

The Gnostic New Age



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How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized
Religion from Antiquity to Today

April D. DeConick



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Acknowledgments

To Marjorie M. Fisher

This is the book I have wanted to write since the beginning of my career. Over the years, I have learned about the Gnostics by immersing myself in their literature. I had one rule of thumb: if something in their literature looked weird or crazy to me, I refused to jump to the conclusion that the Gnostics were saying weird or crazy things. I kept reminding myself that the weirdness or craziness was my problem, not theirs. It reflected the fact that I didn't yet know enough to understand them.

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To keep this book reader-friendly, I have tried to keep the references to a minimum, and I provide citations to works and translations in English whenever possible. Additional resources and deeper discussion of the ideas presented in this book can be found in a series of academic articles and books that I have published previously (DeConick 1996, 2001, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2013e, and 2016).

April D. DeConick

The Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul



Introduction

Forbidden Scriptures

In 1982, I was finishing my first year of college. I was enrolled in a two-year program to become a registered nurse and had been doing rounds on the oncology floor of the local hospital and in geriatrics. I was eighteen years old and any romantic notions I may have had about health care when I started school vanished with the first catheter I had to insert.

One day, to distract myself from my existential crisis, I visited the local bookstore, hoping to find a good novel. But I didn't have any luck. Back at home, my mother pulled out a book that she had been reading and handed it to me. "I bet you will like this," she said. I glanced at the cover. *The Other Gospels* by Ron Cameron (1982). *Gospels that never made it into the New Testament. Unknown sayings of Jesus*. Could be interesting, I thought.

That is how I read the Gospel of Thomas for the first time, in the opening pages of *The Other Gospels*. As I read this gospel, I encountered a Jesus who impressed me, a Jesus who was unknown in conventional Christian circles. As I began reading the Gospel of Thomas, I was immediately enraptured by Jesus' declaration that God's power is not external to us but inside of us, and that if we don't grasp this we are living impoverished. Here, in the Gospel of Thomas, was a Jesus I wanted to know more about.

For years I had been searching for a spiritual church home. I had visited just about every Christian denomination under the sun. But I always left their services disappointed and disenchanted. The God of goodness and providence that I knew from my personal religious life did not seem to be present in any of the traditional Christian churches I attended. No matter how hard I tried, I could not harmonize the God of unconditional love I personally knew with the conventional Christian God who demanded that his son be sacrificed to him for the salvation of sinful human souls. It wasn't until I read

the Gospel of Thomas that I felt aligned with Christianity, although it was a Christianity that had not survived into the modern era.

What was up with this? I was galvanized. *Why isn't this gospel in the New Testament?* I wondered.

Committed to learning more, I came upon Elaine Pagels's book *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979). As I read her book, I was tantalized by her discussion of a wider range of Gnostic opinions and writings. Professor Pagels was among the first researchers to have access to a hoard of Gnostic texts that had been found in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, so her book contains some of the first publicly available English translations of these old Gnostic texts.

For nearly two thousand years, the writings of the leaders of the emergent Catholic church told about the terrible Gnostic heretics who had said and done horrible things that would lead good Christians straight to hell. The Gnostics were so threatening to the first Catholics that they were called by the Catholics monsters and demons. But were they? Pagels posed this question in her book and, in the end, concluded that the works of the Gnostics have a different story to tell.

As I read Pagels's book, I came to see that the Nag Hammadi writings enable us to know what the Gnostics actually said. These old texts give us a chance to evaluate the claims of the Gnostics against the claims of their Catholic enemies. I learned from Professor Pagels that early Christianity was an extremely diverse religion and that Catholicism triumphed as the orthodox or "right" way by forcibly suppressing the Gnostics and eliminating their publications. Pagels could find nothing theologically wrong with the Gnostics. They, in fact, were very reasonable, sometimes even more reasonable than the Catholics in their understanding of the human being, the world, and God.

The main idea that got Gnostic groups into trouble, according to Pagels, was their insistence that we have to find access to God ourselves, that the light of God is already within us, and that this self-knowledge is salvific. Salvation would not come through the sacraments or rituals. It would not come through right belief or the proper reading of the Bible. It would not come through sacrifice and martyrdom. It was available only through the personal discovery of our own internal divinity.

The Catholic bishops were threatened by this premise because, if true, it meant that there was no need for bishops to administer rituals, interpret

scriptures, hear confessions, or run churches. In other words, they would be out of a job. So the theological controversies between the Gnostics and the Catholics over the nature of God and Jesus' resurrected body, the value of Jesus' crucifixion, and the rules of salvation were motivated more by the political struggle for control of Christian churches than the rightness or wrongness of Gnostic doctrines. The Gnostics, unable to ritualize or institutionalize their personal experiences of the divine, were the losers in this battle. The Gnostics did not survive historically. Their highly personal religion was destroyed under the pressure of Catholicism, which was able to develop into an organized religion attractive to a mass audience.

Captivated, I bought a copy of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Robinson 1977) and began reading the Gnostic scriptures firsthand. As I read the ancient collection of Gnostic texts, I noticed constant references to rituals, communal prayers, organized assemblies, and church leaders. The Gnostics who wrote these texts weren't less organized than the Catholics or unable to ritualize their personal experiences of the divine. In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case. The Gnostics who wrote these texts had developed sets of rituals in order to prompt intense religious experiences of spiritual transformation and transpersonal integration. And they were doing so in organized groups with guru-type leaders. *What was going on with this?*

I was electrified. Quite suddenly, I knew that I would never become a nurse. My vocation was clear. My path would be charted in academia, where I would try to make sense of the unconventional spirituality and forbidden religion lodged in the scriptures that had been forsaken by the Christian church. I was determined to figure out why the Gnostic scriptures had become forbidden scriptures.

A Revolutionary Spirituality

After I took my PhD at the University of Michigan in Near Eastern studies, I turned my full attention to the Gnostics and their literature. For the past twenty years I have been resolved to understand why their scriptures had become forbidden in the early church. To translate and study the original documents, I have traveled the world over, visiting the major museums and libraries that house the Coptic manuscripts of the Gnostic scriptures.

What I found took me by complete surprise. The Gnostic writings were not forsaken because they had perverted the older and truer Catholic Christianity, as Christian apologists have claimed over the centuries. Nor were they

innocuous alternative scriptures engineered as heresy by the Catholics to control the game board and assert Catholic interests. During my years of study, I have come to understand that the Gnostic compositions were forbidden because they promoted a type of spirituality so revolutionary that ancient religion was turned on its head. The ideas in the Gnostic scriptures are not innocent. They are not innocuous. Rather, they are provocative. They involve risk. They call into question. They stir up and incite.

The Gnostics were the first to view traditional religion as the opiate of the masses, the drug that keeps people satisfied to serve the gods and their kings as obedient slaves and vassals. Gnostic spirituality offered a new orientation that insisted that human beings are more than the mortal creations of the gods. Conventional religions, they thought, mask the true God of worship, a transcendent God who is the ultimate reality and the primal source of all existence. This God of goodness and love transcends all gods and all religions. This God can only be known through direct personal contact, when the Gnostic unites with him in a profound transcendent religious experience.

This personal link with the transcendent God was believed to be a natural one. According to the Gnostics, the essential human self, our authentic being, is nothing less than God's very own life essence, his own spirit captured deep within the human soul, where it lies dormant, unexpressed, and forgotten. It lies there pained, waiting to be awakened, cultivated, and reunited with the divine source of all.

For the Gnostics, religion is not about obeying the conventional gods but about transcending them in order to find spiritual union with the ultimate God, the supreme source of all existence. Within the various communities of Gnostics, humans were no longer perceived as depraved mortal creatures punished by their maker and forced into perpetual servitude and sacrifice. Humans were freed from slavery to the gods. They were liberated from the tyranny of the gods and their human ambassadors, the kings. The true God of worship is a transcendent god of love who desires nothing more than reunion and integration with us.

This new countercultural orientation toward a transcendent God and the divine power of the human altered religion's traditional purpose and challenged religious convention in dangerous ways. Since the individual person is no longer viewed as a mere mortal created by a powerful god to do his bidding, to offer obedience and submission, the traditional postures of worship are turned upside down by the Gnostics.

Since ancient people believed that offending the gods and neglecting their laws would result in divine retribution, natural disaster, and civil unrest, the Gnostic message was forbidding to most people in antiquity. It was transgressive. It was countercultural. It threatened the very fabric of their society and the maintenance of civil order. What I realized as I studied the Gnostic literature is that the Gnostic scriptures didn't *become* forbidden scriptures. They *were* forbidden scriptures.

The Dirty Word *Gnosticism*

In the forty years since the publication of *The Gnostic Gospels* many new developments have taken place in the field of early Christianity (Rudolph 1983; Layton 1987; Couliano 1992; Williams 1996; King 2003; Marksches 2003; Logan 2006; Pearson 2007; Brankaer 2010; Brakke 2011; Denzey Lewis 2013; Broek 2013). Since the publication of books by Michael Williams (1996) and Karen King (2003), many scholars of early Christianity have come to view the terms Gnosticism and Gnostic with suspicion. Many scholars have become reluctant to use the terms at all, arguing that they were pejorative terms then and remain so now and that it does us no good to continue to use them. Gnosticism was not an ancient religion, and we should stop using the term because it limits our ability to see the full constellation of ancient Christian movements without prejudging them or prejudicing our analyses of them. The Gnostics, they say, were Christians, and we should discuss them under this rubric, not the Gnostic one.

This disenchantment with the Gnostic label is trendy right now in academic circles. It got its momentum from the rise of postmodern critical theory, which views all labels as colonial impositions that people in power construct and then use to control native populations. Because of this, grand narratives or coherent universal histories or ideologies that communities create to stabilize and define themselves are perceived with distaste. Everything about us is local, regional, situational, subjective, and relative.

Because this perspective has become so dominant, since the 1980s definitions in academia have been impossible to maintain. "Gnosticism" and "Gnostic" are no exception to this deconstructive trend. They have been reduced to "Christian." This, of course, doesn't solve the problem but instead imposes another grand narrative on the early Christians, which domesticates Gnostic movements and presents them as no-nonsense *alternative* forms of Christianity.

This new development means that we have two competing stories of the Gnostic. The older story is that the Gnostic is the heretic who emerged late on the Christian scene and threatened to erode the pure Christian religion, which had preceded Gnosticism. This threat of degeneration of Christian truth by the Gnostics was prevented by the heroes of the nascent Catholic church who wrote them into oblivion.

