Gnosticism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Gnosticism

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Few true stories have captivated the imagination of the public in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries like the discovery in 1945 of the Nag Hammadi collection: twelve codices (or books) and part of a thirteenth codex, from the late fourth century CE. The contours of the tale are the stuff of cinema made real. In the shadows of the towering cliffs of the Jabal al-Tarif, in a scattered field of red rock boulders used as a burial ground just outside Nag Hammadi, Egypt, an illiterate farmer named Muhammad ‘Ali al-Samman struck an antique earthenware jar while digging for fertilizer. Once the ancient jar was unearthed, Muhammad was apprehensive about unloading its contents. Might this strange jar from ancient burial grounds contain nefarious jinn or genies? Or did the jar contain unimaginable treasures?

Muhammad smashed opened the jar, and the textual treasures it had kept sealed for over fifteen hundred years have led to a revolution in the study of gnosticism and the gnostics. Since the fifth century CE, the words of gnostics had been preserved almost exclusively in the writings of Christian heresiologists, leaders of the early Christian Church who saw the gnostics as...
heretics because they rejected the tenets of the Church. Although heresiologists such as Irenaeus of Lyon (130–202 CE) quoted valuable sources from individuals and groups now lost to history, the gnostic texts were only included in their texts in order to be condemned. Imagine that American Democrats were known millennia from now only by how they are presented on Fox News. That is what it was like for the gnostics until the Nag Hammadi collection was found. With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection and other gnostic texts such as the Berlin Codex and Codex Tchacos, the gnostics were finally able to speak for themselves.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, scholars began to study the new texts found in these codices and to develop new hypotheses about the gnostics and gnosticism. Old definitions and theories of gnostic had to be rethought. The nature, location, and interpretations of the gnostics had to be seen anew. In particular, three major trends have framed the research in gnostic studies: How do we define gnosticism? What are the origins of gnosticism or the gnostics? What is the relationship of gnosticism to the New Testament and early Christianity?

DEFINITIONS OF GNOSTICISM

In the academic study of any subject, definitions and categories are central. Without clear definitions it is impossible for different scholars to be sure they are studying the same thing. For example, if two individuals are studying football, but one is concerned with tackle football, while the other is interested in soccer, their results will not match. Similarly, without well-formed categories determining which data are included or excluded, scholars may believe they are in disagreement when they have simply been using different materials in their work. If, for example, two scholars want to study water, but one scholar studies only liquid water, whereas the second includes different states of water such as steam and ice, their conclusions will be different.

Similar problems of definition arise in the study of gnosticism and who or what is considered gnostic. Scholars debate the relative merits of different definitions and what should be included in gnostic studies. Six trends are central: (1) typologies, (2) traditionalism, (3) phenomenology, (4) restrictions of the definition, (5) deconstruction of the category, and (6) psychological approaches.

TYPOLOGIES OF GNOSTICISM

The first major trend in theorizing gnosticism after the Nag Hammadi discovery emphasized the construction of typologies. A typology is a catalogue of shared characteristics that are used to classify a group of objects together. Such typologies do important work. First, they bring together a set of texts and movements that may not be historically related. Second, they determine what does not count as gnosticism. If a text or movement lacks the given characteristics, then it is not included in the discussion.

In 1966, the top scholars in gnostic studies met in Messina, Italy, and offered the first major definitions of gnosisc and gnosticism post–Nag Hammadi. They defined gnosisc as “knowledge of divine mysteries reserved for the elite.” In this simple sense, gnosis existed in the first century in a variety of movements but can also be found in completely different religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam (Bianchi 1970). Gnosticism, by contrast, was restricted to the
major gnostic systems of the second century known in heresiological reports of Irenaeus (late second century) and Hippolytus of Rome (early third century) and what had just been found in the Nag Hammadi collection. Gnosticism was defined in this way as the belief in a divine spark in humans, deriving from the divine realm, having fallen into the world of fate. This spark is consubstantial with the divine world but needs to be awakened by a divine counterpart to reintegrate into it. Moreover, the knower, the known, and what is known are identical. That is, to know oneself is to know God, and to know God is the salvation necessary to return to the divine world (Bianchi 1970, xxvii–xxviii).

Although vitally important to the development of gnostic studies, this definition has been abandoned. As the texts from the Nag Hammadi collection were studied more intensely, it was clear many of the texts did not fit these definitions. The ancient texts were diverse and better classified by movements (such as Valentinian), mythological similarity (Sethian), or similar tropes (presence of a Demiurge). The definition also excluded pre-Christian gnosticism or later developments, such as the Mandaeans and Manichaens.

Typologies remain vital to the study of gnosticism. Typologies as they are used today can be classified into two main groups. First are those scholars who assert a separate gnostic religion existed in antiquity alongside Judaism and Christianity. Second are those scholars who catalogue similar terms across texts and groups to identify a common religious proclivity.

