should begin with gnostikos as a self-designation. Everyone recognizes that some people did use this term self-referentially. The most extensive example is Clement of Alexandria and his notion of the ideal “gnostic.” But there are a few places where heresiologists, including Clement, explicitly claim that certain people called themselves gnostikos. ³⁵ The stated method followed by Layton and Brakke is to begin with

³⁰. King, What is Gnosticism?, 216.
³¹. Layton, “Prolegomena.”
³⁴. I acknowledged this in Williams, “Was There a Gnostic Religion?”, 74–75.
³⁵. Cf. Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”, 33–41; e.g., Prodicus (according to Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 3.30.1); followers of Marcellina (Irenaeus, Haer. 1.25.6); Naassenes, according to Hippolytus (or whoever was author of this anonymous work), Haer. 5.2; 5.6.4; 5.8.29; 5.11.1 (but in Haer. 5.9.22 these Naassenes are said to have called themselves “the only true Christians”).
a group that used this self-designation, establish its fundamental profile, and then use that profile to identify other sources belonging to the group. As Brakke puts it, “the ‘Gnostics’ (and perhaps, if we dare, ‘Gnosticism’) can be retrieved as a social category, one that corresponds to a group that recognized itself as such—and was so recognized by others.” Their point of departure is Irenaeus’ claim in *Haer.* 1.11.1 that Valentinus had taken his model for the principles of his own school (διδασκαλείον) from τῆς λεγομένης γνωστικῆς αἱρέσεως, which Layton and Brakke prefer to translate as “the Gnostic school of thought.” This is a crucial passage for them, and they connect it with the reference in *Haer.* 1.29 to a *multitudo gnosticorum*, which is followed in 1.29 by the account of a myth that is very similar to the theogony in the first part of the *Apocryphon of John*. Brakke’s study was written after the publication in 2006 of the Tchacos *Gospel of Judas*, and inferring that this writing is likely essentially the same as the *Gospel of Judas* mentioned by Irenaeus in *Haer.* 1.31.1, he then calls upon both the *Apocryphon of John* and *Gospel of Judas* as primary texts constituting the foundation for reconstructing this “Gnostic school of thought.” The other basic building block in this reconstruction is the famous third-century ce reference by Porphyry, disciple of Plotinus, to Christian “sectarians” who were using apocalypses that included titles that we also see for tractates among the Nag Hammadi texts (*Zostrianos*; *Allogenes*). Porphyry then says that it was these people whom Plotinus was attacking in *Ennead* 2.9, to which Porphyry (not Plotinus) gave the title “Against the Gnostics.” So though Plotinus never actually used the term “gnostic” in that lecture, Porphyry had later concluded that it was the most appropriate designation for those opponents.

From there Brakke expands the collection of sources assigned to this “Gnostic school of thought” by identifying texts deemed to represent the same basic myth. Thus, though he has updated Layton’s original program, he follows the same fundamental strategy in reconstructing “the Gnostics.” I should point out that he offers a very helpful distinction between “interpretive” or “heuristic” categories (such as “apocalyptic Judaism”), which function “as a tool for comparison,” and “social” categories or “how ancient people actually saw

39. It is quite possible, and I think most likely, that when Porphyry applies the term αἵρετικοί (“sectarians, heretics”) to the opponents (who were also “friends”) of Plotinus in the opening words of *Life of Plotinus* 16, he is consciously applying it in the pejorative sense he had heard from Christian heresiologists in third-century Rome. His decision to refer to them as “gnostics” might also bear the influence of or even derive from heresiological usage.
and organized themselves.” Brakke observes that although a distinction can be made, “in actual fact nearly all the categories that scholars of religion use are a hybrid of these kinds.”\(^{40}\) And I generally agree.

The part of the Layton–Brakke approach with which I can identify most comfortably is their classification of sources according to the amount of shared specific tradition. By that I mean the grouping of *Apocryphon of John* with not only the mythic tradition Irenaeus opposes in *Haer.* 1.29, but also with other texts that share what seem to be special mythemes that constitute something like a common “story,” as Brakke puts it. For example, one thinks of texts that place importance on the peculiar set of four aeonic luminaries—Harmozel, Oroiael, Daueithai, and Eleleth (with some variations in spelling)—whom Brakke calls “perhaps the most distinctive characters in Gnostic myth.”\(^{41}\) As is well known, most of the sources that Layton and Brakke group by this means into the “Gnostic school of thought” fall into the assemblage that the late Hans–Martin Schenke and others since have referred to as “Sethian.” And I argued in *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* that scholars can and should continue research on connections like this among our sources. To be sure, shared clusters of mythemes do not necessarily mean membership in the same tightly defined social community in every case. Literary borrowing, adaptation, and experimentation are conceivable in some instances. But the shared mythic traditions here do suggest at least some amount of sectarian continuity and networking.

