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Jesus and the Gnostic Gospels

Jeffrey Kloha

I. Why Are We Talking about the Gnostic Gospels?¹

If we were to discuss Christology, and specifically the relationship between the Christology of the 'gnostic' gospels and the Christology of the canonical gospels, this would be a short paper because there is no Christology in the gnostic gospels. More precisely, we could consider the Christology of Seth because the *Gospel of Judas* calls Seth—not Jesus—the "Christ." That, however, is not the challenge, but the fact that the questions raised by the gnostic gospels go to the very heart of the Christian faith: Who is Jesus? What did he do? What is the human condition and humanity's place in the world? What is our relationship to the divine? What is the nature of salvation? Indeed, what is Christianity? The issue is what was done with and to Jesus in the second century. The problem facing the church is how to account for these "newly discovered" or previously "lost" texts. They were written by people in the second century who claimed to be followers of Jesus yet present an entirely different perspective of him. Beyond those questions, a further requirement is to help students, pastors, teachers, and the people in our pews deal with the challenges that these texts present to credal Christianity. The problem is acute, since they have heard and have read that these texts give us a "better" Jesus than the one that we proclaim.

Previous generations fought over the Bible. For better or for worse, the battle used to be over creationism, Jonah, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and how many Isaiahs there might be. Above all, however, the battle was fought over the first century and Jesus. Historical criticism attacked the text and replaced its authority with reconstructed sources, but historical criticism has now run its course. To be sure, there is still a Jesus Seminar, but "the Quest for the Historical Jesus" did not bring an end to historic, credal Christianity. The Jesus of history could not be pried away from the church, and so the church is now the target.

The battleground has changed. The nature of Christianity in the second century, rather than the first century, is debated. What was Christianity

¹ Quotations of gnostic texts are from James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

like after Jesus? Or, as it is more often stated, what were “Christianities” like? It is no longer assumed that the same Christian faith was preached everywhere by all. Rather, some took Jesus and ran one way, some another. Some died out early, like the Nazoreans. Others died out later, like the so-called Gnostics. The Nazoreans may have simply been too indistinct from Judaism and too small to be sustainable. The Gnostics, it is argued, were viciously attacked by what later were called “orthodox” or “catholic Christians” and were persecuted out of existence. Is orthodox Christianity merely one possible outcome of the teachings of Jesus? Bart Ehrman’s way of framing the issue is typical: “What if it had been otherwise? What if some other form of Christianity had become dominant, instead of the one that did?”² He continues,

In anticipation of these discussions, I can point out that if some other form of Christianity had won the early struggles for dominance, the familiar doctrines of Christianity might never have become the “standard” belief of millions of people, including the belief that there is only one God, that he is the creator, that Christ his son is both human and divine. The doctrine of the Trinity might never have developed. The creeds still spoken in churches today might never have been devised. The New Testament as a collection of sacred books might never have come into being. Or it might have come into being with a completely different set of books³

Now that these “lost” or “hidden” or “secret” gospels have been made known to our conspiracy-loving culture, we can no longer appeal simply to “the Bible” or “the Divine Inspiration of the Bible.” After all, how does one externally prove that the Bible is inspired and inerrant when other books make identical claims to divine origin and authority?⁴ The canonical books, whether sixty-six or seventy-three or eighty-one (depending on the division of Christianity), are no longer the only game in town.

² Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5. This book is marketed as a textbook for undergraduate classes in religion.

³ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 6.

⁴ I recently presented a weekend seminar on the gnostic gospels for University of Iowa students at St. Paul’s Lutheran Chapel. During one of the breaks, a couple of students pulled me aside to discuss the question of how we know that we have the right Bible. One student had recently been challenged by a non-Christian and was forced to acknowledge that he had no idea how we got the Bible, how we know that it is the right one, or where to begin the discussion.

The purpose of this paper is to begin to formulate a response to the rise of the use of gnostic texts in the life of the church. One unacceptable response is to pretend that there is not a problem. If the circus that accompanied the *Gospel of Judas* and *The Da Vinci Code* proved anything, it is that people will hear about this. It would be better if our pastors and people heard about it first from us. Another unhelpful response is simply to label all the gnostic material non-Christian and be done with it. This does not work for the thinking layperson. I have had the opportunity to offer numerous seminars on the gnostic materials to groups of lay people and pastors. The reactions are always interesting. The pastors typically think it is all just weird, but it never fails that during one of the breaks someone comes up to me and wants to talk further about the role of women, the historicity of Jesus, or the development of the creeds. Something they have read or seen on television about these materials made more sense to them than the pat answers they typically receive from us. We can decry the American suspicion of authority and institutions, love of conspiracy theory, passion about gender issues, and general rejection of the Christian world view, but this is our context. Not to give answers only leads people to question the message we preach. In this paper, I will not propose solutions, but will lay out the issues surrounding these gnostic writings, discuss how they are analyzed, and suggest areas where we need to be engaged in the debate.⁵

II. Re-imagining Christianity

The definition of “ancient” and “early” has changed. It sounds impressive to talk about a “historic liturgy of the ancient church,” but there is little, if any, firm textual evidence for it until the fifth, or maybe the fourth, century. This is as far removed from the apostle Paul as we are from Johann Gerhard. It sounds convincing to say that the Nicene Creed traces back to AD 325 and that we have references to *regulae* from 150 years earlier, but those *regulae* are a bit amorphous and varied, and it is clear that the Council of Nicea was an end point in the development of specific articulations of doctrines rather than the consensus of the previous 250 years. The fourth century is too late, too recent, and too reflective of its own theological interests and controversies to help us understand—let alone critique—what Christianity was in the second century.

⁵ I will not state the obvious points, such as the fact that the canonical Gospels are reliably dated to the first century but that no gnostic gospel, save the *Gospel of Thomas* (which will be discussed further below), can be dated in the first half of the second century, and most much later.

The second century, however, is shrouded in unknowns. New Testament textual critics have long recognized that there are huge gaps between the composition of the New Testament writings and the great codices of the fourth century, with only a patchwork of fragmentary papyrus manuscripts from the second and third centuries.⁶ The situation is the same for writings from the second century. Apart from Irenaeus, piecing together orthodox Christianity is a difficult task. Now there is a whole group of writings, typically labeled “gnostic,” that often have Christian elements and that, for the most part, were composed as early as the mid- to late-second century.

What is Gnosticism?