The works of Birger Pearson (1934–), Roelof van den Broek (1931–), and Kurt Rudolph (1929–) exemplify the first option. Pearson argues gnosticism originated in Judaism but grew into a separate religious option from it. He avers gnosticism is characterized by three essential features. First is the idea that gnosis, or knowledge from a transcendent realm of the true nature of God and self, is the key to salvation. The second feature is dualism. In Pearson's gnosticism there is a division between a higher and lower God, between the spiritual and material aspects of the self, and between the transcendent world and this earth. Third is mythopoeia, or where the gnostic constructs elaborate myths in which their revealed gnosis is contained. These myths are concerned with theosophy (the nature of God and the divine world), cosmogony (how the world came to be), anthropogony (origin of human beings), and soteriology (how the transcendent aspect of humans can be saved) (Pearson 2007).

Pearson's definition offers an important counterweight to certain lines of theory in gnostic studies. Research into the Nag Hammadi collection and other found texts has focused on early Christian-gnostics so much so that the inarguably gnostic religions of the Manichaens, the first world religion, and the Mandaeans, a gnostic sect from Iraq who still survive today, have been largely ignored in category construction. Furthermore, by stressing that the typological features of gnosticism are found at its origins in texts such as The Apocryphon of John, and how later gnostic religions relate to its core myth, Pearson shows how these essential features can adapt to Judaic, Christian, and Platonic milieu.

Christoph Markschies (1962–) offers a typology different from Pearson's. Markschies does not assert that agnostic religion existed in antiquity until the development of Manichaemism in the third century. Rather, his typology groups together texts to show a remarkable, shared religious proclivity in second and early third century Christianity. Studying the traditional evidence, Markschies finds that eight fundamental features are shared, including the doctrine of a...
completely distant, otherworldly God. Experience and knowledge of this God constitute redemption. This God is not the Creator. Instead, after a (varying) number of emanations into more and more human-like figures, a distinct and separate ignorant or evil Creator God is born. The world created by this lower God is evil and entirely alien from the supreme, transcendent God. Myths of gnosticism exhibit this state of affairs wherein a divine element falls into the evil world, desperate to be awakened. The gnostic is awakened and saved from this evil, chaotic world by recognition of the spark of God within (Markschies 2003, 16–17).

TRADITIONALISM

The hypothesis that gnosticism is a heresy that arose after an early, pure form of Christianity is a traditional perspective. Perhaps the most famous early example of this hypothesis is found in the work of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Harnack famously quipped: “Gnosticism is the acute Hellenization of Christianity.” Harnack understood Christianity to have arisen within the Hellenic world, in contact with Greek philosophy and religion, but ultimately separate from it. The message of Jesus was, from his perspective, simple and nonphilosophical. Greek philosophy later came to influence Christianity first through philosophical categories (soul, spirit, a transcendent deity), then later through cultic practices in mystery religions. Gnosticism was a particularly acute version of this influence. Using Platonic philosophy to reread the Old Testament, gnosticism featured beliefs such as a strong spirit-body dualism, distinction between true God and lower Creator, and a Christology that averred Christ revealed a previously unknown God beyond the Creator. What Harnack took to be central beliefs of Christianity, such as bodily resurrection and the coming judgment, were rejected entirely. On this reading, gnosticism is a heresy derived from perverting the kernel of the Christian Gospel into Greek philosophical terms (Harnack 1961).

Many scholars today continue in the vein of Harnack in reading gnosticism as a late and contaminated version of Christianity. Darrell Bock (1953–) is notable in this regard. Bock argues that scholars such as Karen King and Elaine Pagels overstate their case when they claim that early Christianity featured a diverse array of beliefs from which the orthodox only emerged in the third and fourth centuries. According to Bock, orthodoxy is the earliest and primary form of Christianity as featured in first-century witnesses, such as the New Testament and Clement of Rome (late first century). This evidence shows an early movement praising Jesus, united in their appeal to Apostolic tradition and missionary work that passed on their teachings: that there is one Creator God; Jesus was both human and divine, suffered and was raised bodily, and is worthy of worship; salvation was largely about sin and forgiveness through Christ; and this salvation realized the promises of Israel's law and prophecy. The explosion of the gnostic movement in the second and early third centuries is tremendously variant and lacked a unifying theology or group church. Gnosticism is an interesting theological development evidenced in texts such as the Nag Hammadi collection, but it had no influence or bearing upon the original, orthodox Christianity (Bock 2006).

PHENOMENOLOGY

Mandaean texts. Jonas was a philosopher who sought to understand the worldview of ancient gnostics through what is called an existential phenomenology. Phenomenological philosophers attempt to discard their own preconceived notions of the world and inhabit the worldview of those whom they study. By existentialism, it is meant these philosophers are concerned with how their subjects portray problems of human existence in the world. What do they mean by freedom? How do they approach embodiment and death? What meaning do they give to anxiety, hope, or despair?