On the other hand, one of the stumbling blocks for me about the Layton–Brakke approach has always been their insistence that the grouping they come up with is built firmly on “gnostic” as a self-designation. It seems to me that this remains an unnecessary albatross. And I repeat the objections I have raised before: (1) we have yet to find this self-designation used by devotees in one of the original sources (e.g., from Nag Hammadi) that are assigned to this grouping, and (2) the approach skirts too easily around the stubborn fact that others (e.g., Marcellina; Naassenes; Prodicus) who are *not* included in the reconstructed “Gnostic school of thought” are clearly reported to have referred to themselves as *gnostikoi*. Referring to examples of the latter, Brakke has remarked that “when Irenaeus and Hippolytus say that people ‘called themselves’ gnostics, this may indicate that the term functions as a secondary claim to perfection rather than as a sectarian self-designation.”\(^{42}\) Just so. But if that is the case, why would not the same explanation be in order for persons associated with sources assigned by Brakke and Layton to the reconstructed “Gnostic school of thought”? The response would presumably be that only in this particular case does Irenaeus mention a “hairesis called ‘gnostic’” (*Haer.* 1.11.1). But called so *by whom*? This is one among several questions posed in the recent study by Geoffrey Smith

that significantly challenges many former theories, including aspects of the Layton–Brakke model.

But first I would call attention to the relevance for this discussion of another recent book. In 2009 Tuomas Rasimus published a very fine dissertation in which he turned the spotlight on the mythological tradition described by Irenaeus in *Haer.* 1.30, which, Rasimus argues, represents a distinct and actually older strand to which the *Apocryphon of John* was only secondarily related.43 The differences between the mythology reported in *Haer.* 1.30 and that in 1.29 had been acknowledged for generations, and 1.30 matches elements in materials that other heresiologists also described and called “Ophite.” Rasimus’ new contribution is a fresh systematic analysis that charts correlations of this mythology with several Nag Hammadi tractates. According to Rasimus, original works more closely related to the myth in *Haer.* 1.30 would include the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II 4), *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II 5; XIII 2), *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC III 3; V 1), and *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III 4; BG 8502,3). Rasimus calls for revisiting the distinctive content in *Haer.* 1.30 with renewed and more systematic attention to its potential significance for understanding related sources like some of those just mentioned. These, he stresses, have suffered relative neglect in the shadow of research more concentrated on texts classified according to a typological model for “Sethian Gnosticism”—which in most respects matches the category mapped by Layton and Brakke. Rasimus contends that a proper analysis of the “Ophite” material is essential to understanding “Sethianism” itself, and he proposes that these overlapping sets of evidence should be treated as a single “Classic Gnostic” corpus, but one that manifests distinct stages of development. His study includes a variety of subtheses that cannot be addressed here, but he has made a compelling case, in my view, that at the very least much closer attention should be granted to these other sources and their relation to *Haer.* 1.30. Brakke himself tightens the ranks of the mythologies mentioned by Irenaeus in *Haer.* 1.29–31, noting that Irenaeus mentions “other beliefs of two sets of ‘others’” (Chapter 30 and 31). Irenaeus appears to indicate that these ‘some’ and ‘others’ belong to a single group of ‘Gnostics,’ although they would hold somewhat different views.”44 But only the possible connection of 1.31 with the Tchacos *Gospel of Judas* receives much comment in Brakke’s book. After the work of Rasimus, I do not think one can simply skip over the “story” in 1.30, which is noticeably different from that in 1.29. This would not invalidate Brakke’s approach entirely, but I think it would call for dramatic revision. The Layton–Brakke “Gnostic school of thought” would become a more complex assortment of communities, or at least a tradition capable of accommodating multiple “stories.” And if the latter, then are we

43. Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered.*
not turning away from the very criterion (common story) that is the basis for the Layton–Brakke reconstruction?

Geoff Smith’s Princeton dissertation, *Guilt by Association*, takes a fresh look at the emergence of the heresy catalogue as a “literary technology” for recasting rivals. In such “blacklists” opponents who otherwise had no necessary affiliation are organized into coherent communities established by demonic powers. That ancient Christian heresiologists were engaged in creating a heinous and alien image of opponents and portraying them as stemming from a common root of error is not in itself a new idea. But Smith’s analysis is the first to provide such a systematic focus on the earliest stages in the emergence of the Christian heresy catalogue as a genre and a nuanced explanation of its unique and decisive role. A central piece of evidence in Smith’s analysis is the famous reference in Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* (26.8) to a “Syntagma” or “Catalogue against All the Heresies that Have Arisen.” This lost writing has conventionally been understood as something like the original prototype for the Christian heresiological catalogue, a prototype expanded by Irenaeus in his “Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-Called,” which itself then set the model for heresiologies to come. Smith’s analysis offers new perspectives on the social and literary matrix and earliest uses of the *Syntagma*.