The newer story tells us that the Gnostic is an alternative Christian. The Gnostics' alternative Christianity died out because certain sociological and political factors favored nascent Catholicism and created an environment in which these alternative Christians could be suppressed and eradicated. The alternative Christians were reckoned to be horrible Gnostic heretics in a battle of mean words with Catholic leaders, who fabricated the Gnostic heresy to rid the religious marketplace of their groups. Because the words *Gnostic* and *Gnosticism* reflect the polemics of the Catholic leaders, we should not continue to reify them but should dispense with them altogether. This has left us facing a situation where the Gnostics have no unique identity and Gnosticism is a dirty word.

I find this deconstructive project unsettling on many counts, including the consequence that we end up erasing transgressive identities from history when, instead, we should be fully exploring their meaning (DeConick 2013a, 2016). We have either declared the Gnostics heretics and thus not worthy of study, or we have deconstructed them so that the Gnostics have been tamed into Christians.

The end result in both cases is a disengagement from unique transgressive identities, identities that have much to tell us about religion and its power to innovate, stir up, change, and even revolutionize the way we are in our world. It is the transgressive power of the Gnostic to innovate and revolutionize religion that I expose in *The Gnostic New Age* and explore as a distinctive feature of Gnostic spirituality.

Although it is true that the heresiologists like Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons and Hippolytus of Rome framed the Gnostic as the demonic and created a grand narrative that connected a variety of unrelated groups to the arch-heretic Simon Magus, this does not mean that Gnostics did not exist historically nor that Gnostics were innocuous alternative Christians. Or, to put it another way, although Gnostics may have been made into heretics by the early Catholics, this does not erase the fact that Gnostics were operating in the margins of the conventional religions, with a countercultural perspective that upset and

overturned traditional theology, cosmogony, cosmology, anthropology, hermeneutics, scripture, religious practices, and lifestyle choices (DeConick 2016; cf. Kaler 2009). When we insist on Gnostics as alternative Christians, we run the risk of taming the shrew. The word *alternative* points to equivalent acceptable routes to the same destination. The Gnostic road, however, is countercultural, concerned with journeying on a road to a different destination, perhaps even along a road in the opposite direction (see Yinger 1982, 42).

Real Gnostics

The domestication of the Gnostics as innocuous alternative Christians becomes even more problematic when we consider the historical evidence for the emergence of full-blown Gnostic religions by the third century, as we will see in [chapter 10](#). The Mandaeans are self-confessed Gnostics with a religious identity that is neither Jewish nor Christian nor Zoroastrian. *Mandaean* literally means “the Gnostics” or “the Knowers,” deriving from the Aramaic word for knowledge, *manda*. Mandaism emerged as a new religious movement in the late first century and by the third century CE was a mature Gnostic religion (Deutsch 1995; Lupieri 2002; Buckley 2002, 2006). It still exists today.

Manichaeism, another new religious movement of the third century, was an intentionally created Gnostic religion (see Klimkeit 1993; Be-Duhn 2000, 2015; Gardner and Lieu 2004; Coyle 2009; Baker-Brian 2011; Colditz 2015). It had its own self-identity and religious beliefs and practices that also were neither Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, nor Buddhist. It was a revealed Gnostic religion marketed by its founder Mani as the only *true* religion. It spread across the Near East and Asia from the Atlantic to the Pacific, becoming the first world religion. Although Manichaeism does not exist any longer as a religion, there is at least one shrine in China today where a statue of Mani continues to be venerated as the Buddha of Light.

The other third-century Gnostic religion is one whose name history does not remember. But we have two of their church handbooks. We call them Jeuians, because *Jeu* was the name of their god (Evans 2015). Like the other Gnostic religions that emerged in this century, they have a unique history and identity that sets them apart from the other religions of the Mediterranean.

We can add to this evidence the testimony of Plotinus, the famous third-century Platonic philosopher. He knew a group of Gnostics, who attended his

seminar in Rome. He called them “friends,” although he was highly critical of their inflated view of themselves as gods, a view he considered exceedingly dangerous (*Ennead* 2.9.14).

So the question is not whether Gnosticism existed in antiquity or whether real Gnostics lived in the past. By the third century we have mature Gnostic religions whose identity is not Christian, not Jewish, not Zoroastrian, not Buddhist, but Gnostic. We also have a case in which one of these Gnostic religions, Mandaicism, has survived into modern times. Like Catholicism, it is almost two thousand years old.

If Gnostics and Gnosticism existed as a new form of spirituality in antiquity, then what is the problem? The trouble we face is that we have not yet determined how the third-century Gnostic religions formed or what their relationships were to other major religions in the ancient world. At the crux of the problem is the fact that we have not been able to delineate when or how Gnostic identity was initially constructed and continually negotiated by grassroots Gnostic groups as early as the first century CE. Instead, we have adopted the constructions of the Gnostics that were formed by the first Catholic Christians, or we have dropped them completely. The result has been the same. The Gnostic is rejected, either as a heretic or as a heretical construction, having no worthwhile contribution to make to Western thought and culture.

Throughout this book, the ancient Gnostics are presented as real actors in history, not as proponents of a single umbrella Gnostic religion or as heretical constructs of early Catholic leaders, although the Catholics certainly tried to reframe Gnostics as “so-called Knowers” and turn their religious identity into something shameful. The Gnostics are presented in this book as real religious people whose search for spiritual truth led them to reevaluate their religious affiliations, suspend the conventions of their ancestral religions, and reinvent religion so that it worked to heal humanity rather than charm the gods.

Gnosticism and Fundamentalism

If Gnosticism isn’t a single religion divided into a number of sects or the disparaging propaganda of Catholic leaders, then what is it? Throughout this book, Gnosticism is understood to be an innovative form of spirituality. Gnosticism is a spiritual orientation that can be likened to other spiritual

orientations that people of different religious affiliations embrace, like fundamentalism.

Consider how fundamentalism is a perspective distinct from any single religion. It is its own unique spirituality that views God as an authoritative patriarchal figure and scripture as a sacred, infallible document that is literally true. As such, the human being must conform to the will of God as it is revealed in the scripture. This leads to exclusivism, in which certain people in the group are saved according to their obedience to the scripture and everyone else outside the group is damned. This spiritual orientation is linked to a variety of religious affiliations, so that we have in our world today Christian fundamentalists as well as Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim fundamentalists.

This is how it is with Gnosticism. In this book, Gnosticism is understood to be its own unique form of spirituality that emerged when some ancient religious seekers attempted to make meaning of their experiences of the world. It is really that simple. “Gnostic” is an innovative concept that some ancient people began to use to describe a new way to be religious. It is an innovative religious identity that emerged in the first century CE when a number of religious people began to claim that they possessed a new kind of spiritual knowledge (gnosis). The Gnostic expressed for them not a new religion but a new type of spirituality, a new way for them to live in their world as religious people, whatever their current religious affiliations. As Gnostic spirituality emerged within these different personal contexts, these religious seekers began to call into question the truth of their regional and ancestral religions and spun that truth in new and unusual directions.

When we think about the concept “Gnostic,” we recruit from our long-term memory ideal attributes that we have associated with the concept. Scholars who study cognition have shown that humans recruit knowledge that we have already organized into useful categories. They call these categories “mental frames” or “schemas” (Coulson 2001) or “idealized cognitive models” (Lakoff 1987). It is helpful to think of the concept of the Gnostic as a frame that ancient people recruited when they thought about a certain way to be religious.

How so? We might use the book as an example of a frame we are all familiar with today. What makes a book a *book* to us, and not something else? We mentally frame the book with ideal characteristics, such as a folio of paper bound between two covers. Does a book have to have covers, or can it

be a simple folio of paper bound with a string? Usually there is writing inside that we read, but not always. There are blank books to be used as journals as well as books to be written. There are published and unpublished books, handwritten, typeset, and picture books.

In other words, there is considerable flexibility in the frames we recruit to think about our world. We recognize that not all books are the same. They do not all have exactly the same properties as the ideal frame. Yet we still recognize them as books. Even more important, the elements that define the book can shift to accommodate new experiences of book-like objects. These new experiences either expand the frame, shift it, or break it open into something new.

Take the e-book, for example. It has no pages, no cover, and virtual words that disappear when the device is turned off. Yet we have come to recognize it as a book because it is an electronic version of a physical book. This is an innovation in the concept of the book, what linguists call an “emergent structure” (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). If this emergent idea stabilizes, as it did with the e-book, it reorganizes the categories we use to think. The e-book allows us to think in new directions about everything from reading to publishing to libraries to other forms of media such as magazines and newspapers. Like the e-book, the Gnostic is an emergent structure, an innovative concept that some ancient people began to use to describe a new way to be religious.

The Ideal Characteristics of Gnostic Spirituality

Ancient people understood this new type of spirituality to have certain ideal attributes. In this book, I present ancient Gnosticism as a form of spirituality that in ancient memory was associated with five ideal characteristics.

The first characteristic is framed around direct experiential knowledge of a transcendent God, what the Gnostics called *gnosis*. In these ecstatic moments, the Gnostics felt immersed in the overwhelming presence of transcendence, believing that they had been reunited with the very ground of being. The experience was utterly transforming, a therapy that restored them to spiritual and psychological wholeness. According to Gnostic stories, the god they met in ecstasy is *the* God who lives beyond our universe in a realm of transcendence. This God is absolute goodness and love.

Second, these ecstatic states were not always unbidden raptures but were carefully choreographed in terms of ritual. Gnostic spirituality is oriented

toward particular religious practices that were used to prompt the ecstatic states and unitive experiences of transcendence that Gnostics pursued. These practices were built around ceremonies of induction or initiation. They had intense contemplative and incubatory components as well as virtual dramas that simulated journeys through the underworld and celestial realms. They were largely cathartic and psychologically therapeutic.

Third, because they experienced complete unity with the transcendent God in their initiations, these people were convinced that humans have an innate spiritual nature that is an extension of this transcendence. It is the divine embodied in each of us, the transcendent God made immanent within the human. They called this spark of God the *pneuma*, or spirit. It is our permanent immortal aspect, whereas most Gnostics thought that the psyche, or soul, was mortal. Although the soul survived the death of the physical body and could be reincarnated or suffer in afterlife purgatories, it would not live on eternally. Once the universe ceased to exist, our souls would blip out like extinguished lights.

For most Gnostics, the spirit was understood to be what would survive into eternity, but only if it could be awakened and reconnected with the transcendent God, the ground of its being. While this integration of the self with God guaranteed the permanent survival of our selves after death, the Gnostics believed that it was the ticket to restoring psychological and physical wellness. Although they felt that our bodies and souls were inferior to the spirit, even imprisoning it, they still shared a holistic perspective of the human being. They believed that spiritual wholeness and physical and psychological well-being went hand in hand. The wellness of the body and the psyche depended on the wellness of the spirit.