Jonas found the gnostic religion was a uniquely strong form of a more pervasive religious worldview of late antiquity. But what sets the gnostic religion apart from its contemporaries is its fundamental sense of human alienation. The gnostic religion sees dualism not just between the body and soul, but also between this soul and the world, a belief known as anti-cosmism. The gnostic experiences a sense of “thrownness,” arbitrarily finding oneself in a hostile, ill-suited world. Salvation from this situation is acquired through gnosis, which for Jonas is the experiential identification between the human’s spirit and the transcendent world beyond creation (Jonas [1958] 1963).

RESTRICTING GNOSTICISM

Beginning in the late 1980s, scholars grew concerned that gnosticism as a category had grown too broad. It was no longer clear which texts could be classified as gnostic or whether such typologies were too vague to be useful. One response to this crisis has been to restrict the category.

Bentley Layton (1941–) proposed that we should begin to construct gnosticism by identifying which groups were explicitly called gnostics (Greek: gnostikoi) in the ancient texts. What Layton found is that few groups in the ancient world were tagged by this term, and none used it as a self-designation. Rather, heresiologists used the term for a certain basic myth depicted by Irenaeus related to the Apocryphon of John, a text later found in multiple versions in the Nag Hammadi collection. This myth relates to the Sethians and a group called the Ophites, a gnostic group deriving its name from the Greek word for “snake.” For Layton, scholars can use this myth as a reliable indicator of what counts as gnostic. As such, the next step is to compare this myth to other texts and find close matches. The final set of texts that contain this myth give what Layton calls “classical Gnostic scripture” (Layton 1987).

Alastair Logan has taken Layton’s lead. Where Layton was concerned with myth, Logan is concerned with identifying the social group. To study this, he uses the sociological theory put forward by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge who characterize religion in three forms. Traditional religion, such as contemporary Catholicism, refers to a large religion that shows a low tension with society. Sects are groups like Protestant denominations that split off from the traditional religion to reestablish what they see as an old form of religion. They are in relatively high tension with the society at large but remain tied to the parent body. Cults, such as Scientology, arise from creative innovation or a sense of revelation, generally without a previous tie to another religious body. They are in high tension with the society at large (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 26–29).

Logan posits that the gnostics arose as a Christian baptismal cult in Syria (Logan 1996, 2006). They practiced a form of baptism that anointed the individual as a new Christ, in which they
sealed the five sensory organs with myrrh. This baptism, called the five seals ritual, catalyzed the anointed into a vision of the heavenly Father, Mother (Barbelo), and Son (Christ) triad. They were in high tension with other Christians for their negative portrayal of the Old Testament God and for asserting a high Christology, that is, a doctrine of Christ that emphasized his divine status above Jesus's humanity as seen in their scripture The Apocryphon of John. They demonize sexuality as a trap used by the Old Testament Creator God or Demiurge to keep divine sparks from returning to the Father in the divine realm or Pleroma. As a consequence, these gnostics were intensely ascetic, avoiding sexual activity and the temptations of this world. Christians, such as Irenaeus, found their form of Christianity vulgar and pushed them out of the community. The group responded by becoming more interested in the Old Testament son of Adam named Seth and his descendants called the seed of Seth. They identified themselves with Seth's seed, whom they considered to be God's elect.

DECONSTRUCTING GNOSTICISM

Most recently, some scholars have attempted to rethink the category of gnosticism itself. In 1996, Michael Williams (1946–) published his watershed book, Rethinking Gnosticism. After years of reading contrasting definitions of gnosticism, Williams asked: do these definitions based upon shared characteristics even fit our texts? In a strict sense, the answer was no. Whether the criterion was asceticism, anticosmism, hatred of the body, elitism, or inverse exegesis, Williams showed that a diverse array of views on each subject could be found in individual texts brought into the category of gnosticism (Williams 1996).

Williams proposes that scholars abandon the category gnosticism because it does not provide any clarity or further our understanding. It is more useful to study small, new religious movements, such as the Valentinians or Sethians. For a more comparative category, he offers the term biblical demiurgical myths to encompass all ancient texts that feature the biblical Creator deity as a lower Demiurge.

Soon after Williams's book hit the shelves, Karen King (1954–) offered a further critique of the category gnosticism. Where Williams sees the category as incoherent, King sees political danger. In What Is Gnosticism? (2003), King elucidates how scholars of the early and mid-twentieth century, such as Reitzenstein and Jonas, unwittingly continued the project of the ancient heresiologists. As King traces, scholars sought origins outside of Christianity or a distinct essence to mark these differences. They explain gnosticism as syncretism or contamination of Christian beliefs with Greek philosophy or Oriental myths in order to show this distinction. Doing so allowed normative Christianity to seem pure.

The study of the Nag Hammadi collection, however, has shown early Christianity was much more variant, shifting, and unstable. Only those who claim to represent orthodoxy see the history of the Church and the New Testament as teleological. Thus, King cautions that gnosticism never existed as a separate entity and only serves to reinscribe ancient discourse that divides orthodoxy from heresy. King urges scholars to focus on the study of individual texts and their location within the milieu of early Christianity (2003).