It used to be easy to deal with the Gnostics. They were considered part of another religion, as distinct from Christianity as Islam or Buddhism. Alternatively, Gnosticism was considered aberrant, a corruption of orthodox Christianity. All this has changed. Among the most significant issues is the definition of Gnosticism itself. In contemporary literature on Gnosticism there is considerable debate—at times even confusion—regarding terminology. No one in the ancient world describes themselves as followers of “Gnosticism,” as if it had a known and recognized set of shared characteristics. In fact, the word itself does not occur until the seventeenth century, though, of course, *gnosis* and *gnostikoi* are both ancient terms. Moreover, there are only indirect references to people calling themselves “Gnostics.” This confusion applies also to the texts themselves. Though I have titled this study “Jesus and the Gnostic Gospels,” none of the writings that I will discuss use the word “gnostic.” Cristoph Marksches opens his primer on Gnosticism with this caveat: “[T]here is no usage of this term [‘gnosis’] on which there is consensus in every respect and which is accepted everywhere. Nor, things being as they are, can there be, since any definition remains somewhat arbitrary.”⁷

After the fashion, writers in the second century did not refer to religious adherents by collective names, like “Christian” or “Gnostic,” but by the

⁶ See especially Barbara Aland, “Die Rezeption des neutestamentlichen Textes in den ersten Jahrhunderten,” in *The New Testament in Early Christianity*, ed. Jean-Marie Sevrin, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 86 (Leuven: Leuven University Press; Uitgeverij Peeters, 1989), 1–38; and William L. Petersen, ed., *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 3 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

⁷ Cristoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 1.

founder or leader. One can read about Valentinians, Marcionites, followers of Basilides, Nicolaitans, and, on occasion, Gnostics. Indeed, Irenaeus's magnum opus is titled "Disproof and Refutation of *Gnosis* Wrongly So-Called," yet this book discusses dozens of teachers and groups, only one of which he describes as giving themselves the name "Gnostic."⁸ Irenaeus also labeled this group followers of a certain Marcellina and described them as people who worship images of the great philosophers, such as Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Jesus. It is not clear, however, that all references to "Gnostics" refer to the same groups. Clement, for example wrote,

For I know that I encountered some sort of sect, and its leader claimed that he fought pleasure with pleasure. This noble Gnostic (for he said that he was a Gnostic) deserted to pleasure through feigned combat, since he said that it is no great thing to avoid pleasure which had never been enjoyed, but it is something to avoid it after having been involved in it, so he trained [to avoid pleasure] by indulging in pleasure.⁹

Later in the same writing he accused the followers of Prodicus, who also called themselves Gnostics, of the same abandonment toward pleasure.¹⁰

Earlier still, Justin Martyr conceded to his Jewish interlocutor that many groups called themselves Christians, such as Marcionites, Valentinians, Basilidians, and Saturnilians.¹¹ Later, Hippolytus claimed that only a single group, the "Naassenes," called themselves "Gnostics."¹² It cannot be questioned that many groups used the name "Christian" in the second century, including those that were then, and would be today, considered "heretical" by orthodox standards.¹³

Furthermore, these groups cannot be considered entirely non-Christian. The first Christian commentary on a New Testament writing, in the ancient sense of that term, is by Heracleon, a follower of Valentinus, whose commentary on John is quoted extensively by Origen. Moreover, both Marcion and Valentinus relied heavily upon the Pauline Letters. Valentinus himself wrote something like a commentary on them. The writings drawn upon by the "Gnostics" seem to be identical to the writings

⁸ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.25.6.

⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.20; my translation.

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.4.

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 35.

¹² Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 5.6.

¹³ See also the survey in Michael Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33–43.

used by the "orthodox," specifically the four Gospels and the Pauline Letters. The writings ignored by the Gnostics, such as what came to be called the Catholic Epistles, are the same writings that were generally ignored by the orthodox until much later. Furthermore, in his sermon *Gospel of Truth*, Valentinus did not reflect the grand cosmology so typical of Sethian Gnostics. His creator is described positively, Jesus is the primary savior, and the world is not so much evil as a place of ignorance. The goal is not, as is often typical in gnostic thinking, to escape the flesh. Instead, the Son by his death on the cross makes the Father known, and through this knowledge ignorance is done away with so that salvation is achieved. Valentinians also observed the Eucharist and, surprisingly, accepted marriage, which many Gnostics (and some later Christians) did not.¹⁴

Nor were Gnostics completely independent of early Christian communities. In the late fourth century, Epiphanius reported a remarkable autobiographical story of a group in Egypt who called themselves "Gnostics" (one of only a handful so labeled in his *Panarion*). A long passage describes their attempts to lure him into heresy by sending beautiful women to seduce him physically and spiritually. Epiphanius received strength from the Lord to resist, then reported the group to the bishop and—here is the important point—the bishop, "finding out which ones were hidden in the church . . . they were expelled from the city, about eighty persons, and the city was cleared of their tare-like, thorny growth."¹⁵ It is also worth pointing out in this report that Epiphanius fled only after "reading their books," which means that he must have spent some time among them though without converting. Although this group of self-described "Gnostics" had their own teachings, evangelism methods, and books, they still were "in the church" of this unnamed Egyptian city. The confusion is compounded by recognizing that the use of the term *gnosis* by theologians of the early church (such as Barnabas, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and before them even Paul) parallels common

¹⁴ Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 159–162; see also April D. DeConick, "The Great Mystery of Marriage: Sex and Conception in Ancient Valentinian Traditions," *Viligiae Christianae* 57 (2003): 307–342.

¹⁵ Epiphanius, *Panarion* II.26.17.8; in *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book I, Sects 1–46*, trans. Frank Williams, Nag Hammadi Studies 35 (Leiden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), 98.

vocabulary and themes in Greco-Roman thought and not specific “gnostic” or “gnosticizing” tendencies.¹⁶

It may be surprising to learn that the term “gnostic” appears nowhere in the Nag Hammadi documents, the *Gospel of Thomas*, or the *Gospel of Judas*. There are other names, like “Sons of God,” “the elect,” “descendants of Seth,” “children of the bridal chamber,” and the “fourth, kingless and perfect race.” The last designation is particularly significant in one respect, for Christians of the second century referred to themselves as “children of the third race,” that is, that Christians superseded Jew and Gentile. With the name “children of the fourth race” the Nag Hammadi group was distinguishing itself from Christianity by claiming to supersede it.¹⁷

Providing a definition of what is “gnostic” is therefore extremely difficult. The point of debate is this: Is the phenomenon of *gnosis* a single religion, or a movement which goes beyond the limits of a single religion?¹⁸ In *Gnosis: An Introduction*, Cristoph Marksches provided a slight tweaking of the classic description:

1. The experience of a completely other-worldly, distant, supreme God;
2. the introduction, which among other things is conditioned by this, of further divine figures, or the splitting up of existing figures into figures that are closer to human beings than the remote supreme ‘God’;
3. the estimation of the world and matter as evil creation and an experience, conditioned by this, of the alienation of the gnostic in the world;
4. the introduction of a distinct creator God or assistant: within the Platonic tradition he is called ‘craftsman’ –Greek *demiurgos*– and is sometimes described as merely ignorant, but sometimes also as evil;
5. the explanation of this state of affairs by a mythological drama in which a divine element that falls from its sphere into an evil world slumbers in human beings of one class as a divine spark and can be freed from this;

¹⁶ See the entries in G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), s.v. “γνῶσις”.