Fourth, this was transgressive talk that set Gnostics at odds with conventional religions, which worshiped local deities of the earth and the celestial spheres, not the transcendent realms. Although some of the Greek philosophers in the first centuries CE also were talking about a transcendent deity beyond Mind and Being (Whittaker 1969), they did not worship this God as the Gnostics did. In the second century, several philosophically minded Christians also began thinking about a transcendent God. To resolve the transtheistic problem that the Gnostic vision raised—that the true God of worship is the supreme God who lives beyond the cosmos and is not the biblical God—these Christians weld the concept of a transcendent deity with the biblical God. Gnostics engaged conventional religion and its scriptures

by upending traditional understandings of the gods and readings of texts. They developed a countercultural method of interpretation.

Fifth, to achieve this, they incorporated into their religious discussions everything but the kitchen sink. To reorient religion as *true* religion, they relied on everything from Homer and Plato to magic and astrology to ancient brain science and fantastic cosmological speculations about multiworlds. They were embedded within the countercultural. Their intellectual engagement was open-ended, their mentality that of a seeker (see Roof 1993, 79–83). Although we might be tempted to consider this a “cafeteria style” spirituality that is a function of the religious marketplace, this view diminishes the fact that Gnostics located spiritual authority in the individual’s soul or spirit. So what the individual already knows and comes to know through ecstasy and revelation is what comes into play in their plans to remake religion as true religion.

Worship at the Margins

In this book I am mainly concerned to explore the transgressive nature of Gnostic spirituality as its distinctive feature (DeConick 2013b, 2016). It is the feature that makes the forbidden scriptures forbidden. Gnostic spirituality, with its subversive view of a transcendent God, the divine human being, and multiworlds, is nothing less than a revolution in religion, an uprising of the spirit that shook the foundations of the ancient religious world.

As we will see in [chapter 1](#), before its emergence, there was nothing like the extreme Gnostic orientation that empowered the individual person and subverted religion’s traditional purpose of serving the gods. Before Gnostic spirituality surfaced, the religions in the Mediterranean basin conceived the human being and God to be vastly different, in terms of both substance and power. The metaphysical orientation of these traditional religions understood the human being as a mortal creature made by a powerful God for the sole purpose of obediently serving God and his appointed king as slaves and vassals.

To the contrary, Gnostic spirituality spotlighted the perspective that human beings are more than mortal creatures fashioned by God to do his bidding. The human being is perceived to be bigger and more powerful than the conventional gods, substantially connected to a divine source that transcends creation. Knowledge of this divine source, gnosis, depends on a direct religious experience between the human and the transcendent God.

In [chapter 2](#), we will see how Gnostic movements and religions that were forged out of this new metaphysical orientation focused on the revival of the divinity that lives at the center of the human being. They conceived this revival as a therapeutic shamanic journey of integration, a transpersonal journey to spiritual wholeness. Ancient Gnostic movements and religions reoriented the focus of religion from the welfare of the gods to the health and well-being of humans, who were not meant to submit to the gods of this world but to vanquish them.

Gnostic spirituality was not innocuous. Its countercultural program reformatted conventional religions in ways that many traditionalists felt would lead to civil disorder, unrest, and damnation. Yet its call for the liberation of humanity from the tyranny of the gods and their kings did not result in military coups and bloodshed. Gnosticism did not emerge out of political revolt, nor did it encourage it.

Rather, Gnosticism emerged from the life experiences of people who were oppressed but had no hope for political advantage. They felt estranged, literally. Roman colonialism and imperialism had left them despondent and demoralized. Facing brutal oppression on a daily basis, they began to question the value of their religious upbringing, which taught them to submit to the will of the king as the representative of the gods, to suffer divine retribution for their sins, and to endure the fate the gods had cast for them. Their religions gave them no succor beyond apocalyptic fever that their suffering now meant heaven later. For some people this was not enough. These are the people who began searching for truth outside the normal channels. These are the people who were the first Gnostics.

In [chapter 2](#), I suggest that Gnostic spirituality first emerged when some disenchanted Greeks and Jews made pilgrimages to Egyptian temples to learn from the priests, who were marketing themselves as spiritual gurus. The priests initiated these pilgrims, taking them on soul journeys to meet Atum, the transcendent primal God Before All Gods. Their experiences of the transcendent God impressed these pilgrims so deeply that their religious upbringing and ancestral faith were called into question. The God they had met in their visions was not the god of any of the organized religions. They were convinced of this. So they began reorganizing their religious ideas and practices to align them with the worship of this transcendent deity. They established religious ideas and practices of liberation and therapy, gaining

control of their oppressive world by ritually conquering the traditional gods and empowering themselves as immortals.

This countercultural spirituality was attractive to many ancient people who had never heard anything like it before. It wasn't long before Gnostic spirituality went viral, engaging the conventional religions in ways that reformatted them and turned them inside out. In [chapter 3](#), I sketch the migration of Gnostic spirituality from Egypt into the pagan circles of the Hermetics and the biblical circles of the Sethians. In [chapters 4](#) and [5](#), I follow its migration north into Palestine, Samaria, and Asia Minor, where it interfaced with emergent Christianity in the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John.

By the second century, a variety of Gnostic thinkers had interacted with Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy and ancient medical knowledge, as well as with the craft of astrology and magic. The result of this religious interchange was the emergence of a large number of unique Gnostic grassroots religious movements with wildly networked mythologies, doctrinal systems, and ceremonies, which I cover in [chapters 6](#) and [7](#). As we will see in [chapter 8](#), Gnostic spirituality eventually influenced the Christian teachings of Valentinus and others in his influential school.

In [chapters 6](#), [7](#), and [8](#), we also will see that the goal of Gnostic religions and movements is to alleviate human suffering and isolation by addressing our ultimate concerns, deepest yearnings, and profoundest experiences through myth and ritual. Gnostic movements are not about civic or familial duty. They are not a contest in appeasement or a placation of a God to be feared. They are not premised on attempts to secure God's favorable judgment and recognition in order to procure a better life here or hereafter. They are about the renewal of the human as God and the wielding of this personal power to forge a better life in the here and now and forever after.

In [chapter 9](#), we will see that the relationship between Gnostics and conventional religions was tenuous at best. Because of this, Gnostics ended up developing reform and separatist movements at the margins of the conventional religions, where they critiqued conventional thought and worship. More often than not, Gnostics found themselves beyond the borders of their ancestral religions, worshipping at the frontier, outside the boundaries of conventionally organized religions. Because of this, many Gnostic leaders chose to start their own religions altogether rather than trying to reform an existing tradition.

Gnostics heavily critiqued claims to authority that traced religious legitimacy to the traditional gods or their human representatives or scriptures. For the Gnostic, authority lay within the heart of each person, and revelation was its succor. Although Gnostics built their systems with wide-ranging reference to conventional religions and philosophies, there is always an element of revelation involved in the emergence and maintenance of their movements. It is the revelation that gives the movement its authority and legitimacy, not the harking to conventional wisdom, however reasonable the wisdom might be.

We will see how all of this fostered hostile relationships with those people who honored traditional wisdom, like the Christians who called themselves “apostolic” and “catholic.” The Apostolic Catholic label designates these Christians as part of a worldwide or “universal” movement based on the teaching of the twelve disciples. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these old Apostolic Catholic Christians were not Catholics as we might think of them today. They were the first ancestors of the subsequent Catholic and Orthodox Christians, and eventually even of Protestants.

The ancient Apostolic Catholic reactions to Gnostic spirituality and the movements and religions it generated were disparaging and dangerous. The Gnostics were viewed by Catholic Christians as terrifying deviants, monsters to be converted or exterminated. Their teachings were denigrated. Their books were burned. Council after council anathematized and expelled them. Violence erupted again and again.

Gnostic transgression galvanized people of the traditional faiths, who sought to control the fallout by censuring the Gnostics’ deviance through humiliation and violence. The leaders of the conventional religions were successful in their efforts, spoiling the Gnostic with shame. In this way, the Gnostic seekers of the transcendent God became in our memory polytheistic heretics bent on destroying Christian monotheism.

A Gnostic Renaissance

Over the years, as I have read and taught about Gnostic literature, I have become attentive to remarkable parallels between the ancient Gnostic world and the modern New Age (see Campbell 1972; Roof 1993, 1999; Bloom 1996; Hanegraaff 1998; Versluis 2014). As the title of this book suggests, the religious landscape that Gnostic spirituality generated in the Mediterranean basin reflects the emergence of an ancient Gnostic New Age. I like to

compare the first Gnostics to contemporary New Agers, people who were dissatisfied enough with the spiritual orientations of the conventional organized religions that they went seeking their own answers beyond the borders of traditional dogma. The New Agers were able to do so because traditional religions and values were collapsing as a more global world came into view in the 1960s.

The ancient Gnostics likewise lived in an environment where their regional and ancestral religions were breaking down, under the pressure of Roman colonization and imperialism. They also had frequent contact with new religions and philosophies as the exchange of information flowed more easily along Roman roads and trade routes such as the Silk Road. This rich religious buffer gave them the tools they needed to translate their profound religious experiences into a new way of being religious. They made new meaning out of their lives and, in the process, revolutionized religion, igniting an ancient Gnostic New Age.

Like contemporary New Age groups, Gnostic movements were grassroots affairs operated by charismatic leaders and prophetic figures. The authority of the movements, both past and present, relied on revelation from spiritual entities through channeling and visions. New Age and Gnostic movements are fundamentally countercultural, critical of the doctrines and practices of organized and ancestral religions. This countercultural orientation inverts the way ancient Gnostics and modern New Agers “do” religion, generating lively movements on the fringes of the conventional religions. At the center of these movements, ancient and modern, is the longing for the transcendent, a spiritual source that generated everything.

Religious seekers in both time periods use whatever resources are at hand to construct their ideas and practices, including scriptures, philosophy, magic, astrology, science, and references to alien or multiworlds. While modern New Agers feel themselves to be part of a spiritual transformation of humanity with the beginning of the Age of Aquarius, the Gnostics believed that their initiations set in motion the transformative process of universal spiritual renewal, finally enabling human spirits to rejoin the great transcendent aeon and regenerate God’s fullness in the last age of the world.

Because most Gnostic movements did not survive beyond the Middle Ages, many scholars have argued that Gnosticism was extinguished by the Catholics when they burned the Gnostics’ publications and forced them into exile. Yet the uncanny parallels between the ancient and modern New Age

worlds points to the survival of Gnostic spirituality, a powerful transgressive and experiential spirituality that has eroded conventional religions today just as it did in the past.

In [chapter 11](#), we will investigate how Gnosticism survived for two thousand years as a powerful spirituality, most prominently emerging in the modern world within New Age religion. Yet its reach extends beyond New Age religion into American religion more generally (Bloom 1992, 1996; Smoley 2006; Burfeind 2014). We will see how its therapeutic understanding of religion has become our own. Religion that doesn't offer us spiritual well-being, psychological restoration, and an emotional attachment to a God of love is religion on the run. American religion, from megachurches to new religious movements, from pew to pop, is enchanted by the Gnostic, its divine human, and its holistic therapy.