I cannot do justice to the structure and content of Smith’s entire argument, but will mention only its implications for this present discussion. In his final chapter Smith turns to the adaptation of the *Syntagma* by Irenaeus of Lyons—or more accurately, Irenaeus’ adaptation of an updated version of the *Syntagma*, since Smith thinks it very possible that the *Syntagma* had undergone revisions since the version mentioned by Justin (a general idea first suggested by Adolf von Harnack). Smith contends that the version available to Irenaeus did not yet include Valentinus and the teachers in his tradition. It was Irenaeus’ project to make clear that Valentinus and Valentinian teachers should be added to the blacklist. Smith’s argument is that Irenaeus has invented the “school called ‘Gnostic’” (*Haer*. 1.11.1) by collectively identifying all of the heretics in the updated *Syntagma* as this school. Now this thesis stands in significant tension with the Layton–Brakke theory that the “school called ‘Gnostic’” refers to one specific historical sect or tradition (a.k.a. “Sethian” by other scholars). Smith argues that his approach makes much better sense of the collectivity of Irenaeus’ uses of the term *gnostikos*. Most scholars who see in *Haer*. 1.11.1 and 1.29.1 a reference to a particular sect/school have (like Layton and Brakke) nevertheless had to make room for a second, broader sense in which Irenaeus applied the term *gnostikos*, sometimes applying it to other “heretical” groups. Smith proposes to eliminate the need for assuming a sort of sloppiness in Irenaeus’ language, and

contends that the bishop has very intentionally constructed a “gnostic” school out of the list of names in the Syntagma and then has depicted the Valentinian “school” as only another successor in the same lineage:

Irenaeus draws together two powerful oppositional strategies: the association of misguided knowledge with false teaching, a strategy pioneered by the author of the Pastoral Epistles, and the consolidation of a number of distinct opponents into one single school, a strategy found in sectarian medical polemics.48

I will say that, for me, a lot of inconvenient oddities or apparent sloppiness in Irenaeus’ use of the gnostikos terminology suddenly seemed resolved. I am struck by the economy of Smith’s theory on this point. Whether scholars agree with Smith’s conclusions, he has laid out a case that will have to be taken very seriously.

The Layton–Brakke delineation of “the Gnostics” has going for it at least its clarity: they are referring to one historical social group represented by a specific set of texts, and I have always thought that to be the strongest feature of their approach. Some kind of tradition-historical relationship surely does exist among at least most of the sources they identify. The necessity of anchoring all this to a “Gnostic school of thought” that is not simply a grouping invented by Irenaeus, however, is in my mind now even more questionable.

I do want to point out that Karen King, David Brakke, and I (as well as others) are agreed on something very important. All three of us in different ways have advocated the eschewing of some of the reigning conventional stereotypes about “gnostics” and “gnosticism.” Like both King and myself, Brakke wishes to avoid constructing “gnosticism” on the basis of “attitudes,” etc.49 And in recent work I suppose I have become even more preoccupied with pursuing questions along these lines. I have been especially interested in implications of heterodox cosmologies for social behavior, and particularly in everyday life. This is an evolution of certain aspects of the research in Rethinking “Gnosticism”.

The long history of repetition of clichés about “gnostic world-rejection,” “anti-cosmism,” “hatred of the world,” “escape from the world,” and so forth has left deep scars in the discourse about such texts. My impression is that one encounters such clichés somewhat less often these days, but one still does encounter them. I would suggest that whatever shape the way forward will take, we will need to get beyond this in order to understand the significance of demiurgical myth-making as a feature among early Christian societies. Not wishing to extend unduly the length of this paper, I offer only a few final observations on which I have elaborated in recent articles:50