¹⁷ Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, 10-11.

¹⁸ Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, 19.

6. knowledge ('gnosis') about this state, which, however, can be gained only through a redeemer figure from the other world who descends from a higher sphere and ascends to it again;
7. the redemption of human beings through the knowledge of 'that God (or the spark) in them' (TestVer, NHC IX, 3, 56, 15-20), and finally
8. a tendency towards dualism in different types which can express itself in the concept of God, in the opposition of spirit and matter, and in anthropology.¹⁹

Two scholars, however, have argued strongly against continued use of the term "Gnosticism," primarily because of its negative associations of not being "Christian." In his book *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* Michael Williams proposed an alternative designation: "demiurgical traditions," or, more specifically, "biblical demiurgical traditions":

By "demiurgical" I mean all those that ascribe the creation and management of the cosmos to some lower entity or entities, distinct from the highest God. This would include most of ancient Platonism, of course. But if we add the adjective "biblical," to denote demiurgical traditions that also incorporate or adopt traditions from Jewish or Christian Scripture, the category is narrowed significantly.²⁰

This definition has the advantage of not employing anachronistic terminology, but without the adjective "biblical," as Williams himself admits, the definition covers too broad a spectrum to be useful. With the adjective "biblical," however, there is (intentionally or unintentionally) perhaps a too-close connection with Jewish and Christian materials, for many of the Nag Hammadi texts themselves show a "demiurgical" foundation but make no reference to Jewish or Christian narratives.

Karen King offered a different approach. She eschewed any definition as confining and impacting negatively the study of the texts. For example, after presenting a paper at the International Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) meeting in Helsinki in 1999, a paper which became the opening chapter of her book *What is Gnosticism?*, King was pointedly asked by one participant to clarify how she would define the term "Gnosticism." King refused to offer a definition. She claimed that her only interest was to:

¹⁹ Markschies, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, 16-17.

²⁰ Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 51-52.

consider the ways in which the early Christian polemicists' discourse of orthodoxy and heresy has been intertwined with twentieth century scholarship on Gnosticism in order to show where and how that involvement has distorted our analysis of the ancient texts. At stake is not only the capacity to write a more accurate history of ancient Christianity in all its multiformity, but also our capacity to critically engage the ancient politics of religious difference rather than unwittingly reproduce its strategies and results.²¹

What this passage encapsulates is the program of much of recent scholarship on early Christianity and "Gnosticism." The early polemicists, whether intentionally grabbing power or not, marginalized Gnosticism as heretical and lifted up the emerging orthodoxy as the only "everywhere and at all times" truth of Christianity. Modern scholarship is able to strip away that façade and expose the arbitrariness of ancient Christianity and its modern adherents. This apparently means that any approach taken by a Christian researcher would inevitably result in a skewed understanding of Gnosticism. King wrote again: "[T]he problem of defining Gnosticism has been and continues to be primarily an aspect of the ongoing project of defining and maintaining a normative Christianity."²²

From its very conception, then, this essay apparently is doomed to be skewed, and I would agree with such an assessment. Since any orthodox Christian researcher would not be a part of the community that wrote, preserved, and continued to be shaped by gnostic texts, he or she will inevitably misinterpret and read them against what is already familiar. Then again, no modern interpreter, including King herself, could be described as a member of such a community or as one who is free from his or her own agenda. In addition, I would argue that given King's pessimistic outlook on the use of language—if every use of a term like "gnostic" does violence to it—then by the same argument neither she (nor we) should use the term "Christian," for every use of that term will also inevitably be an attempt either to defend an orthodox perspective or to re-imagine Christianity in new terms. One of King's goals is to bring these previously ignored so-called "gnostic" materials into conversation with historic Christianity. For example, she wrote, "Far from unmaking Christianity or denigrating theological enterprises, elucidating this

²¹ Karen L. King, "The Origins of Gnosticism and the Identity of Christianity," in *Was There a Gnostic Religion?*, ed. Antti Marjanen, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 87 (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 118.

²² King, "The Origins of Gnosticism," 116, and *What is Gnosticism?*, 18.

complexity will ground theological reflection in more accurate historical and theological reflections of the ancient material."²³ Her criticism of biblical scholarship vis-à-vis Gnosticism concludes with this call:

The goal is not to destroy tradition but to open up space for alternative or marginalized voices to be heard within it. A fuller historical portrait of religious piety can enrich the funds of religious tradition, providing more complex theological resources to attend to the complex of issues of our own day. One's own faith is not diminished by hearing other voices; it may be strengthened and enriched.²⁴

That such a paragraph could only be written by a twenty-first century American seems not to trouble King.²⁵ Nonetheless, this paragraph reflects the wider thinking of much of our society, and our typical response—*sola scriptura!*—is simply no longer effective.

Not all researchers who use the term "Gnosticism" do so in an attempt to compare it to Christianity, especially in the last decade. Marvin Meyer, for example, published yet another collection of gnostic gospels that interprets the texts on their own terms without comparison to the canonical gospels. His definition of Gnosticism is this:

Gnosticism is a religious tradition that emphasizes the primary place of gnosis, or mystical knowledge, understood through aspects of wisdom (often personified wisdom) presented in creation stories, particularly stories based on the Genesis accounts, and interpreted by a variety of religious and philosophical traditions, including Platonism, in order to proclaim a radically enlightened way of life and knowledge.²⁶

²³ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 150.

²⁴ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 246.

²⁵ The last sentences of her book contain a hint of recognition that hers will likely not be viewed as the last word: "Ours is a post-colonial and postmodern world, struggling with the complex legacies of the increasingly pluralistic and multicultural globe we inhabit. It is essential that we gain a critical grasp on these discourses in order to disentangle them from our own work. Yet we do so with respect and appreciation for the contributions of scholars whose work constitutes our own past, knowing that our own enterprises will effect only a partial revolution, and no doubt will be subject to the critical hindsight of those who follow." King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 247. King comes perilously close here to assuming that she has a modernist, detached perspective, though the last sentence at least leaves open the possibility that her own work is as contextual as those who preceded her.

²⁶ Marvin W. Meyer, *The Gnostic Gospels of Jesus: The Definitive Collection of Mystical Gospels and Secret Books about Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), xiii.