PSYCHOLOGY, COGNITIVE STUDIES, AND GNOSTICISM

Since the birth of scientific psychology in the twentieth century, scholars have attempted to
understand gnosticism from a psychological perspective. Theorizing from a psychological perspective has the advantage of helping scholars understand how and why gnostic ideas may have originated as products of the human mind, consciousness and mental activities.

Gilles Quispel (1916–2006) was the first scholar of early Christianity to offer a psychologically informed definition of gnosis. He saw gnosis as the experience of the self as the Self. For him, the Self is the deepest aspects of the human psyche, representing the unity of the conscious ego and unconscious aspects of the individual. Quispel derives this idea from the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961). Quispel goes further than Jung in seeing experiences of the self as identical with the experience of the Self, which is God (Segal, Singer, and Stein 1995, 24). These intense and transformative experiences are then mythologized when they are rendered in highly symbolic, imaginative narratives by writers and grouped into gnostic texts.

Quispel understood that Western culture has been influenced by the Christian faith, as well as reason and logic embodied in the scientific method. But he did not think that this was all there is to it. A third force has been at work. This force is gnosis. Because faith and reason have consistently suppressed the experiential awareness of inner divinity expressed in gnostic texts, gnosis has remained a hidden, underground stream that bubbled up in the writings of alchemists, magicians, and others who had experienced gnosis (Oort and Quispel 2008).

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The first scholar to turn to cognitive science was Ioan Culianu (1950–1991). In his book The Tree of Gnosis (1992), Culianu sought the nature of gnosticism in an operation of the mind. Culianu posited that it is possible for the human mind to come to a specific set of conclusions anytime, anywhere. People anytime anywhere can conclude that humans are not made for this world, a concept known as anticosmism. Also, people anytime anywhere can conclude that this world is not made by an intelligent or beneficent Creator. When people hold both of these ideas at the same time, they are dualists and are prime candidates to develop gnostic thinking. Gnosis results when an individual or group accepts the premise of dualism and then interprets biblical texts through it. For example, a reading of the book of Genesis can see a Creator responsible for this universe. If a dualist sees this universe as evil, then the Creator must be evil, or at least deeply flawed.

Much has changed in cognitive neuroscience since Culianu wrote. April DeConick (1963–) has recently turned to cognitive linguistics to theorize the origin and similarity over time of what she calls gnostic spirituality. Whereas most typologies are the creations of the scholar's own interpretation, DeConick theorizes how a specific taxonomy (a cognitive frame) developed in the first and second centuries CE (2013). Cognitive frames are mental shortcuts humans acquire through life that help us quickly interpret incoming information into coherent, understandable categories. All human minds run on such heuristics and cognitive frames, much in the way computer programs (software) run to interpret different commands and produce unique outputs.

According to DeConick, gnostic spirituality as an ancient taxonomy has five defining characteristics. First, the individual gnostics are in personal possession of gnosis. They experience this knowledge of God through mysticism, or the individual encounter wherein the essential human joins the divine through initiatory rites and practices. This inner divinity is an innate, uncreated essence. Such gnostics practice transgressive hermeneutics, which presume the spiritual truth is hidden from the many by their scriptures, which then requires a
transgressive reading of them to uncover the truth. Last, such gnostics are united by a
seekership outlook. They are focused on metaphysical questions and pursue them with an
inclusive outlook that incorporates diverse philosophical and religious positions (2013).

DeConick's position has several merits. The turn to cognition defuses the debate over whether
the gnostic is the invention of heresiologists or was a self-designation by a small group. The
cognitive frame thesis allows both to be true. The heresiologists interpreted this new frame
pejoratively and differentiated it from their own position, whereas gnostics used it to understand
their own religious identity.

This cognitive frame also allows for a diversity of movements and beliefs to arise without
personally influencing one another. Cognitive frames are also located outside of the mind, in
material objects in the environment, such as texts that are imprinted with them. Therefore, it is
possible to read ancient gnostic texts and have the same frame activated in the modern reader.
So watch out.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF GNOSTICISM

In the immediate years after the Nag Hammadi discoveries, some theories of the origins of
gnosticism had to be discarded. The most influential theories from the early twentieth century
came from the History of Religions school. Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920), Richard
Reitzenstein (1861–1931), and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) posited that gnosticism was a
pre-Christian religion that began in the Orient. These scholars thought that gnosticism featured
the myth of a redeemed redeemer: a divine, transcosmic Primal Man who descended into
creation, forgot his divine origin, and requires revelation from beyond to experience salvation.
This figure is also the revealer who saves souls and the souls of humankind who are saved.
They believed that this myth influenced the early Christian theology of Paul and the Gospel of
John. Eventually this Iranian influence on Christianity blossomed into the great gnostic systems
of the second century.