48. Smith, Guilt by Association, 171.
49. E.g., Brakke, The Gnostics, 41–42, 44.
50. I have elaborated on some of the following in Williams, “A Life Full of Meaning and Purpose,” “Life and Happiness,” and “Irenaeus and Opponents.”
That demiurgical myths are “world-denying” is a Weberian-type characterization that initially appears only logical, but I have become even more convinced than I was in 1996 that uses of this sort of characterization have led to deep misunderstanding. Something was indeed being denied or rejected in demiurgical myths, but it was most of all essentially the same moral evil attacked by other Christians (and Jews and many others) of the era. When we read myths in which the actual fashioning of the material cosmos and material humans is performed by figures who are not the true God but lower entities (sometimes even rather nasty fellows), we might infer that producers and devotees of such texts could never have enjoyed a single day in their lives, could never have appreciated any beauty in nature, must have despised everything about the natural world in which they lived day to day, must have been obsessed only with poisonous reptiles or vicious carnivores, destructive storms, earthquakes, and so forth. When one looks in their writings for these kinds of complaints about the natural environment itself, however, they are virtually absent. No doubt they saw such “imperfections,” but so did everyone.

When one looks through the pages of Irenaeus’ attacks on his opponents, it is striking how little is mentioned about what we would call the natural world. The debate is elsewhere: over theology, over whether the teachings of Valentinians or Marcionites, for example, counted as belief in the one true God. There certainly were debates about creator(s) and creation, about how the cosmos came into being. But one hears no voices gushing about how the cosmos is a wonderful, flawless material paradise, but also no great moans about the ugliness of the material cosmos or all of its unbearable physical dangers and imperfections. What one does hear a lot of, and from all sides, is the necessity to resist moral evil in the world. And for that, there was something to be done—indeed something had been done, was being done, would be more fully done. Not the complete elimination of moral evil from everyday experience—that would surely have been viewed as a ludicrous assertion by most everyone. Rather, there had been revelations (in gospels, apostolic letters and traditions, apocalypses, preaching, etc.) about new power. Divine power had decisively thwarted evil and would completely annihilate it by-and-by. I do not see that demiurgical myths in general were any less optimistic about this than Paul, Irenaeus, or many others. Instead, it is their myths for explaining all this that differed.

In brief summaries of “the gnostic worldview,” one so commonly finds the assertion that “gnostics” considered the world to be a “prison” and their all-consuming thoughts were about “escape.” As most everyone knows, however, this is a familiar metaphor found in Plato and picked up by many others. Take only one example, possibly one that is rather unexpected: over the centuries, in any given year at Passover (Easter) time, many Christians in Sardis, Egypt,
and elsewhere might have heard in languages from Greek to Coptic to Latin, to Georgian, and to Syriac the reading of a famous second-century ce homily on the Pascha by Melito of Sardis. At one moment in this lengthy melodramatic performance text, congregations will have been reminded that in Eden the first human, like a clod of earth capable of receiving either good or bad seed, “received the hostile and greedy Advisor” and disobeyed the command of God. As a result, the human “was thrown out into this world as into a prison for the condemned” (ἐξεβλήθη γοῦν εἰς τοῦτον τὸν κόσμον ὡς εἰς δεσμωτήριον καταδίκων). On this passage one scholar in an important edition and translation remarks that, though others had suggested that Platonic influence is behind this language, the “idea of earth as prison corresponds to the Egyptian bondage of Jewish Passover tradition (Deut. 26:5–6),” and rather than Platonic influence, “Melito is more probably interpreting Rom. 5:12–6:14 … on the consequence of Adam’s sin.” This is a plausible inference. But either way, how often do we find scholars classifying Melito in terms of his understanding of the cosmos as a prison?

And the constant repetition of the conventional wisdom that “gnostics” thought of the world as prison, despised life in the cosmos, longed only for escape, and so on, gets in the way of one of the most debated issues surrounding such texts: the origins of demiurgical mythmaking. Where did it come from? As long as we look at these texts and hear only some freakish level of pessimism about life, then we are naturally going to be flummoxed about such a “sudden emergence of a marked ‘darkening’ of the view of the world … for which there are virtually no contemporary parallels.” As I have stated recently, “If we do not jump to the conclusion in the first place that these cosmologies confront us with such a radical and unparalleled pessimism about the world and a disregard for life in the world, then it is not some sudden and radical pessimism about life in the world that needs explaining.” Instead, what “does need more discussion and analysis is how men and women writing and reading such texts were apparently able to accommodate themselves quite well in a world built by lesser gods, and to find in these cosmologies affirmation for a wide spectrum of life-styles and patterns of social engagement.” Such ventures in research will be far easier without baggage that has been packed by others over the generations with things wrongly thought necessities and that will no longer fit in the overheads.

52. Text and translation in Hall, Melito of Sardis. For a summary of manuscript witnesses reflecting the widespread usage of this homily, see xlv–xlvi.
54. Hall, Melito of Sardis, 25 n. 15.
55. Markschies, Gnosis, 83.
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