This enchantment with the Gnostic will be highlighted in each chapter of this book, where alongside ancient Gnostics we will meet cinematic modern Gnostics. In these contemporary films, we see Gnostics as heroes whose words and deeds are valorized and glorified rather than condemned and vilified (Wilson 2006). Their popular stories have much to tell us about the survival of Gnosticism as a prized revolutionary spirituality in America today, where we are experiencing nothing less than a Gnostic New Age.



CHAPTER ONE

The Matrix of Ancient Spirituality

Thomas Anderson

Thomas Anderson has been living two lives. During the day, he works a mind-numbing job as a computer geek for a software company. At night, he hacks systems as Neo. He is the intense guy who can get anything for anyone for a price. Then, messages start to come through the computer from a mysterious entity named Morpheus. Bits and pieces of sentences. A word or two. Neo is perplexed. Confused. Driven to paranoia. One morning, exhausted, he sees these words fixed across his screen: “Wake up, Neo . . . the Matrix has you.”

What is the Matrix that Neo discovers in the Wachowski brothers’ science fiction film? In a horrifying scene of human beings trapped in metallic pods perched along an immense beehive structure, Neo learns that the Matrix is a computer program in which humans live their lives. It is a virtual reality created by intelligent machines to control humans. The machines incubate and grow humans to extract from their bodies the energy that the machines need to survive ([figure 1.1](#)).

To keep humans passive, the machines wire them into the Matrix, where they happily live out virtual lives on twentieth-century Earth while encased in goo in a pod, with extraction wires bored into their bodies. The Matrix is the humans’ only reality. It is what gives their lives purpose and meaning. Asleep like babies, they never know that they are living out their lives from the perspective of the Matrix, which is nothing more than a software program they are wired into.



Figure 1.1 Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) emerges from his pod in *The Matrix* (1999).

It is unnerving to think of our reality as a constructed matrix, a software program that we are wired into. Although we are not humans incubated in pods by machines, we inhabit a worldview that has been constructed for us by our human ancestors, and we perceive this worldview to be reality, the way things actually are. Yet, when we study the flux of history and cultures, we see very plainly that worldviews are adjustable and what is viewed as “real” changes with time and location. Humans are known for shifting and altering the worldviews or matrices that structure and organize people’s lives, including people’s spiritual orientation, what we call today “spirituality.”

Spirituality points to the metaphysical orientation that directs our lives. It is like our sexual orientation, only in reference to our views of the existential and transcendent. It is our view of reality. It is the metaphysical matrix that we live within. It is like the Wachowskis’ vision of a human software program that we engage when we think about all there is and how we fit in. It involves how we structure our lives around the big questions of existence, reality, transcendence, and the sacred (cf. Fuller 2001, 8–9; Sheldrake 2007, 1–2; Kaufman 1993, 45–47). What exists ultimately? Who are we fundamentally? What do we value deeply? Why are we here primarily? What inspires us with awe and dread? Our answers to these types of questions create the spiritual matrix in which we orient ourselves, enabling us to lead structured and meaningful lives within a chaotic world where suffering and death are unavoidable.

How then does religion fit into this? If spirituality is how we meaningfully orient our lives to the existential, to the transcendent and to the sacred, then what is religion? Religion is the communal or collective expression of this metaphysical orientation through symbol, language, and behavior. Religion is the organized community of worship, the fellowship of the faithful.

Spirituality and religion are intimately linked. It is the spirituality of a people, their orientation toward the existential, transcendent, and sacred, that generates an organized religion in which the people can come together in community. The religion serves as the institutional platform, reinforcing the spirituality that originally generated the religion.

But what happens when a new way of perceiving reality forms in a community, when the traditional spiritual orientation that has maintained a religion goes offline? There is a software shift, so to speak, or as in Neo's case, a matrix rift, when he takes the red pill and experiences another reality altogether. It is a rift that causes religious dissociation. To deal with this matrix rift, some people attempt to realign their religion's older spirituality with their new perspective by reforming the religion. If this fails, they turn away and become "unchurched," as in the spiritual-but-not-religious New Age mindset today (Fuller 2001).

This type of rift between an old spirituality that grounds a traditional organized religion and a newly developed spirituality is not novel to the contemporary American religious scene. It is something that ancient people in the Mediterranean experienced at the beginning of the first century CE when Gnostic spirituality came online and challenged the very foundations of the religions of the time. It is a spirituality that revolutionized religion so that it could focus on the quest of the individual human for wholeness rather than on the perpetual quest, motivated by fear, to satisfy the gods and their desires through submission and obedience. It is a radical orientation that remains in play in modern American religion, where its once heretical message about the power of the divine human has become mainstream. Its therapeutic message of self-transfiguration has become America's favored form of spirituality, successfully confronting older models of spirituality that have been in play since antiquity.

What types of spirituality were common in antiquity before the emergence of this Gnostic orientation? What worldviews were the Gnostics overturning? There were three main types of spirituality that dominated the religious scene before the emergence of the Gnostic orientation: servant,

covenant, and ecstatic spirituality. These types of spirituality generated the religions around the Mediterranean and, like the turning of a wheel, were themselves nurtured and maintained by the organized religions.

Servant Spirituality

The oldest spirituality in the Mediterranean basin is servant spirituality. This is the metaphysical orientation that fostered all of the religions in the ancient Mediterranean. This metaphysical orientation views the human being as a mortal creature crafted by a more powerful being or god who is immortal. As the god's creature, the human being is the god's property to do with as the god wishes, even arbitrarily. Gods in these systems typically act as humans might, with emotions and passions that result in capricious and indiscriminate behavior on their part. The sole purpose for the creation of the human being is to produce an entity that will relieve the gods of toil. The human is created to serve the gods, not out of love or respect but out of obligation and fear. If the gods are pleased with the service, the humans may not be punished or destroyed. If the gods are displeased, then famine, pestilence, or war could consume them.

Integral to servant spirituality is the belief that the natural tendency of our world, including human inclinations and affairs, is to disintegrate into chaos. This propensity has to be overcome and the world brought into order and then forever maintained. Since human inclination is predisposed to chaos, structure must be managed externally. This begins with the gods, who establish order primordially, slaying or imprisoning the draconian forces of chaos, structuring the architecture of the heavens and the earth, and setting time in motion.

The intent of the gods is to organize a world that is stable and peaceful so that it will support their own desired lifestyle of leisure. The problem is that the natural drift of the world toward chaos remains. The primordial structure cannot sustain itself. If let go, it would naturally disintegrate into chaos.

How could this problem be solved? The onerous job of maintaining cosmic stability and peace fell to humans under the direction of a leader or king who was believed to operate in the best interests of the gods, either as their representative or as their son.

One of the primary tasks of the king is to interpret and enforce the will of the gods in order to keep the gods content and sympathetic toward his community. To this end, the king must make sure that human beings build

temples to house the gods and to care for them. He must ensure that human beings perform the religious rituals that satisfy the gods with worship and gifts. Since the gods desire that the cyclic structure of creation and nature be sustained as they had established it originally, the king must make certain that human beings regularly imitate or duplicate the establishment of primordial order on the microcosmic, ritual level. All of this results in governance based upon iterative or repetitive actions of the king and his subjects, which maintain the traditional state rather than innovate or develop it in any progressive way.

The king's other job is to maintain civil order among humans whose natural state of avarice parallels the proverbial observation that the big fish will always eat the little fish. The king is expected by the gods to uphold justice within his community so that the weak are protected against the strong and the poor against the rich. It becomes the job of the king, then, to suppress the barbaric and greedy nature of the human being through strong, even oppressive, governance.

The classic metaphysical orientation that conceives of powerful immortal deities who harness chaos and create mortal human beings to sustain cosmic order has its consequences. It results in a picture of the human as a forced laborer who toils beneath the weight of maintaining the will of the gods and their creation, endlessly in servitude to the gods and their king (cf. Assmann 1989, 55–88; Moscati 1960). And to what end? The afterlife provided no relief. As a shadow, the deceased endured in gloom and wretchedness, eating dust and drinking dirty water. The only hope for respite came from the living, who might provide the dead with grave offerings of food and wine. If the living forgot to assist them, however, the shades would wander restlessly on the earth and molest the living as malicious demons.

Life and Death in Babylonia

Servant spirituality was at the heart of the Babylonian religion, as can be seen in the Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish*, in which human beings are viewed as the pinnacle of creation but not as a stunning climax (Jacobsen 1976, 167–91). They are an afterthought molded to serve the pantheon of gods in the temples of Marduk. By imposing upon humans the task of serving the gods, the ancient myth reasons, the gods are set free to do as they please.

The inferiority of humans is accentuated by the Babylonian tale when it relates that humans were created from a mixture of earth and the blood of the

conquered primordial demon of chaos, Kingu (Enuma Elish 4.33–34). In this yarn, it is something of a pitiful joke that human beings are perceived to be the combination of dust and the blood of the one of the oldest monsters of chaos in Babylonian mythology. To put it another way, the tendency toward anarchy, the blood of chaos, runs in our veins.

The Babylonians understood their enforcement of civil law, such as the famous Code of Hammurabi, to be necessary to maintain control over the chaos that is in the blood of all humans. Legend records that King Hammurabi was appointed by the gods Anu and Enlil to make justice rule in the land and to destroy the wicked and the unjust so that the strong would not oppress the weak. To promote justice and communal well-being, he received laws from these gods, which he was appointed to enforce. As the representative of their laws, he possessed absolute sovereignty to do so.

After a lifetime of forced servitude to god and king came death, when the Babylonians thought that the deceased would be transformed into an *etimmu* (ghost). This entity is an insubstantial shade of the deceased that resides underground in the land of no return. As the classic Epic of Gilgamesh maintains, every human being dies, including the greatest of heroes, and goes to the land of the dead to eat dust as food and to dwell in darkness. This is the wretched fate of every one of us, good or bad. Gilgamesh laments (Jacobsen 1976, 207):

What can I do, Utanapishtim, where will I go?
The one who followed behind me,
the rapacious one,
sits in my bedroom, Death!
And wherever I may turn my face,
there he is, Death!

So what was the point? The righteous suffer—of this the Babylonians were keenly aware. Even when they fulfilled all their tasks as servants of the gods, still they suffered under their heavy burden. Who is to know, they concluded, what the gods really desire? Humans are mere mortals. “He who was alive yesterday is dead today,” they said. “What is evil to a person’s mind is good for a god” (Pritchard 1969, 435).