To put things in a less scholarly way, it seems that gnostic language and thinking was “in the water” of the Greco-Roman world. It drew heavily on the thought patterns of both Judaism and Platonism. Some groups, notably the Sethians associated with the *Gospel of Judas*, have an identifiable outlook. To the casual observer, others may have been simply another strain of Christians. James Robinson noted,

Gnostic Christians surely considered themselves the faithful continuation, under changing circumstances, of that original stance which made Christians Christians. But the “somewhat different terms” “under changing circumstances” also involved real divergences, and other Christians clearly consider Gnosticism a betrayal of the original Christian position. . . . But the Nag Hammadi library also documents the fact that the rejection was mutual.²⁷

Two elements deserve further discussion: the mention of “real divergences” and the “mutual rejection.” Both will be addressed below.

The question of the relationship between catholic Christianity and Gnosticism is not as easily explained as was once thought. The implications of this in our own context, when many voices are claiming that creedal Christianity was never and should not be the only game in town, are considerable. Gnosticism is not what we thought it was; therefore, we are told, Christianity also cannot be what we thought it was.

III. Theology and Proclamation in a New Historical Context: The Challenge of the Gnostic Gospels

How does the church respond? Francis Pieper’s theology, formulated in response primarily to modernism, does not answer the questions being raised today. Once Pieper had his “all Scripture is *theopneustos*” answer to the question of biblical authority, the rest of his dogmatics was relatively easy. Pieper never had to deal with the Gnostics, and, while he had challenging issues in his own modernist context, the answers he gave to those questions are ineffective in a pluralistic, non-foundational context. The risk we run is even greater than that we faced with historical criticism. At least in that debate everyone was a modernist, that is, everyone saw some kind of authority in Jesus and believed that he could be historically and accurately reconstructed, at least to some extent. In our present-day context, however, such chutzpah is not tolerated. We are reminded that there is no unmediated description of Jesus. The texts were written by individuals who were part of communities that had their own questions

²⁷ James M. Robinson, introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 4.

and issues. They were copied—and sometimes altered—by later communities who both reinterpreted and at times rewrote those narratives to suit their ever-changing situation.²⁸ Issues of community identity and differentiation from other communities were involved in this process, and the Jesus depicted in the gospels—whether canonical or gnostic—is simply assumed to be “someone’s take on Jesus.”

In a forum such as this, it is impossible to “solve” the problem of the gnostic gospels. To my knowledge, no book or article has been written by a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod theologian that analyzes or responds to these texts. Here I will lay out some areas for further investigation that I would encourage pastors and theologians to pursue. These are neither exhaustive nor the only fruitful lines of argumentation for a “response to,” or classroom approaches to, the challenges of the gnostic gospels.²⁹

Purity, Syncretism, and Genuine Christianity

Since Walter Bauer’s *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*,³⁰ the reigning assumption in early church studies is that the classic model of the development of theology cannot be born out by the evidence. That is, rather than a single orthodoxy that was later corrupted by various heresies, orthodoxy was only one—and by no means the inevitable—outgrowth of varied expressions of religious belief and practice, all of which claimed derivation from, and faithfulness to, the life and teachings of Jesus. While Bauer’s thesis is not, of course, without criticism, any casual perusal of the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen that stops at the early third century will uncover themes, language, and argumentation that sound little like that of Athanasius or Augustine, let alone Luther or Pieper. For example, Tertullian, who coined the use of *trinitas*, had essentially a modalist view

²⁸ For example, Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). This is not the place to assess Ehrman’s thesis and conclusions. Although factors other than “orthodox corruption” can account for some of the alterations, some examples are irrefutable.

²⁹ For example, the fact that the teachings of Jesus in the gnostic gospels are all narrated in post-resurrection settings (e.g., the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospel of Philip*). The *Gospel of Judas* is an exception in that it is set during the week of Jesus’ passion. The post-resurrection setting is employed because Jesus’ resurrection is viewed as his release into the physical realm from which he is able to bring *gnosis*.

³⁰ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971 [German, 1934]).

of the Trinity and would be regarded as "heretical" according to later definitions of orthodoxy.

This, of course, is not news. It is news, however, that some researchers wish to define gnostic material as just another form of Christianity in the second century. In order to do so, the charge of "syncretism" must be done away with; that is, they must deny the existence of a "pure" Christianity that, when corrupted by foreign elements, thereby produced "Gnosticism." King, for example, acknowledged that a standard definition of "syncretism" would apply to gnostic materials: they are subject to "amalgamation, of blending heterogeneous beliefs and practices."³¹ King also argued, however, that every religion, including Christianity, would fit this definition of syncretism and that both the ancient and modern charge of "syncretism" against Gnostics simply represents identity discourse and boundary-setting, in particular a defense of one's own already held ideas.³²

Yet this relegation of the term "syncretism" fails when it comes to the person of Jesus and specifically to the question of whether or not the gnostic materials present anything remotely connected to the Jesus who walked the earth. There is firm textual evidence that Sethian Gnostics grafted Christian elements onto an already existing framework. Some of their writings contain no Christian elements, such as the *Three Steles of Seth*, which is essentially a description of hymns of praise sung to a gnostic "Trinity": the first stele is a hymn to the self-begotten Son, the second to the male virgin Barbelo (who is at the same time the mother, incidentally), and the third to the Unbegotten Father. Even though there is a "self-begotten Son" in this text, there is no trace whatsoever of Christian thinking or influence, though Jewish and neoplatonic traditions pervade the text.³³

Other writings do show an adoption of Christian thinking. A remarkable pair of texts in this connection is *Eugnostos the Blessed* and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. *Eugnostos* is a very early text, most likely first-century BC, which describes the existence of an invisible, heavenly world beyond the physical world. This world is not accessible, the text pointedly states, to philosophers (specifically, Stoics, Epicureans, and Babylonian astrologers).

³¹ Peter van der Veer, "Syncretism, Multiculturalism and the Discourse of Tolerance," in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (London: Routledge, 1994), 208, quoted in King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 223.

³² King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 222-224.

³³ See James E. Goehring's introduction to the *Three Steles of Seth*, in Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 396.

It describes the ruling hierarchy of five beings who create successive worlds. The last, of course, is the realm of the immortal man, though this section may be a later addition. At some point, however, the text was adapted for a different cause: the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* takes the text of *Eugnostos* and places it on the lips of Jesus, who becomes the figure that makes known the revelation. Several disciples become Jesus' discussion partners, though only the disciples who typically appear in gnostic texts, such as Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, and Mary (never Peter or Paul). Philip asks the first question. Jesus appears after his resurrection, but "not in his previous form, but in the invisible spirit. And his likeness resembles a great angel of light" (*Soph. Jes. Chr.* 91,10-13). Jesus asks the disciples "What are you searching for?" and Philip responds, conveniently, "For the underlying reality of the universe and the plan" (*Soph. Jes. Chr.* 92,3-5). The final prediction of *Eugnostos* is applied to Jesus: "All I have just said to you, I said in the way you might accept, until the one who needs not be taught appears among you, and he will speak all these things to you joyously and in pure knowledge" (*Eugnostos* 90,4-11; cf. *Soph. Jes. Chr.* 114, 5-8). The only "Christian" element in the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* is the presence of Jesus as a character, but he is a character who merely mouths an already extant philosophical treatise.