Unfortunately, much of their hypotheses assumed Mandaean and Manichaean sources
antedated those from early Christian heresiologists, which they do not (Bousset [1916] 1970;
Reitzenstein 1921; Bultmann 1956). So their theories had to be discarded. With the Iranian
option off the table, scholars seeking the origins of gnostics or gnosticism were left with two
options: Judaism and Christianity.

JEWISH ORIGINS

In Gnosticism and Early Christianity (1959), Robert M. Grant (1917–2014) hypothesized the
origin of gnosticism could be found in a Jewish apocalyptic sect who saw that their expectation
that God would return to earth and rescue his chosen people disappointed time after time.
When the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE), and later murdered over one
hundred thousand of their people in the Roman-Jewish War (115 CE), their God did not
intervene. Hope and faith were lost. These distraught Jews then shifted their concern from the
end of time to a need to escape this evil world. Moreover, they began to question whether the
God of the Hebrew Bible was all-powerful. Perhaps there was a God above this God?
Unfortunately, the lack of concern with the fall of Jerusalem in the primary texts made Grant's position untenable. Grant himself abandoned it late in his career. Nevertheless, this hypothesis offers a window into how early theorists attempted to trace gnostic origins to a social catalyst.

One fundamental approach in historical-critical studies is called source criticism. A scholar practicing source criticism identifies sections of a text that are not innovations of the author. Instead, these sources are historically prior to the production of the text as we have it. As an analogy, imagine a World War II documentary on TV as a text. When the director cuts to show battle footage or speeches of President Roosevelt, these old pieces of film are sources.

Source analysis also attempts to find external sources an author or text was influenced by. As a contemporary example, Stephenie Meyer, the author of the *Twilight* books, is Mormon. In Mormonism, a central idea is that some individuals at death experience apotheosis (becoming divine). Bella's transformation into a vampire in the third book in the series—complete with lucid vision, an influx of immense energy, and a physical transformation into a glistening, diamond-like body—is rendered to exhibit this sense of apotheosis at her human death. Without source criticism, however, it would not have been clear that Meyer is influenced by the Mormon afterlife vision.

Scholars in gnostic studies practice source criticism. They look for what texts authors cited or must have known. Through source criticism, many scholars argue that the oldest material in gnostic texts arise from Jewish sources. For example, many gnostic texts show a deep familiarity with the Greek version of Genesis. Some, such as Hypostasis of the Archons, center on the biblical figures of Adam, Eve, and Seth. Others, such as The Apocryphon of John, include radical reinterpretations of the creation of the cosmos in Genesis 1:1 to 2:6. Interpretation of these early chapters of Genesis was abundant in nonbiblical Jewish literature of the first century CE, so gnostic literature could have easily developed from such reading practices.

One text that is cited as especially significant as a source for the Jewish origins of gnosticism is The Apocryphon of John. It begins with the apostle John son of Zebedee being visited by postresurrection Christ. This Christ tells John the entire scheme of history, from the beginning to the end of time. In his *Refutation of the Heresies* 1.29–30, Irenaeus locates the gnostics in relation to a certain myth that looks remarkably like the Apocryphon of John. However, in Irenaeus's telling, there is no frame story at the beginning and end of a vision of Christ by John.

What might this mean? Scholars such as Birger Pearson have shown that this Christian frame is a late addition to sources whose interpretive strategies are at home in first-century Judaism (2007). All of this points to a Jewish interpretive community being responsible for the oldest sections of the text.

**CHRISTIAN ORIGINS**

Some scholars argue that the origins of gnosticism can be found in Christianity. Simone Petrement (1907–1992), in *A Separate God* (1990), offers a strong case for this view. Among several strong criticisms of the Jewish origins hypothesis, she points out there are zero direct references to gnostics in Jewish literature of the era. Instead, all early references to gnostics came from Christian writers who identified them as a Christian heresy. If it began in Judaism,
would there not be similar critiques by the rabbis? Moreover, Petrement notes it is impossible to find the gnostic motif of a savior descending to earth in order to call humanity back to God in pre-Christian Jewish sources, but such references abound in Christian literature.

For Petrement, gnosticism is characterized by two key ideas. First there is a separate and divine world of souls outside of the observable cosmos. Second, this lower cosmos has a representative commonly called God, but the *true* God resides in the divine, supraterrestrial world. Petrement claims that the first point is uniquely Christian, and the second is gnostic. The second claim, although not in the New Testament, could arise from novel interpretations of Paul and John. Following Paul, Jesus's crucifixion could be interpreted as a judgment and condemnation of this world. For the gnostics, this could require the abandonment of the law of the Old Testament God. Moreover, the idea that salvation from this condemned world requires a transcocsmic savior was surmised by early gnostics in their reading of John.