Submission for Eternity in Egypt

Servant spirituality structured the Egyptian religion, too, where the human being is so marginal that the mythology does not bother to mention the

creation of humans, or does so only in passing, as creatures that emerged from the unintentional tears of Atum (Lloyd 1989). Atum is the primary self-generated god, the first to come out of the primordial darkness. He is relieved when his brother and sister return to him after leaving him alone for a time. It is from the tears of relief he sheds at his reunion with them that human beings spring, unplanned. In one such mention, it is remarked that the tears were wept out of anger, suggesting that the human race is a product of Atum's rage and misery (Faulkner 2004, spell 714). In another version of the story, it is tears of sorrow and loneliness that produce human beings, suggesting that the human race is a product most sorrowful and pitiful (spell 1130).

In some accounts, humans are molded from mud or clay by the creator god Khnum, who makes them on his potter's wheel, continually producing bodies of children yet to be born. At their births, the *ka* (life breath) is breathed into them. Death occurs when the *ka* departs from the body to take up residence in a statue or portrait of the person in the tomb. It is difficult to render fully the meaning of *ka* into English because we have no similar concept today. It is considered to be the person's vitality and so is rendered as a twin or double of the individual.

In addition, the human being has a *ba*, an individual capacity to move. It assumes immense importance after death, when the corpse can't move, and it must be released from the body through a ritual called the Opening of the Mouth. The *ba* is depicted as a bird or animal manifestation of the person, which can leave the tomb and roam the earth and sky during the day, returning to the underworld every night to be reunited with the *ka* (figure 1.2).

Once the person had been properly mummified, the unification of the *ka* and *ba* resulted in the separation of the *akh* from the corpse. The *akh* is the glorified afterlife form of the person, the deceased reconstituted as a being of light. The *akh* was like a roaming ghost.

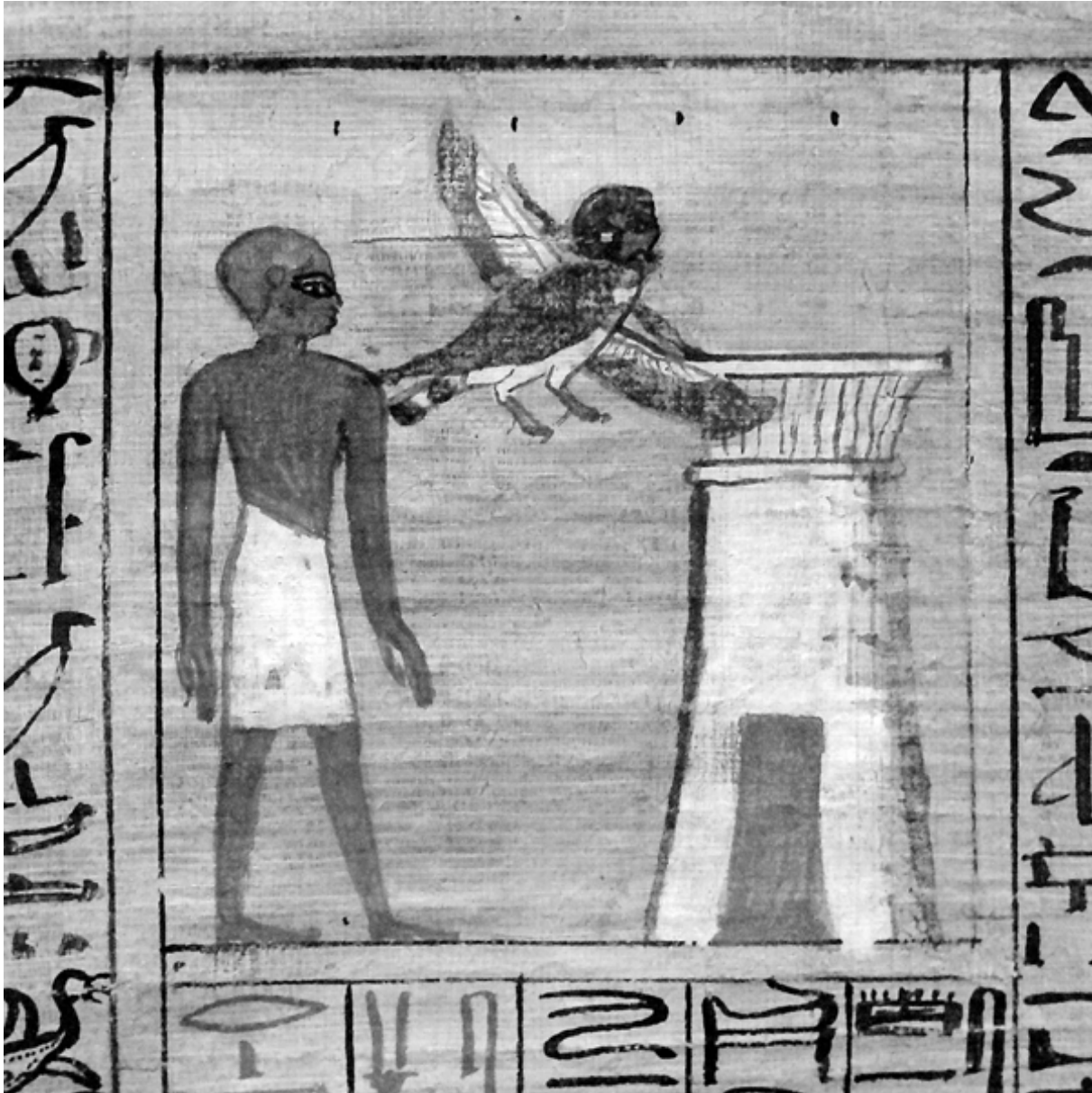


Figure 1.2 Illustration of the *ba* leaving the deceased, from a version of the *Book of the Dead* displayed in the Museo Egizio, Turin, Italy. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

Why are humans around, according to the ancient Egyptians? Their job is to maintain *maat* (truth, justice, and order), which was established by the gods when primal chaos had been subdued. *Maat* is cosmic stability, seasonal regularity, and the law and justice of the gods. It is the opposite of chaos, lawlessness, and violence. Cosmic order is maintained by the priests, who observe daily religious rituals in the temples for this purpose. Civil *maat* is maintained through public decency and individual morality,

especially as it is manifested in the conduct of the pharaoh and the obedience of his subjects.

With this emphasis on individual morality, it is not surprising that Egyptian religion eventually developed a complex view of an afterlife where personal piety was rewarded. The aspect of the human being responsible for moral behavior was the *ib* (heart), the seat of the intellect and emotions. The good person was guided inwardly by the heart to be virtuous. Virtue was understood to be knowledge of the rules of conduct that brought about communal harmony, as well as obedience to the will of the gods. The Egyptians viewed the wise person as the *silent* person who submitted himself or herself to both maat and the will of the gods. The gods were viewed as omniscient, constantly judging humans with favors and disgrace, depending upon human compliance.

So it was in the afterlife, too. In order for the deceased to make the transition to the otherworldly state when he or she is transformed into an *akh*, the old body must be disintegrated and a new form created. To this end, the priests performed elaborate embalming ceremonies. These practices were not so much about preserving the body of the deceased as they were about destroying the old body and transfiguring the deceased into a new form that would live on after death.

Part of this transition to the *akh* form involved a terrifying journey through the netherworld to the Hall of Twin Truths. At every underworld portal were ferocious draconian guards who tested the deceased. The deceased had to prove themselves knowledgeable and worthy to be inhabitants of the *akh* sphere, to be deserving to live in Osiris's field of plenty, to board the sun god's ship in the sky, or to become a star god in the belly of the sky mother.

The final decision was made in the Hall of Twin Truths, where the deceased had to pass strenuous examinations to be confirmed pure and worthy of afterlife transfiguration. In order to gain admittance, the deceased uttered precise scripted responses to questions about their identity and competence. They also testified about their moral condition by listing the forty-two sins that they never committed. To prove the veracity of these claims, the *ib* of the deceased is placed on a scale and weighed against the feather of *maat*. If the *ib* is heavier than the feather, the heart of the deceased is considered heavy with sin. Immediately, the terrible crocodile-faced monster Ammut devours the heavy heart and the deceased ceases to exist.

If the scale is balanced, the great god of wisdom, Thoth, cross-examines the deceased about the outcome of the trial. “Why have you come?” he demands. “What is your moral condition? Who do you hope to see?” The deceased is required to respond that he or she has been judged worthy, offering a resounding repetition of the exclamation “I am pure!” and a petition to be granted an audience with Osiris. Thoth then introduces the deceased to Osiris, and the *akh* form is taken to enjoy a blessed afterlife in the Field of Reeds, harvesting Osiris’s bounty as his eternal servant.

The Greek Mortal Differential

Greek religion also emerged as an expression of servant spirituality. In fact, the vast difference between gods and humans was central to the religion, even after Greek philosophy developed the concept of the individual psyche (soul) as immortal. Greek gods are distinct because they are supremely powerful and have bodies that remain forever young. Humans have mortal bodies that weaken and age. Gods have special blood, called ichor, which keeps them from dying even of wounds that would be fatal to humans. They have no need to eat to sustain their lives as humans do, although they still enjoy being fed by their human servants, savoring smoke from sacrifices on the altars of temples dedicated to them.

Humans are supposed to admire, worship, and fear the gods because of this power differential. Sin is tantamount to hubris, exceeding human limits, rather than breaking a law. Humans might imitate the beauty and strength of the gods, but if this becomes excessive and infringes on their godliness or mocks them, divine retribution results: famine, pestilence, war, death. Humans must respect human limits and must bow to a fate and death meted out to them by the gods, however arbitrary. If humans fail to comply, they can expect punishment on the civic level as well as the personal.

In the famous story of Prometheus, we learn the classic Mediterranean tale of the creation of the human being as a pitiful slave of the gods. After the fall of the Titan monsters and their imprisonment in the gloomy underworld realm of Tartarus, the young god Prometheus is given the task of creating the human being, which he shapes out of mud. Then the goddess of wisdom, Athena, gives the mud figure the breath of life. Yet Prometheus’s creation is pitiful, weak, and prone on the ground. To make matters worse, all the great qualities such as swiftness and strength have been distributed to other animals, leaving the human truly pathetic in comparison. So Prometheus does what he can for

his creation. He makes the human being stand erect like the gods and gifts him with fire.

Zeus, the king of the Olympians, is not pleased, because these gifts blur the distinct lines between god and human, diminishing the power differential between the two races. To draw the lines again, Zeus indentures humans to serve the gods. Zeus decrees that a portion of every animal cooked by humans must be given to the gods as food. Prometheus is not powerful enough to undo Zeus's decree, but he is able to trick Zeus into accepting only the bones and fat as the gods' share of the meal. Zeus does not take this trick lightly. Angry, he unleashes upon men the guile of beautiful women like Pandora, and all the evil and suffering in the world that such women bring.