The *Gospel of Judas* is another example. There is nothing about the person of Jesus, the disciples, or Judas that is not found in either the canonical gospels or Sethian Gnosticism. The use and adaptation of Jesus in such texts is an area that requires further investigation.

Gnostic Thought in Judaism and Neoplatonism

The popular impression given of the gnostic materials is that they are all about Jesus. Many gnostic texts, however, entirely lack Christian elements. James Robinson concluded, "Some traits previously thought to be characteristic of Christian Gnosticism have been shown by the Nag Hammadi library to be originally non-Christian."³⁴ Some texts, in particular Sethian ones, have no Christian influence, such as *Allogenes*, *Marsanes*, and the *Thought of Norea*. Other texts, such as *Zostrianus* and the *Apocalypse of Adam*, have themes that are only slightly related to Christianity. Some have a thin Christian veneer in that there are characters found in Christian texts but little else. Among these writings are the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and the recently recovered *Gospel of Judas*. Others, such as the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, *Melchizedek*,

³⁴ Robinson, introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 7.

and the *Apocryphon of John*, might be considered to represent a form of "Christian Gnosticism." The last text is frequently singled out as an example of the Christian-ness of the so-called "gnostic" texts.³⁵

Furthermore, a monolithic religion did not exist in the Greco-Roman period, if it ever had. One cannot speak of "Judaism" and come up with a set of beliefs and practices that would reflect those of every member of that group. The Essenes, for example, held to a dualism that would not have been foreign to gnostic thinkers. Some of the texts, particularly among Sethian Gnostics, draw heavily upon Old Testament passages and characters, even if they eschew the world view and description of God in the Old Testament. The basic gnostic cosmological narrative has numerous parallels, including Platonic systems. Some individuals apparently took this similarity and adapted it even further toward a gnostic perspective. The neoplatonist Plotinus took umbrage at this adaptation. According to his student, Porphyry,

There were in [Plotinus's] time many Christians and others, and sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy, men . . . who . . . produced revelations by Zoroaster and Zostrianus and Nicotheus and Allogenes and Messos and other people of the kind, themselves deceived and deceiving many, alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality. Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures, and wrote the treatise to which we had given the title "Against the Gnostics."³⁶

Notably Porphyry assigned the title "Against the Gnostics" to Plotinus' treatise, yet said that these texts came from "Christians and others." To Plotinus, at least, there was not much difference between Gnostics and Christians. Furthermore, he described "revelations" of Zostrianus and Allogenes, both which are titles of works found at Nag Hammadi.

Therefore, James Dunn's conclusion seems reasonable:

³⁵ See Alastair B. Logan, who states: "[M]y second presupposition is that one is justified in seeking both a central core of ideas, a myth or myths based on and concretely expressed in a rite of initiation as a projection of Gnostic experience, which holds it together, and in treating it as a valid form (or forms) of interpreting Christianity." *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), xix. See also Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³⁶ Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 16; translation from Robinson, introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 9.

The more obvious interpretation of the Nag Hammadi documents is that they are all typically syncretistic: they draw upon bits and pieces from a wide range of religious influences in the ancient world, including Judaism and Christianity, but including others, too. As such they are totally explainable in terms of what we know about second and third century Gnosticism.³⁷

Gnostics against the Christians

A fruitful area of investigation is the anti-Christian polemic of the gnostic writings. This has long been known from the *Apocalypse of Peter*:

They [the catholics] will cleave to the name of a dead man, thinking that they will become pure. . . . And there shall be others of those who are outside our number who name themselves bishop and also deacons, as if they have received their authority from God. They bend themselves under the judgment of the leaders. These people are dry canals. (*Apoc. Pet.* 74,13-15; 79,22-31; cf. 73)

This anti-Christian (or to be more neutral, anti-catholic) rhetoric is seen very strongly in the *Gospel of Judas*. In two passages, the twelve disciples, who stand for the Christians, are worshipping what is called "their god." In the first, the disciples are offering sacrifices but Jesus rejects their actions. The second is even more striking. After walking in on their celebration of the Eucharist, Jesus laughs at the disciples. They respond,

"Master, why are you laughing at [our] prayer of thanksgiving? We have done what is right." He answered and said to them, "I am not laughing at you. <You> are not doing this because of your own will but because it is through this that your god [will be] praised." They said, "Master, you are [. . .] the son of our god." Jesus said to them, "How do you know me? Truly [I] say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me." (*Gos. Jud.* 34,10-15)

Striking in both of these anti-catholic passages is the rejection of catholic ritual, worship, and even the Eucharist. In addition, a title of Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels, as well as a confession of the early church, is specifically rejected: Jesus is the "Son of your God," that is, "you call him Son of God but we do not."

The *Gospel of Judas* is one text, in particular, which requires further study. I hesitate to say much about this text right now, in spite of the whirlwind

³⁷ J. D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 98.

of the initial publication. If you recall, the text was hailed as providing an alternative view of Jesus' suffering and death—Jesus actually wanted Judas to betray him. This was connected, at least in scholarly circles, to various theories to explain Jesus' death. Maybe he actually was in league with Judas; maybe he wanted to die to spark a rebellion. When other scholars actually looked at a translation of *Judas*, however, it was soon recognized that there is but a single passage referencing Jesus' "request" for betrayal (*Gos. Jud.* 56). Furthermore, there is no passion story, and the actual act of betrayal is an anti-climactic conclusion to the grand Sethian cosmology laid out in the text (*Gos. Jud.* 58).