**GNOSTICISM AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS**

Since the beginning of historical-critical New Testament studies, scholars have wanted to find what can be said with certainty about the historical Jesus. What words in the New Testament came from his mouth? By contrast, what sayings of Jesus are interpretations or even inventions? To get to the bottom of what Jesus said, critical tools are necessary.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, especially the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings or *logia* of Jesus, has become part of this quest for the historical Jesus because it contains a large number of parallel sayings to what is found in the canonical Gospels. For example:

"Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left." (Matthew 24:40)
"I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left." (Luke 17:34)
Jesus said "Two will rest on a bed: the one will die, and the other will live." (Gospel of Thomas 61a)

How do we explain the similarities and differences, the relationship between these versions?

One option is to look for a source all versions of the saying were familiar with. Many scholars already hypothesize the existence of a document called Quelle or Q. German for "source," Quelle is an early document scholars argue must have existed to account for the parallel sayings found in Matthew and Luke but not Mark. The Gospel of Thomas was found to contain an astonishing number of parallel sayings to Q. Helmut Koester first noted one drastic difference between Q and Thomas. Jesus in Q is concerned with the end of the world or eschatology, especially in the form of a heavenly being called the Son of Man descending to catalyze the apocalypse, but Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas is not. Moreover, the Jesus of Thomas does not reference his resurrection. Instead, the Jesus of Thomas is concerned primarily with the idea that the kingdom of heaven is here, now, and not a future event (Gos Thom 32:25–28).

Koester accounts for this difference by arguing that the Gospel of Thomas contains sayings even more primitive than those found in the canonical Gospels. The compilers of Matthew and Luke utilized later versions of these sayings that included apocalyptic concerns of Jesus into
their texts. Earlier forms of Christian oral tradition may, then, not have seen Jesus as an apocalyptic preacher, but instead as a teacher of wisdom akin to the Hebrew Bible book of Proverbs.

The implication of such an argument is clear: the Gospel of Thomas tells us as much, maybe even more, about early Jesus sayings as the canonical Gospels. At least that was the position of many involved in the Jesus Seminar. Beginning in 1985 and led by Robert Funk (1926–2005), this assembly of scholars voted to include certain sayings of the Gospel of Thomas as authentic versions of Jesus's words. Funk published the results of this seminar in *The Five Gospels*, in which he provides a concordance that includes the Gospel of Thomas alongside the canonical Gospels to illustrate how he surmised the earliest version of sayings was shared by different Gospels.

The work of Koester and scholars in the Jesus Seminar has been controversial, as one might imagine. One alternative hypothesis to the early dating of Thomas might be, for example, that authors of Thomas were aware of New Testament writings and altered the sayings from there. On such a reading, the lack of concern with the imminent apocalypse would not be from Jesus, but instead a later, second-century revision of early Jesus sayings.

A second critique directly contradicting Koester comes from April DeConick. DeConick uses social memory theory to argue the earliest form of teaching in Thomas arose from a community in Jerusalem prior to 50 CE. In these earliest kernels of Thomas, Jesus is an apocalyptic prophet preaching the imminent end of the world and its demands on Christians. Only later (60–100 CE), after these Thomasine Christians relocated to Syria and the apocalypse did not occur, did the community add new sayings and reinterpret the oldest kernels to emphasize a new theology of mysticism. This turn toward mysticism eventually (80–120 CE) led to their theological commitment to a fully present kingdom of heaven here and now, where their church had attained Adam and Eve's divine status before the Fall (DeConick 2006).

**GNOSTICISM AND JOHANNINE LITERATURE**

One of the most widely quoted sections of the Christian Bible is the prologue to the Gospel of John: “In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This section of John contains some remarkable imagery and ideas. The light came down to the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it (1:5). The light dwelled below, but people could not see it, even though “the light enlightens everyone” (1:9). And the Word became Flesh and dwelled among us but was not recognized (1:14). For centuries this prologue has been read for its incarnation theology, where the Word, interpreted as Christ, became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

When the Nag Hammadi collection became available, scholars such as James Robinson (1924–) and Carsten Colpe (1929–2009) noticed that The Apocryphon of John and Trimorphic Protennoia contained a short hymn with a scheme of three descents by an emissary of the divine world into an uncomprehending darkness. Just as in *John*, the third descent of this heavenly being is as Jesus. This similarity raises important questions. Did John and these gnostic texts adopt the hymn separately? Or might they have been part of the same community whose theological dispute over the nature of Christ is embedded in separate texts?
Further work on the Gospel of John and the Johannine letters has made some relationship between gnostic theology and the Johannine community even more likely. In The Community of the Beloved Disciple (1979), Raymond Brown (1928–1998) advocated that within John one can see the development of certain gnostic ideas, especially Christ as heavenly revealer, the emphasis on light versus darkness, and anti-Jewish animus. Brown argues that the Johannine epistles show disputes between the Johannine community and a small group within the church they expelled when these gnostic tendencies came to fruition.