Yet, in the bottom of Pandora's box is hope. This is not the bright, shiny hope of a life blessed with the kiss of the gods but the hope that the human can ward off the retribution of the gods through submission and humiliation in the face of the gods' extreme power. By bowing down to the limits of the human condition and to the lot of mortality, the human might be able to stave off divine judgment, at least until after death.

Did anything about the human survive death to be rewarded or punished? In classical Greek religion, there exist *skiai* (shadows) of the deceased, who reside in the underworld after death but who also can wander in and out of the dreams of the living as ghosts. These are viewed as images of the deceased, the likenesses of the departed. As time went on, there developed in Greek religion the concept of an afterlife judgment that occurs after the deceased have been ferried to the house of Hades. If the deceased are judged wicked, they are thrown into the pits of Tartarus or endure endless tortures, such as immersion in a lake with no ability to ever drink. If the judgment goes well, they are taken to live in the blessed netherworld fields of Elysium.

The Immortal Soul

By the time of Plato, an innovation in the understanding of the human being had occurred. The concept of a psyche as something distinct from the body and immortal had emerged in the Greek world. The idea can be traced to Pythagoras, who taught that the soul enters the body with a child's first breath. It comes from a heavenly realm, and after death it returns to live in the upper atmosphere, within the Milky Way, or reincarnates in another body, if purity of soul has not yet been achieved.

As early as 400 BCE, religious people known as Orphics made the immortality of the soul the focus of initiatory religious practices. They taught that this liberation from the wheel of rebirth is not achieved without effort. Purity of soul is attained through a life of asceticism, emotional detachment, and prescribed religious ceremonies. If a person is unable to gain control over his or her body and emotions, then, upon death, the immortal psyche passes into another body and the wheel of birth and death continues. They expected the final destiny of the purified immortal soul to be underground, in the blessed groves and fields of Persephone.

The Orphic view of the immortal soul reflects an alternative view of the human being that emerges in ancient literary references to the cannibalization of the god Dionysus in the form of the infant Zagreus (Plutarch, *De esu carnum* 1.996b–c; Olympiodorus, *On Plato's Phaedo* 1.3; Xenocrates, frag. 20 Damascius, *On Plato's Phaedo* 1.2). Dionysus as the baby Zagreus, son of Zeus and Persephone, is captured by the Titans while he is playing with a toy mirror. The Titans tear him to pieces and then cannibalize him. Athena is able to save his heart and return it to Zeus so Dionysus can be reborn. In the meantime, an angry Zeus strikes the Titans with his lightning bolt, incinerating them. It is out of their ashes that the human race emerges. This means that the human being consists of two natures: a divine nature from the remains of Dionysus and a monstrous, warlike nature from the remains of the Titans.

Plato develops a philosophy that operates with reference to this alternative understanding of the human being. Plato thinks that there is an immortal, divine element, the psyche, that can be returned to the heavens and the life of the gods it once enjoyed, if a person can free himself or herself from this Titanic nature (Plato, *Laws* III 701b–c). In each life, Plato thought, a person's psyche is meant to learn and progress toward ethical purification and intellectual enlightenment, to a sudden remembrance of the divine psyche before it was drawn into a material body and weighed down by the body's passions. Once this purification is fully achieved, the soul of the deceased can return to its celestial home at the height of the cosmic sphere, as a star. If it remains impure, it is reincarnated.

Central to this understanding of the divine psyche is Plato's understanding of its makeup. For Plato, the plight of the psyche is comparable to that of a charioteer struggling to control his team of winged horses, one noble and the other ignoble. The charioteer represents the reasoning part of the psyche, the

nous (mind), whose job it is to control the horses. The lower part of the psyche is represented by the two horses. The noble horse is the moral impulse of the psyche; the ignoble horse is the irrational, appetitive impulse. Primordially, the soul, under the careful direction of the charioteer, flies around the skies among the gods, and with each rotation it can glimpse the Good above them all. But eventually the charioteer loses sight of the Good—and control of his horses. He falls from the skies. The psyche is embodied in the cycle of birth and death until, once again, it is able to control its lower aspects and, liberated, can fly with the gods (Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a–254e).

As much as this philosophy revolutionized the ancients' picture of the human being, it did not alter Greek religion to any great extent. Although a strong sense of personal religion begins to be cultivated in emergent Greek mystery religions, through initiation ceremonies, underworld journeys, and heavenly flights, these religions still focus on a human supplicant seeking an “in” with the netherworld gods. The initiate's hope is for recognition and favoritism, that a bond of devotion to the god will guarantee his or her preferential treatment in the afterlife and transformation into a body that will survive and prosper in the underworld environment. Even if a person enjoyed initiation into the mysteries of great gods like Demeter or Dionysus, the individual still maintained his family and civic religious duties. Greek religion continued to be about humans serving the powerful gods as a civic duty that would maintain the good of the city by holding at bay the wrath and jealousy of the immortals.

Capricious Dealings in Israel

Servant spirituality was also foundational to the religion of the ancient Israelites. In fact, Israel as a community was understood to be YHWH's servant Jacob. The Israelites' oldest mythology (ca. 950 BCE), what scholars call the Yahwist source, is embedded in the Old Testament narratives. This distinctive cycle of stories refers to God by the name YHWH (probably pronounced YAH-way).

Although these stories were edited and rewritten many times before they came into their final biblical form, it is clear that the old stories about Israel's God in the Yahwist source portray him as a powerful deity who related to the Israelite tribes as he would relate to servants. Abraham refers to himself as YHWH's servant, who seeks favor from YHWH by preparing and serving him water, bread, meat, curds, and milk (Genesis 18: 1–8).

Jacob is identified as YHWH's servant when he talks to the angels of God at Mahanaim. He begs YHWH to save him from Esau's wrath so that Jacob's offspring will grow exponentially, to continue serving YHWH according to YHWH's wishes (32:1–5, 9–12).

Not only are the leaders of the old Israelite tradition memorialized as servants of YHWH; the entire tribal nation is identified in these terms as well. The nation of Israel is YHWH's servant, a people who have been chosen by YHWH to be his slaves, to bring him gifts, and to offer him sacrifices. As such, YHWH calls Israel a "worm" and an "insect" completely dependent upon him for help. In fact, Israel's very existence, even the provision of such basics as water in a desert land, is completely contingent upon YHWH's favor (Isaiah 41:8–17, 43:22–24, 44:1–3).

How is YHWH's favor acquired? Just as was the case in the other Mediterranean religions we have investigated, favor is acquired through devotion to God and maintenance of justice within the community. Humans are expected to devote themselves solely to YHWH, who is perceived to be a jealous God ready to strip, beat, mutilate, and abandon them if they stray, as a husband might his adulterous wife.

They are also instructed to maintain justice or righteousness within their communities. They must uphold the laws that YHWH has put into place for his servants or expect to receive severe punishment from his hand (Isaiah 42:1–4). This idea is very old, embedded even in the Yahwist source, which portrays the primary fathers of the faith as those who have kept the way of YHWH "by doing righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19). Justice was viewed by the ancient Israelites in terms of equitability—that the weak and sick be assisted, that the poor be fed, that prisoners be cared for.

As is the case in other Mediterranean religions, the servants of YHWH are understood as creatures of YHWH, created by YHWH to serve him. "Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant," says YHWH. "I formed you, you are my servant" (Isaiah 44:21).

This theme goes back to the oldest cycle of stories in the Yahwist source, to the story of Adam, the primal human being created from the dust of the earth and infused with the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). Adam's job is to be obedient to his creator, the God YHWH, who desires above all else to maintain the distinction between God and human (2:15–17, 3:4–5, 22). Thus, the first humans are forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge, whose fruit would make them like gods who know the difference between good and evil.

When they disobey his direct command, YHWH becomes worried about the fact that the distinction between God and human has started to blur. Their insubordination signals to YHWH that his creatures are becoming like gods (3:22). Afraid that the insubordination might continue and that they might also eat from the tree of life and actually become immortal, YHWH throws them out of the garden and binds them into a mortal life of submission, pain, and endless toil to produce food from infertile land to feed both human and God (3:16–23).

In the old Yahwist story cycle, there is randomness in YHWH's dealings with the humans he creates, an arbitrariness that, more than fair dealings, showcases YHWH's power. It is not long before YHWH regrets creating humans, because he perceives an evil and violent streak in them. Would they revolt against him? So he decides to wield as much violence as he can muster and to destroy all humans, beasts, and birds with a flood—except the righteous Noah and his family, whom YHWH favored (6:5–8).

When new generations of humans arise after the flood and begin to build a city with a lofty temple, YHWH investigates. What he finds disturbs him. Human beings were united and cooperative, successful builders, creating a temple that would allow them access to the very heavens that YHWH inhabited. YHWH considers their success threatening to him, as they are vying for a station among the gods. “This is only the beginning of what they will do,” YHWH says. “Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (11:6). His solution? He confuses their speech so that they cannot communicate with one another. Unable to communicate, the people become divided. They leave the city and its temple unfinished and scatter into the countryside.

Next, without explanation, YHWH selects from among all humans one small tribe, the righteous clan of Abraham, to honor him. Eventually, some of the inhabitants of Sodom begin to distress YHWH, so he ventures down to take a look. When Abraham discovers that YHWH intends to destroy the neighboring city, he is upset. What are the ethical implications? He demands to know whether YHWH intends to kill the righteous people along with the wicked. Yes, YHWH had planned to get rid of them all. Abraham negotiates with YHWH on behalf of the righteous living in Sodom, so that at least YHWH's righteous servant Lot and his family can be removed from the city before YHWH rains down sulfur and fire and destroys everything there (18:23–33, 19:12–26).

Later, YHWH tests how much Abraham fears him by commanding Abraham to kill his son Isaac and make a burnt offering out of him. Abraham complies and lays out his son. YHWH is satisfied and spares the boy's life just before the knife can be plunged into Isaac's flesh (22:1–14).

The old cycle of stories about Moses is equally erratic and violent. Immediately after YHWH chooses Moses to be his prophet, he meets Moses on his way back to Egypt. The clandestine night visit triggers a brutal but unsuccessful attack by YHWH, who tries to kill Moses, evidently because Moses was not circumcised. A ritual to ward off demons protects Moses from sure death at YHWH's hand (Exodus 4:24–26).