In addition, there is no consensus regarding the purpose of the text, nor indeed its translation. During the November 2006 SBL meeting, a panel of experts, including Marvin Meyer, Karen King, Elaine Pagels, and Craig Evans, gave their reflections on the text six months after its initial publication. It should be noted that there was a delay in the publication of the Coptic *editio princeps* until several months after the first translation was published. This is highly unusual. Typically a critical edition of a text is produced and translations are provided either concurrently or shortly thereafter. Not so with *Judas*. Three books, including translations, were available on Monday of Holy Week 2006, the day after the National Geographic special aired, and only a few weeks before the release of *The Da Vinci Code* movie. At this SBL session, King and Pagels argued that the text was not anti-Christian but an anti-clergy invective aimed at those who encourage Christians to martyrdom. They considered it a Christian polemic against other Christians and their blood-thirst for martyrdom. It was not mentioned that Seth is called the Christ in *Judas* (*Gos. Jud.* 52) and that Jesus is the Son of their God (*Gos. Jud.* 34). Their thesis was met with a subdued reaction and was vastly overshadowed by the other panelists, who discussed that the *Gospel of Judas* had been not only misunderstood but even mistranslated. It was all over the blogosphere, of course, though there have not yet been any journal articles on the topic. One *Gospel of Thomas* scholar, April DeConick, described it this way:

My examination of the Coptic transcription has led me to think that certain translational errors and one mistaken reconstruction of a Coptic line led the team to the erroneous conclusion that Judas is a saint destined to join the holy generation of the Gnostics. The result is that certain claims have been made by the National Geographic that the *Gospel of Judas* says things it just does NOT say: Judas is the perfect enlightened Gnostic; Judas ascends to the holy generation; Jesus wants Judas to betray him; Jesus wants to escape the material world; Judas performs a righteous act, serving Jesus by "betraying" him; Judas will be

able to enter the divine realm as symbolized by his vision of the great house; as the thirteenth, Judas surpasses the twelve disciples, and is lucky and blessed by this number.³⁸

Whatever the outcome of the scholarly debate about *Judas*, this serves to highlight the difficulties involved in the use of these texts. The communities that produced them, the rituals and beliefs behind them, and the rhetorical goals which led to their composition are all lost. Studies of these gnostic writings are in their infancy. Nevertheless, the anti-catholic perspective of many of these texts does show a differentiation between those who used texts like *Judas* and those who did not. This differentiation should not be minimized as we seek to answer the question of what Christianity looked like in the second century.

The Historical Jesus and the Gospel of Thomas

The *Gospel of Thomas* is unique among the writings found at Nag Hammadi, as well as unique among early Christian literature. It is a different form of a text called a "gospel," for a "gospel" is what its subscript says it is, at least in the Coptic translation. *Thomas* has no narrative, no birth, no passion, no deeds, and no miracles. It is simply a collection of sayings without a narrative context. In *Thomas*, one begins to see some of the formal features that would be encountered in the "gnostic" gospels but no blatant gnostic perspectives or tendencies.

Originally written in Greek, parts of *Thomas* were known beginning in the early twentieth century with two Greek fragments found at Oxyrhynchus. These were not properly identified as containing sayings matched by the Coptic version of *Thomas* found at Nag Hammadi until fifty years later. Some of the 114 sayings found in *Thomas* are remarkably similar to those in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, "He who does not hate his father and mother cannot be my disciple, and he who does not hate his brothers and sisters and does not take up his cross as I have will not be worthy of me" (*Gos. Thom.* 55).³⁹ In at least one case, *Thomas* preserves a form of the text that has been virtually lost in the transmission of the canonical Gospels. In Matthew 6:28 the standard text reads: "And concerning what you wear, why are you concerned? Consider the lilies of the field, *how they increase; they do not labor or spin*" (emphasis added).

³⁸ April DeConick, "The Forbidden Gospels Blog: January 2007" entry for "Monday, January 29, 2007," *The Forbidden Gospels Blog*, http://forbiddengospels.blogspot.com/2007_01_01_archive.html. See now April D. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (London: Continuum, 2007).

³⁹ Cf. Matt 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:26, 27.

"How they increase" seems out of place here; what does "increasing" have to do with either lilies or clothing? The original hand of Codex Sinaiticus, alone among all the witnesses, reads, "Consider the lilies of the field, *how they card*; they do not labor or spin" (emphasis added). That is, the lilies are not involved in clothes production; they do not card the wool, labor over it, or spin it into clothing. This may be dismissed as an "improvement" to the text, but Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 655, one of the few Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas*, reads: "How much more valuable are you than the lilies, which do not card nor spin" (*Gos. Thom.* 36). While *Thomas* is not identical to Codex Sinaiticus, it is based on a text that has been lost to all Greek manuscripts but one. The corruption in other manuscripts is easily explained: πῶς οὐ ξαίνουσιν ("how they do not card") was misread or misheard as πῶς αὐξάνουσιν ("how they increase").⁴⁰ Therefore, while the composition of *Thomas* itself does not reach back past the early second century, it preserves traditions and even individual words that had been lost or corrupted in the process of transmitting the canonical Gospels.

Other material in *Thomas*, while not quite reflecting thinking associated with Gnostics, at least moves in that direction. For example, saying 22 encourages a way of looking at the world that sees through the limits of the physical world. "Jesus said to them, 'When you make the inner two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, then you will enter the kingdom'" (*Gos. Thom.* 22).

Thomas cannot therefore be called a "gnostic" gospel. Nor is it really an "orthodox" gospel, for there is no mention of the cross aside from the need for carrying it in saying 55. There is no sin and forgiveness, only darkness and enlightenment; neither are there narrative or editorial helps to guide the reader toward a clearer understanding. Indeed, some sayings remain completely opaque. For example, saying 97: "Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of the Father is like a woman who was carrying a jar which was full of meal. While she was walking on a long road the handle of the jar broke; the meal spilled out behind her on the road. She did not notice it; she was unaware of the accident. When she came to her house she put the jar down and found it was empty'" (*Gos. Thom.* 97). If parables are really earthly stories with heavenly meanings, what does this mean? Without the community that preserved or created these sayings, they often remain unintelligible.

⁴⁰ First proposed by T. C. Skeat, "The Lilies of the Field," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 37 (1938): 211-214.

Later Christians did not use this gospel or pass on the interpretive strategies necessary to understand it.

While *Thomas* has frequently been compared with the putative “Q” source for Matthew and Luke, it cannot be identical with Q (if Q ever existed). Again, the relationship (or lack thereof) of *Thomas* to the Synoptic Gospels is too complex for discussion here.⁴¹ However, the origins, development, and use of *Thomas*, and its relationship to the canonical gospels are areas of study that should not and cannot be ignored.

The Narratives and Paul

Like the Pentateuch and the canonical gospels, gnostic perspectives on the world are not laid out in dogmatic texts but in narratives. Narratives, of course, have meaning only in the eye of the reader, and without a guide they often remain obscure. Christians have had various communities and resources—most prominently the Pauline Letters—to make clear the underlying focus of the narrative story later preserved in the canonical gospels. The gnostic materials have no comparable exegete and no enduring communities which created valid readers of their texts. As noted above with *Judas*, there is often uncertainty regarding the meaning of a given passage or even of an entire document. Nonetheless, some typical features of the gnostic material can be described.