DeConick has extended this analysis. She argues that we find in John a transitional system from early Christianity to gnostic belief in a God who transcends our world, what she calls transcosmic theism. In John, Jesus often refers to “my” Father in heaven. So one must pause when Jesus tells the Jews in John 8:44 that “you are from the Father of the Devil.” That is, these Jews are framed as liars because they are from their own Father, distinct from the Father Jesus refers to as “my Father.” For DeConick, this bifurcation of the Jewish God into a lower lawgiver (Father of the Devil) who rules the earth and Jesus's Father as a cosmic God is a crucial step on the road to the gnostic doctrine of the Demiurge (2013c, 24).

GNOSTICISM AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The trend in gnostic studies that has received the most public attention is surely the relationship among gnosticism, the New Testament, and early Christianity. Documentaries on cable abound, from The Gospel of Judas on National Geographic (2006) to Finding Jesus on CNN (2015). Works in this field such as Elaine Pagels's Beyond Belief (2003) have become New York Times bestsellers. The culture at large wants to know what, exactly, was the relationship between gnosticism and historical Christianity?

There is no simple or singular answer to this question. Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, scholars have largely conceded that the ideas of orthodoxy and heresy are historical constructions, not theological categories. That is, the claim to right belief, or orthodoxy, is a claim made by some early Christians who came to represent normative Christianity. They marked what was different from their beliefs as heresy. The distinction is, then, between social groups and not intrinsic to the philosophy of the ideas themselves. Christian beliefs and ideas we now call orthodox have their own complicated history of development and only coalesced together in the third and fourth centuries. Prior to this, highly diverse teachings about the nature of Christ, the afterlife, the nature of the cosmos, and the character of the true God circulated around the Roman Empire. Many of the texts we now call gnostic would have been written by individuals who defined themselves, simply, as Christians. Yet at issue is how gnostics had distinct views on issues such as the nature of God, Christ, anthropology, and gender that were largely lost after the church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries.

In books such as The Gnostic Gospels (1979) and Adam, Eve, and the Serpent ([1988] 2011), Elaine Pagels has written extensively about the ways in which gnostic views served as foils by which orthodox Christianity came to define itself. On her readings, the proto-orthodox church found itself in debates with gnostic Christians that helped them to stabilize their own beliefs. This does not mean gnostics had a uniform set of doctrines. But by being able to designate what its beliefs were not, the growing Church could better define what its beliefs were.

Consider the resurrection of Christ. Normative Christianity as seen today is based on the
kerygma, or preaching, of Jesus's death on the cross and physical resurrection as essential to
the forgiveness of sin. According to orthodox interpretation, in his resurrection Jesus grants
authority in founding his Church to Peter (Matt 16:18). Yet this was hardly a uniform view in
early Christianity. In The Apocryphon of John, Christ appears in a triple spiritual form as the
Father, Mother, and Son. In The Apocalypse of Peter, there is a polemic against those who think
Christ died in the flesh. Christ hovers above Jesus on the cross, laughing at those who might
believe physical death was necessary for salvation (Pagels 1979).

According to Pagels, the church literalized the resurrection because of its political power. By
certifying the authority of postresurrection vision for only a select few, namely Peter and the
disciples, they circumvented the authority of other gnostic communities in their claims about
Jesus. Furthermore, they used this foundation to assert apostolic succession from these early
disciples. As such, they achieved political might through asserting a specific belief.

Normative Christianity lacks a feminine counterpart of God. The Holy Spirit is in the neuter
gender in Greek, and Mother Mary, though exalted, is not an aspect of the Trinity. God is
described exclusively in masculine terms such as Lord, King, and the Father. By contrast,
gnostic texts abound with imagery of a divine feminine principle. Valentinus (100–160 CE)
looked to Silence as the feminine counterpart of the Primal Father or Depth. Sethian texts
consistently invoke an alternative form of the Trinity in the Father, Mother, and Son. A third
common motif is the feminine figure of Sophia. Sophia's role varies, from being the receptive
matrix through which God creates to the fallen aspect of the Pleroma whose restitution to it is
essential to humanity's salvation.

Where did the divine feminine go in orthodoxy? Pagels and other scholars have recognized this
eradication of the divine feminine correlates with a marginalization of women within the early
Church. Within early Christian communities, women had a strong presence. They held
leadership roles and acted as teachers and evangelists. Some even delivered prophecies.
Some gnostic texts, such as the Gospel of Mary, suggest that the orthodox Christians were at
odds with gnostic communities over the role of women in their churches. Ultimately, in orthodox
churches females were denied the priesthood (DeConick [2011] 2013).

MODERN RELEVANCE

The major trends covered here are not academic debates insulated from the real world. In fact,
these theories have found their way into Western culture at large. They have impacted
contemporary religion in profound ways, especially in the growth of gnostic churches today and
the creation of religious fiction. But also, we see a transformation of orthodox Christianity itself.