When the Hebrews cast a statue of a calf as an object of worship, YHWH is incensed and tells Moses that he has decided to destroy them all and to turn only Moses' descendants into his nation. Moses convinces YHWH that it will make YHWH look bad if he destroys the very people he just rescued from Egypt. He reminds YHWH of the promises he made to his servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. YHWH relents. Rather than annihilating them, he sends a plague as the punishment for their sin. Moses takes it upon himself to have the sons of Levi kill with swords three thousand offenders, whom he identifies as their brothers, friends, and neighbors. The violent vengeance of the sons of Levi acts as their priestly ordination into the service of YHWH. The cost to be YHWH's priest, according to Moses, is the lives of their sons and brothers (32:1–14, 25–35).

Again and again throughout these narratives, YHWH acts out of wrath, revenge, regret, and jealousy as only a being of supreme power can. He is the ultimate warrior god, crushing those who are the enemies of his favored people along with any who displease him. He lords it over his servant Jacob as only he sees fit, punishing innocent children for the transgressions of their ancestors four generations removed. He makes weal and creates woe (Isaiah 45:4–7). Like the Greek gods, YHWH does things because he *can* do them.

Perhaps his most complete portrait is painted in the book of Job, where YHWH allows his servant Job and Job's family to be brutalized by Satan, even though Job is properly blameless, upright, and fearful of YHWH. The only condition YHWH puts on Satan's violence is that his servant Job himself must remain alive. Yet, throughout all the sufferings, horrors, and killings that Job endures, he refuses to blame YHWH because, Job reasons, what YHWH gave, YHWH may take away.

In the end, Job's response to it all is personal humiliation. Job covers himself in ashes and repents for his lowly, despicable status, for his mortal mind that cannot know the workings of the mind of an all-powerful God who can do anything he wants with the creatures he fashioned from the dust (Job 1:21, 42:1–6).

Covenant Spirituality

An unusual innovation in Judaism occurs when covenant spirituality shifts the servant paradigm and tames the arbitrary nature of the old God YHWH. After the Babylonians destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE, the Jewish royalty and priests were forcibly removed to Babylon. This event is known as the Babylonian exile. During the exile, the Jewish priests composed and edited the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Bible or Old Testament. This work contains an innovation in spirituality. In the composition of their history as a religious people, the priests crystallized a view of their God YHWH as a powerful king who operated by laws that he had contracted with a chosen portion of humanity—the tribe of Abraham and his descendants Isaac and Jacob.

In the ancient world, covenants were treaties established between two parties. These could be contracts in which the parties unilaterally agreed on the days that each of them could use the local water hole. Or a powerful king might impose a covenant on his subjects, requiring them to pay taxes in exchange for royal protection.

The idea that a god would enter into a covenant agreement with his human servants may have started as a simple metaphor used by the prophet Hosea to signal the contingency of YHWH's protection, that such protection was dependent upon Israel's fulfillment of its obligation to be a righteous and just people (Hosea 8:1–3). But the full expression of the idea as an actual legal agreement between God and humans did not occur until the historical chronicle found in Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings was composed and the exilic priests rewrote the old Yahwist source into the Torah. Perhaps it was the critical and horrifying nature of the war and the forced relocation to Babylon that enabled such a startling claim to gain traction.

Initially, it must have been scandalous to argue that YHWH ratified a legal covenant with his human servants, especially as the story is presented in Abraham's tale. In the case of the Abrahamic covenant, YHWH ratifies the

covenant by walking through the cut halves of sacrificed animals, rather than asking Abraham, the subordinate party, to do so. YHWH's actions suggest that he expects his demise to be similar to the demise of the sacrificed animals. If he fails to fulfill his obligations to Abraham, to provide his people with property, progeny, and protection, YHWH will be similarly cleaved in half (Genesis 15:1–21; see McKenzie 2000, 17–18).

This signals YHWH's total commitment to Abraham, God's absolute intention to meet his covenantal obligations. Abraham is asked to do nothing except agree to be the recipient of YHWH's promises by circumcising the bodies of the males within the community. Circumcision then serves to physically mark the individual as YHWH's own.

At the same time that we have the covenant of YHWH's commitment evidenced in the Abrahamic cycle, we find highlighted in the Mosaic narrative the covenant of human obligation. In this case, the covenant, with its vast legal stipulations, is ratified in a ceremony in which the people agreed to keep all YHWH's laws. As blood from the sacrificed animal is thrown on the people and on the altar, they say, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (Exodus 19:5, 24:3, 7–8; see McKenzie 2000, 20).

What are the implications of this drastic shift from servant to covenant spirituality? What the Deuteronomist historian and the exilic priests were saying is that YHWH could not do whatever he arbitrarily wished. Even though the Israelites were still his creatures, mortal beings created in his image, he could not do with them whatever he desired. He, along with his people, had to abide by the terms of a treaty that they had ratified together. YHWH was obligated to provide them with a homeland, progeny, and protection, as long as his people were obedient servants who observed a well-defined code of law. But if the people broke his laws, he no longer would be obligated to them and their lives would be on the line. Their penalty was death, either directly or through an indirect sacrificial system that substituted an animal for the transgressor.

Mercy and Forgiveness

This covenantal agreement put a new twist on the relationship between human and God. Because it was bound to be broken and would need to be reestablished, it meant that mercy and forgiveness had to come into play on the part of YHWH, and repentance on the part of Israel. Although YHWH is

never perceived to love his people in terms of unconditional affection, his relationship takes on a new flavor. He becomes a God whose fierceness is tempered by his mercy and compassion, as long as his servants continue to fear him as liege. He is reenvisioned as a father who pities his children, who are weak creatures of dust and short days. The psalmist sings, in Psalm 103:11–18:

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
As a father pities his children,
so the Lord pities those who fear him.
For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting
upon those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

It is quite likely that the crystallization of this covenant spirituality was the direct result of the trauma that rocked the Jewish community as they watched the temple of YHWH destroyed in Jerusalem, their population decimated and then deported to Babylon, and their land colonized. Evidently they were unable to believe that YHWH would bring upon them such annihilation for no reason at all, because, in the face of this horror, the exiled priests maintained that YHWH had not arbitrarily left them. Nor were they convinced that the vengeful warrior YHWH was a weak God overpowered by Marduk, the god of the Babylonian victors.

In their minds, something else had to be going on. The exiled priests were convinced of this. The people had lost YHWH's favor. He had withdrawn his protection from Israel, the priests reasoned, because the people had been unrighteous. His withdrawal was fair. The priests began to argue that YHWH was doing what he had every right to do because the Israelites had made a covenant with him. It was the Israelites who had failed in their contractual obligation. With the covenant broken, YHWH was no longer obligated to keep his end of the deal and had withdrawn his promises and protection.

To manage the extremity of their existential crisis, the priests threw themselves on the mercy of the court. They argued that YHWH was not just fiercely righteous but was merciful, too, a God who would remain faithful to his promises even when his people failed to. If his people responded with fear and repentance, he would renew the covenant and protect them once again. It is within this critical context that the lamentations of the Israelites ring so true (Lamentations 5:19–22):

But you, O Lord, reign for ever;
your throne endures to all generations.
Why do you forget us for ever,
Why do you so long forsake us?
Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!
Renew our days as of old!
Or have you utterly rejected us?
Are you exceedingly angry with us?

Ecstatic Spirituality

The third type of spirituality that surfaces widely in the ancient Mediterranean is ecstatic spirituality. It points to an ecstatic or mystical relationship with God. So we should consider both the words *ekstasis*, which signals in Greek disassociation or out-of-body experience, and *mystês*, which indicates someone who has been initiated into the divine secret *mystêria* (mysteries). Behind this is the Greek word *muô*, which means to “close” or “shut” the lips or eyes. It points to an understanding of the divine as something hidden that must be revealed to the ignorant human.

This form of spirituality is built on the premise that the god and the human are vastly different and separate in two ways. First, the human is mortal, whereas the gods are immortal. This means that humans are unlike the gods in their essential being. Second, the dwelling place of the gods is far removed from the human, or is cloistered in a separate space, so that a chasm exists between the two worlds. It is an abyss that is intended to keep the god and the human separate, in multiworlds of their own. The gods are hidden in a shrouded, divine world, beyond the human locale, in a place where humans cannot go. The gods are utterly Other in the otherworld, according to this spiritual perspective.

This difference means that the gods cannot be comprehended by the human being. The natural human mind, being utterly different from the mind of the gods, cannot conceive of the gods, who are ultimately Other. They are a

mystery beyond what the mortal human mind is capable of comprehending. There are no words in human language that even begin to circumscribe the gods. To the mystic, the gods are incomprehensible and ineffable. What we can know about the gods is that they are hidden, a mystery that remains unsolved.

One might think, then, that type of spirituality is an agnostic orientation. We cannot know anything about the gods; so, end of story. But that is not the case. In fact, the opposite is true: ecstatic spirituality encourages humans to seek knowledge of the gods through two avenues.

The first avenue is human discernment, when we try to read the signs that the gods leave for us in the natural world; for example, by studying the skies or the entrails of sacrificed animals. We might learn the plans or secrets of the gods from a divine figure who crosses over into our world from the otherworld to tell us what the gods desire. This figure might be an angel like Michael, with a revelation in hand, or a god like Hermes, with some divine wisdom to share. It might come from a human prophet like Jeremiah, who is inspired by God's spirit to speak on behalf of God, to set the community straight about exactly what kind of fidelity God requires. Or it might come from a seer like the priest Ezekiel, who is ravished by an apparition of God in a visible shape and is roused to tell about it. It might come in the form of dreams, such as Daniel describes, which require proper interpretation by religious experts to unravel God's messages.

The second avenue is more traumatic because it involves trying to transmute the human being into a creature divine enough to enter the otherworld and communicate directly with the gods. This transmutation process relies on peculiar rituals that ecstasies develop to raze the human body and make it into a new creature capable of seeking the gods and venturing across the chasm into the otherworld to discover their will.

Ultimately, the ecstasies hoped to learn the will of the gods beyond any doubt. Only when they were able to live their lives in orientation to the divine will would the gods befriend and favor them, altering their miserable fate, healing their illnesses, and shining upon them with fortune as a good patron should. This obsession with knowing the will of the gods was not for the purpose of maintaining cosmic order or to avoid being maimed or killed by the gods, as was the case in the servant form of spirituality. Nor was it for the purpose of observing a treaty that had been ratified between a god and his people as in the covenant form of spirituality. In ecstatic spirituality, the

purpose was to be gifted with well-being and fortune from the hands of befriended gods who were their patrons, even their kin.

Otherworld Invasions

This native ecstatic impulse is very ancient in the Mediterranean religions. However, it was bolstered and reframed when the Greeks made contact with early Siberian and Mongolian shamans who were specialists in otherworld journeys (Kingsley 2010). Stories from the Greeks tell us that historical contact with Mongolian shamanism was made at least as early as the sixth century BCE when Abaris, a shaman from the north, visited Greece and deputized the famous philosopher Pythagoras.