What is a typical narrative? Here I can provide only a summary of one text, the *Apocryphon of John*. This narrative purports to be a revelation given to John by Jesus after his resurrection. This revelation includes the following cosmology. Sophia decides to generate a divine being apart from her male consort, but this offspring, named Yaldabaoth, is deformed and imperfect. To cover up her action, Sophia removes Yaldabaoth from the *pleroma* and hides him in a lower sphere; left to himself, he decides to create other, lesser divine beings and the world itself. Yaldabaoth does not know about the *pleroma*, so he foolishly declares, “I am God, and there is no other God beside me” (from Isa 5:5–6). His other divine assistants decide to create man: “Let us create a man according to the image of God” (from Gen 2:7). This being, however, has no spirit. The One tricks

⁴¹ Helmut Koester concludes that it is “unlikely that our document [*Thomas*] can be considered as an eclectic excerpt from the gospels of the New Testament.” Introduction to the *Gospel of Thomas*, in Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 125. More cautiously, J. K. Elliott: “The possibility that at least some of the unique sayings preserved in Coptic *Thomas* may ultimately go back to Jesus is generally conceded.” *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 124.

Yaldabaoth into breathing the power of his mother Sophia into this man, Adam, making him greater than the beings that created him. The One then sends Thought to Adam to help him escape his worldly prison.⁴²

In this narrative, typical gnostic elements appear: for example, creation by a lower being, the exclusion of humanity from the *pleroma*, and access gained via *gnosis*. While it uses Old Testament “proof passages” — in a way that is not dissimilar from the use of the Old Testament in early Christian writings — the underlying narrative of the Old Testament, further clarified in the New Testament, is absent. That narrative could be summarized as follows: God created a perfect world; humanity fell into sin and became separated from God; God sent his Son as a human to save the world; Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God who was crucified for our sin; Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead by the Father as the first fruits of the new creation; and this creation will be restored on the last day. This brief summary is found in the creeds, in particular the Apostles’ Creed.

Such a narrative is not as late as the Apostles’ Creed. It is found already in Paul. Paul is notably absent from much discussion of Gnosticism and Christianity. For example, the popular book *Beyond Belief* by Elaine Pagels argued that the Gospel of John was written as a response to the *Gospel of Thomas* and that John was the writer who invented the divinity of Jesus.⁴³ While *Beyond Belief* claims that the divinity of Jesus was a late development, it never mentions any of the Pauline Letters (for example, Philippians 2). Particularly fruitful analysis of early Christology, including the Pauline Letters, is found in Larry Hurtado’s *Lord Jesus Christ*.⁴⁴ His chapter on “Radical Diversity” engages the issue of gnostic gospels.⁴⁵

⁴² A detailed analysis of the text is provided in Zlatko Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe: Narrative and Cosmology in the Apocryphon of John*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 52 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006).

⁴³ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003).

⁴⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003). For essays that are generally appreciative of Hurtado’s work, see Charles A. Gieschen, “Confronting Current Christological Controversy,” *CTQ* 69 (2005): 3–32; James W. Voelz, “A Review of Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*,” *CTQ* 69 (2005): 33–47; and David P. Scaer, “Recent Research on Jesus: Assessing the Contribution of Larry Hurtado,” *CTQ* 69 (2005): 48–62.

⁴⁵ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 519–561.

The Manuscripts

One final area of investigation is the manuscripts themselves. Recent studies into the development of the canon have helpfully demonstrated that the formation of the canon, far from a late process, influenced—and was influenced by—the use of the codex for early Christian literature.⁴⁶ While the details cannot be recounted here, some relevant observations can be made. First, the collection of the thirteen Pauline Letters (without Hebrews) was likely completed before the end of the first century, and the four canonical Gospels by the mid-second century. These collections were used by catholic and gnostic alike. Yet no gnostic writing is ever found in the same codex with either the Pauline Letters or the canonical Gospels. Furthermore, when Justin Martyr and Tatian produced their harmonies of the gospels, they were based on canonical texts and not gnostic texts.⁴⁷ The gnostic texts appear in codices with other gnostic writings; the *Gospel of Judas*, for example, is not an isolated text. Other texts in the “Codex Tchacos” are the *Letter of Philip* and the *First Revelation of James*, both of which are gnostic texts previously known from Nag Hammadi, as well as a previously unknown *Book of Allogenes*, which has not yet been published but apparently focuses on the character of Seth as typical Sethian texts do. Furthermore, there are no canonical texts in the Nag Hammadi find. This may be because the manuscripts were buried in a “purge” of the nearby monastery;⁴⁸ then again, the individual codices do not contain gnostic texts alongside canonical ones. What we do find is the eclecticism typical of the gnostic writings—alongside philosophical treatises are sections of Plato’s *Republic*, Sethian texts, Valentinian texts, and Hermetic texts. The study of individual manuscripts within their usage in communities is still in its infancy,⁴⁹ but the fact that the canonical New Testament texts are never

⁴⁶ See J. K. Elliott, “Manuscripts, the Codex and the Canon,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 63 (1996): 105–123; T. C. Skeat, “The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels?” *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997): 1–34; and Larry W. Hurtado, “The New Testament in the Second Century: Text, Collections and Canon,” in *Transmission and Reception: New Testament Text-Critical and Exegetical Studies*, ed. Jeff W. Childers and D. C. Parker, Texts and Studies, 3rd ser., 4 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 3–27.

⁴⁷ There is, however, debate about *Thomas* and the *Diatessaron*, as raised by William L. Petersen, *Tatian’s Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (Leiden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1994).

⁴⁸ Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, 50.

⁴⁹ See Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1977 (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and

found alongside or in the same codices as gnostic writings says something about community differentiation.

III. Epilogue

Unmentioned so far is the issue of what is central in Christianity. Is it the sacraments? Both Sethians and Valentinians apparently practiced Baptism; the Lord's Supper was prominent in Valentinianism because *gnosis* was passed through the mouth, and, whether in a kiss or in the Lord's Supper, this *gnosis* was passed on. Is it a moral perspective? Some Gnostics practiced celibacy and continence, for example, but so did many catholic Christians. No, the central question is the work of Jesus. Is he a revealer of knowledge or is he one who acts to save? Specifically, did Jesus rise bodily from the dead, and what does that have to do with us? The point at issue is articulated quite clearly in an advertisement for a lecture by Karen King:

According to Iranaeus [*sic*], a second century church leader, heretics denied the full humanity of Christ, making nonsense of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. Dr. King asserts that newly available texts, such as *The Gospel of Mary* and *The Treatise on the Resurrection*, vividly demonstrate that what was at stake was not the reality of the resurrection, but the question of what it means to be fully human. In an age of genomes and post-Freudian psychologies, where notions of the body and the self have shifted dramatically from those of Jesus' day, has the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection shifted as well?⁵⁰

Many in contemporary society have problems with Jesus walking on water and healing people. They say that it could not have happened, so the canonical gospels must be false. The gnostic gospels do not describe Jesus like that, and thus some deem them to be more reliable. The church must point to the resurrection. If Jesus rose from the dead, then a walk on water is no big deal; if he did not rise from the dead, then walking on water does not matter. In a generation that searches not only for a narrative to explain existence but for an answer to the question of what it means to be human, we must hold forth this: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in

Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006).