In Los Angeles, California, downhill from the famous white-lettered Hollywood sign, is the official
meeting place of the Ecclesia Gnostica. This self-described gnostic church is one of over one
hundred gnostic churches in the United States and abroad. Those raised Catholic or
Episcopalian would hardly feel out of place at a service: incense sends smoke down the nave,
congregants bow their heads in silence, and the priest, adorned in red church vestments,
delivers a short homily. What might surprise visitors are the scriptures read. In these churches,
the Nag Hammadi books and other gnostic texts are used as scripture alongside sections of the
The bishop of Ecclesia Gnostica, Stephan Hoeller (1931–), is deeply interested in theories of gnosticism (2002). When he calls himself agnostic, his definition is largely informed by psychological theories such as Quispel's and typologies such as Pearson's. Psychological theories give contemporary gnostics a hermeneutic lens to read ancient texts personally and to theorize their own religious experiences as gnostics. Moreover, the more expansive definitions of ancient gnosticism that include texts from the Mandaeans and Manichaeans permit gnostic churches to use them as scripture alongside Christian-gnostic texts.

Everyone has heard of Dan Brown's (1964–) *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). The book sold over 100 million copies and spent over two years at the top of the New York Times bestseller's list. The corresponding film, starring Tom Hanks, grossed over $750 million worldwide. It is a prime example of religious fiction that has been influenced by the rediscovered gnostic writings and scholarship about them. Beginning with the murder of the lead curator of the Louvre Museum in Paris, Jacques Sauniere, the novel follows Harvard professor of symbology Robert Langdon as he attempts to decode a series of clues left by Sauniere concerning a famous historical secret. Spoiler alert: the secret is that Jesus of Nazareth impregnated Mary Magdalene prior to his crucifixion and the Catholic Church had for ages attempted to hide the bloodline of Jesus from public view. Most of Brown's novel is based on the error-ridden book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1982), but he does cite and build on the theoretical model developed in Pagels's *Gnostic Gospels*. He portrays the gnostics as advocates of different viewpoints from the proto-orthodox that were lost to history when the Catholic Church came to power. For Brown, the gnostics showed an awareness of the divine feminine and advocated for female position of leadership in the face of a patriarchal and misogynistic Catholic Church (2003).

Despite the significant historical errors in the novel, its popularity exhibits how important theories of gnosticism can be to contemporary religiosity. Evangelical and Episcopal ministers, historians of Christianity, and even gnostic priests all joined the media firestorm surrounding the book. As they debated the merits and flaws of Brown's book, what they were implicitly arguing over was the role of women in the early church and whether the gnostic gospels could be looked to as legitimate sources for theology and history.

The deconstruction of gnosticism and reframing of Nag Hammadi texts as alternative Christian has itself had an impact in an unexpected place. It has impacted orthodox forms of modern-day Christianity. Consider the implications of King's views: if the Nag Hammadi collection exhibits examples of early Christianity that were not heretical, but simply alternative, then why should churches today only read the Old and New Testaments? What would be wrong with those seeking to understand Christianity by reading texts like The Gospel of Mary, The Gospel of Thomas, and The Apocryphon of John alongside the New Testament?

This is why the Methodist pastor and Jesus Seminar scholar Hal Taussig (1974–), along with twenty pastors, priests, ministers, and scholars, created *The New New Testament* (Taussig 2013). It represents a new canon, promoting the belief that all texts from early Christianity (pre–175 CE) can be read for spiritual edification. Some, such as Taussig himself, draw from texts such as The Gospel of Philip for their Sunday sermons and direct congregants to their message. Reading such texts as Christian allows these readers to find resources in early Christian history to rethink their views on religious tolerance, gender politics, and even the nature of Christ.
Summary

What, then, does it mean to theorize gnosticism and the gnostics? It means that scholars attempt to finalize a definition of what counts as gnostic and what the defining features of gnosticism are. There are good arguments to provide an overarching typology that includes groups from the first century to the present, and there are solid arguments to limit the category to a single group, the Sethians, in the second and third centuries of the current era. Or, one can deconstruct the category entirely to begin afresh, either looking for new identifiers such as a biblical Demiurge or reclassifying all the texts as alternative Christianities.

It means that scholars have to look at the complex, messy, pluralistic milieu of the Greco-Roman world and attempt to determine where gnostic beliefs arose from. Did they arise as a response to a social crisis within Judaism? Or from literary forms and religious interpretive strategies that led to beliefs like the evil Demiurge? Or did gnosticism arise from Christian circles as an interpretation of Paul and John? Or from ecstatic religious experience in baptism? Or might it reflect human cognition as it grapples with concepts like God?

It means that scholars have to wrestle with the role gnostics played in the development of Christianity itself. The simple divide between heresy and orthodoxy is no longer taken for granted. Orthodox Christianity developed in a highly diverse environment of Christian beliefs where many gnostics had influence. Theorizing gnosticism requires rethinking not just the gnostics and gnosticism but the nature and history of Christianity itself.

How the academy answers such questions and pursues such trends matters. A lot. Scholarship today plays a formative role in all religions. As scholars find texts previously lost, resurrect ideas once fervently believed, and theorize the nature of gnostic religion, individuals and groups within the culture will continue to blend these major trends into their own religious self-definition.

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