⁵⁰ "MBS 2005 Beck Lecture with Dr. Karen King," *Massachusetts Bible Society Web site* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Bible Society, 2005), http://www.massbible.org/sections/programs/beck_lectures/past_becks/2005_beck_king/2005_beck_king.html.

accordance with the Scriptures. . . . If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:3, 4, 14).

Response to Jeffrey Kloha

Charles R. Schulz

I am grateful for the careful argumentation of Professor Kloha regarding the syncretism of the gnostic texts.⁵¹ The difference between the multiple historical and cultural influences in the biblical texts and the wild conglomeration in the later extra-biblical materials deserves such attention. I happily receive his instruction about the manuscript tradition, which illustrates that the supposed primordial soup of second-century Christian thought already observed differences in kind. This and the fact that ancient polemics cut both ways demonstrate the original distinction between orthodox Christianity and the deviations. I do miss any suggestion that we might yet make the traditional argument—a position so significant for historic Lutheran identity and ecclesiology even with all its difficulties—namely, that Christ preserves his church through the ages and therefore lost “Christianities” were simply not Christianity.

The paper provides a good foundation. Professor Kloha notes, for example, that the Sethian Gnostics “draw heavily upon Old Testament passages and characters, even if they eschew the world view and description of God in the Old Testament.” While many in our culture no longer think in canonical categories, Christians confused by the authority claimed for the non-canonical texts might well be taught to ask themselves which texts stand in better continuity with the Old Testament. By inviting the Old Testament to determine the rest of the canon, the foreign character of the gnostic texts could be demonstrated at many points.

It is easy to sympathize with the first-century Jew who heard the apostolic message as a rather strange and fanciful interpretation of the

⁵¹ The relevance of this topic was brought home to me when I discovered that someone had stumbled upon the Web site of my Church, St. Thomas Lutheran, by using the search terms “Secret Gospel of Thomas.” I then added a hyperlink, “All we can tell you about the Secret Gospel of Thomas,” to Professor Kloha’s article in the Lutheran Witness. Already at least one visitor followed that link. For the article, see Jeffrey Kloha, “The Revelation and Inspiration of the New Testament,” *Lutheran Witness* 125, no. 8 (September 2006): 6–11.

hopes of Israel. Would it not be natural to accuse Paul of playing, like a Gnostic, wild and free with the Scriptures by introducing strange new elements? Paul himself admits that the Spirit of Jesus reveals what never entered into the mind of man; still, once revealed, it harmonizes with the Old Testament faith. In spite the gnostic-sounding Pauline vocabulary of archons, the pleroma, the evil age, sophia, gnosis, mysteries, and secret revelation,⁵² and in spite of the popularity of his epistles with gnostic teachers, there are vital continuities which the gnostic texts abandon—the character of God, the nature of humanity, the world to come, and the relationship between God’s word and saving deeds. Gnosticism, roughly characterized as a religion of salvation by revelation, employed historic and mythological narratives metaphorically. They retained their import even if invented from whole cloth. Christianity, as a revelation of Christ’s work of salvation, depends entirely on his deeds done in flesh and blood.

Professor Kloha notes the different understandings of salvation, and this too deserves emphasis, particularly because the insight has so many fruitful applications for our proclamation. For this purpose, one might take a phrase from E. P. Sanders and define “gnosticism” as a *pattern of religion*. Most significant for the mission of the church is the natural tendency of the human mind to develop such erring systems of faith. For example, teachings within the Nation of Islam reveal the inherent superiority of the original black race and explain the existence of white peoples as the consequence of the malicious experiments of an evil black scientist, Yacub. Origin stories of Scientology interpret personal struggles as the consequence of traumatic experiences of past lives. It seems that extraterrestrial dictators long ago grafted deleterious implants into our souls, which can only be delivered by a costly treatment program. Traces of the pattern appeared again when it was discovered that a famous singer had sired scores of children as he traveled to perform all around the country and then, as the rumors of his profligacy spread, hundreds more gladly claimed him as their father. All such origin stories reveal the inherent but secret dignity of the believers who otherwise feel estranged or at least under-appreciated in the world.

Nor does the gnostic pattern limit itself to such fanciful story-telling. It appears in Christian attempts to articulate the gospel as an “eternal truth” revealed in, but not established by, the words and work of Jesus Christ.

⁵² 1 Cor 1:5–6, 24, 30; 2:7–8, 10; 8:2; Gal 1:3–4; Eph 2:1–2; and Col 1:25–28, 2:9. These all show how Paul emphasizes the importance of revelation in salvation and can speak of the Christian as estranged from this world because of the hostile spiritual powers which rule it.

“Smile, God loves you” and even “Jesus loves me this I know” become slogans of a hollow faith unless one also sings, “he who died, heaven’s gates to open wide” (that is, to establish the new heaven and new earth with full bodied resurrection). A gospel of “God loves me, I’m Okay, You’re Okay” dresses up the American civic virtue of tolerance as the mystery revealed from the divine realm. This pattern would tell us that God has never been all that concerned about our behavior *per se*. Witness the popular children’s book *You are Special* by Max Lucado. In it, a wooden puppet discovers the secret that he can dismiss the judgments of others once he learns to hearken to the words of the woodcarver, who loves him just the way he is. In this putatively Christian story, there is no Christ-figure apart from Lucia, who only functions to reveal the message, illustrate its power, and direct others to experience for themselves the personal revelation of divine acceptance.

In the Augsburg Confession, Article III, on the Son of God, appropriately follows Article II, on original sin. The work of the Son of God does not first and foremost answer man’s ignorance of his natural okay-ness; rather, the Son of God delivers man from the Father’s wrath against sin. As Professor Kloha wrote, in the *Gospel of Thomas* “there is no sin and forgiveness, only darkness and enlightenment” and in the *Gospel of Truth* the cross does away with ignorance because it “makes the Father known.” It is not just necessary to come to know the Father; rather, we need to believe that the *Father* has come to know *us* in love through the *work* of the Son on our behalf. Jesus Christ’s saving deed was principally directed God-ward. We have a God problem and God had a problem with us until his Son stepped in to reconcile us by his blood.

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