Abaris was a Hyperborean priest of Apollo, known as the god of healing. The Hyperboreans were people in Greek legend who lived “beyond the north wind.” Since Boreas, the god of the north wind, lived in Thrace, the Hyperborean reference identifies Abaris as a man who comes from a region north of Thrace, from the Central Asian highlands. The stories surrounding Abaris, including his travel on the wind via a golden arrow, suggest that he was a shaman from Mongolia who journeyed around Greece healing people and chasing away epidemics. His nickname was Aethrobates (Airwalker).

As an ambassador of the Mongols, Abaris followed an ancient custom, leaving his arrow in someone else’s care as a gesture of mutual trust and deputation. Legend says that he left his arrow with Pythagoras, and deputized him. Pythagoras and others, such as Aristeas, Empedocles, Parmenides, and Epimenides, developed careers as shamanic figures within their local communities. They were considered wise men who regularly journeyed to the otherworld, where they met deceased ancestors and gods to learn the mysteries of life and death. These stories suggest that some kind of blending of Eurasian shamanic practices and traditional ecstatic Greek religious practices took place (Ruck 2004, 478b–484d; cf. Burkett 1972, 162–165).

Shamans who lived north and east of the Mediterranean in the regions of Western and Central Asia were traditional religious specialists known for their ability to access the spirit world during induced moments of ecstasy. The shaman’s soul was practiced at flight through the underworld and the multilayered heavens as it sought from the spirits knowledge of therapeutic remedies for individuals within the community. The centrality of ecstasy and knowledge to the shaman’s profession is discernible in the Tungus word for shaman, which some have argued means both “knower” and “raver” (Edson

2009). Because of their ability to cross the threshold between our world and the otherworld, some shamans were believed to be psychopomps, or guides, escorting newly deceased souls to their final resting place in the afterlife. The shaman gained his status as an ecstatic healer through complicated initiatory ceremonies that allowed the shaman to commune with the spirits, even to shape-shift into their animal forms (Winkelman 1992, 2011).

It was not long before people across the Mediterranean had developed their own plans for invading, before death, the realm where humans do not belong. Religious rituals, often elaborate, were set in place. These premortem rituals were meant to break down the human body and reconstitute the person in a form viable in the otherworld. They were meant to traumatize and raze the body so that a different, suitable body could be formed as a replacement and the initiate could be reborn a transfigured creature.

So it is that we discover the rise in the popularity of initiatory rites across the ancient religious landscape, shamanic mysteries of induction ordained by priests for laypeople. This is most pronounced in the creation of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian mystery religions that provided amateurs with guided journeys to the otherworld. The purpose of such journeys was twofold: first, to discover the path to the otherworld and to learn its secrets; and second, to meet the god face-to-face in order to procure the god's friendship, affection, and favor for a better life both in the here and now and in the hereafter.

To prepare for the otherworld journey, the initiate must be educated about the otherworld and the kinds of dangers invasion poses. Usually, the Other beings are not happy to see the invader. The human does not belong there, so violence and threats against the invader are commonplace.

To prepare initiates for this harsh reception and to teach them how to contend with the guardians of the otherworld who will block their way to the god, long periods of study and concentrated oral instruction are required. Memorization of required facts about the inhabitants of the otherworld and the locations within it are standard fare. Thwarting spells, prayers for assistance, and the names of the gods and their guardians are learned by rote.

Devotion to the god is taught and rehearsed through repetitive prayers, hymns, mythic performances, praises, and offerings. Fidelity to the god includes vows of secrecy. There could be no disclosure to the uninitiated about how to get to the god. That was considered top secret, meant only for the god's favorites, for those who managed to survive the harsh journey and traumatic face-to-face meeting.

The body is always the central focus as it is prepared for the journey. To destroy the body, the ancient people required that the initiate either abstain from normal physical activities or transgress them in some way. Sex was usually set aside, but not because the ancient people thought it was sinful or impure. Rather, celibacy was demanded, often for long periods in advance of initiation, to break down the normal functions of the human body. To deny the human body its normal functions was to destroy it. The same was true of food. Strict fasting procedures were set up for initiates, so that their bodies would be denied what they normally would need to survive as a human being.

Initiates would be forced to participate in physical exercise far more strenuous than they might normally engage in, such as carrying a struggling piglet twenty-seven miles to the sea until the initiate is absolutely exhausted. They might be deprived of sleep, given special drink, stripped and reclothed, masked with animal faces, drugged or otherwise intoxicated, held in isolation, branded, or castrated. All of these activities were meant to dissolve the human body and to prepare for transfiguration into another form that could traverse the otherworld and find the hidden god.

The breakdown of the body was not a metaphor. Actual death rituals were extended into the initiation ceremonies themselves. Use of ointments reserved for burial often came into play, smeared on the initiate's body, mimicking preparations of the corpse. This action was thought to release the person from the body so that the person could take on a new form that was capable of surviving in the otherworld. Journeys into the underworld through physical caves or other types of portals were undertaken. Ascents into the heavens in star chariots and sky barges were plotted along the Milky Way pillar and around the zodiac, to be flown at special times of the year when the stars were properly aligned.

Initiations often were graduated, allowing for a progressive transformation of the newly formed body from its state as a newborn babe to its youth to its adulthood. The levels were marked with special names that described the state of transformation or the location of the invader in the otherworld. Souvenirs such as laurel crowns were given to the initiates to designate their progress or triumph. Protective amulets were worn and used to thwart harm as the journey progressed into more and more dangerous territories, closer and closer to the god.

Initiatory stages and progressive transfiguration was quite pronounced in the mysteries of Mithras, the sun god who was worshipped by Roman soldiers around the beginning of the first century CE (Beck 2007). The mysteries of Mithras are better known than most in the ancient world, which remain concealed behind vague literary references, because a large number of Mithraic caves have been unearthed, enabling us to reconstruct many of their activities ([figure 1.3](#)).

In particular, we know that they organized their ceremonies into seven levels or grades. Each grade was associated with a planet that located the person spatially, a name that identified the person's transformed state, and souvenirs or amulets that marked their progress. For instance, the first level of initiation was linked to the planet Mercury. The person who attained this level was called a Raven and received a cup and a caduceus. The second level was associated with Venus. The initiate was given a soldier's bag, spear, and helmet as souvenirs of his progress and was called the Bridegroom. The ladder of progress through the planets and the collection of souvenirs continued until the initiate had attained the final stage, the Father ([figure 1.4](#)).



Figure 1.3 Statue of Mithras slaying Taurus, in a Mithraeum beneath Mithraic baths, Ostia Antica, Italy. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

The Mithraic mysteries were about Roman soldiers invading the heavenly world, and their progressive transformation into the unconquerable sun god Mithras. Architecturally, the setup of their halls and caves reveals that the Mithraic initiation ceremonies took place virtually in the stars, along the wheel of the zodiac. The benches are marked with zodiac symbols. As the initiates walked (or danced) around the cave and sat on different benches, they advanced through the houses of the zodiac, ascending from planet to planet.

Persephone's Darlings

It was the progressive transformation of the person from human to Other that enabled the person to communicate with the gods in the otherworld. Although this communication might be brief and temporary, it was enough to guarantee the person favoritism, even nepotism. Through initiation they had become kin to the god. The god would know them intimately as extreme devotees, as absolute observers of the god's will, and grant them privileges in this life. And when they died and their transformation into the Other body was made permanent, the initiates would already know the way to journey to the house of the god, where they believed that they would be treated advantageously in the afterlife.

of initiation, and to the queen of the underworld, Persephone, whom they hope will greet them with favoritism in the underworld and grant them a happy afterlife in her groves and fields.

The teachings reflected on the tablets had been taught to the deceased during initiatory ceremonies while the person was still alive. It is for this reason that the person is called in the tablets both “mystic” and “Bacchos,” references to the person’s status as an initiate and devotee within the cult of Dionysus.

The tablets caution the deceased to avoid drinking from the water of forgetfulness, a spring on the right of the entrance to Hades, near a white cypress tree. Instead, they should go to the Lake of Memory and, when tested by the guardians about why they are there, they should repeat the passwords they learned during initiation (Bernabé and Cristóbal 2008, 9–12):

I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven.
But my race is heavenly.
Give me fresh water to drink
from the Lake of Memory.

Here we have the key to the rites, which centered on the initiates’ transformation from mortal to immortal. Here is their declaration of immortality and the recognition of their true race as that of the gods. Although they admit they are human, born from the earth (their bodies) and from the heavens (their souls), they believe that they have been transferred from this mixed human race to the pure or heavenly race of the gods. The allusion points to the nature of the human being as it is related in the myth of the Titans who cannibalized Dionysus. All humans are a combination of the earth and the sky, but only the initiates have purged themselves of the Titanic nature and cultivated the Dionysian (Bernabé and Cristóbal 2008, 41–42). They have recovered their divine nature and belong to the race of the gods. The tablets glory in the promise: “Happy and fortunate! You will be a god, from the mortal that you were” (173).

Next, the tablets tell us that the guardians of the Lake of Memory consult Persephone about the arrival of the deceased. Should the deceased be allowed to drink? She grants permission to drink from the lake. After drinking from the lake, the deceased recall the path to Persephone that they learned during the initiation ceremonies. The deceased progress along the Sacred Way, approaching Persephone as supplicants. The deceased hope that Persephone will send them to live with the other bacchic mystics who have

already died and passed along the Sacred Way. So they declare their purity: “I come, pure from among the pure, pure!”

Persephone yields, and the deceased are permanently transformed into heroes and gods. This transfiguration is described as regeneration or rebirth. The tablets talk about the deceased plunging beneath Persephone’s lap, becoming a baby animal that has fallen into milk ([figure 1.5](#)). This is likely a reference to the rebirth of the deceased as a suckling infant from the womb of Persephone (Bernabé and Cristóbal 2008, 76–83). Then it is off to the sacred groves and meadows of Persephone, where they will drink wine and dwell happily with the other heroes and pure ones already there.

Although the Orphics clearly focused their rites on the concept of the divine human, this concept stayed locked within the old metaphysics of servant and ecstatic spirituality, doing nothing to reframe or reform traditional Greek religion. The deceased gains an immortality of inebriation and revelry, but they do so as Persephone’s favorites, locked within the underworld with her other darlings.

The Red Pill

The three types of ancient spirituality are united when it comes to the human being. The human is a servant to a master god of exceeding form and power; a vassal legally bound to a mighty liege; a client of an influential patron; or a subordinate child dependent upon an authoritarian parent. In all cases, the human being is the lesser entity, bound to the wishes and whims of entities far superior to him or her. The religions that the ancient people constructed out of the servant, covenant, and ecstatic forms of spirituality are based entirely on metaphors of subservience, bondage, humiliation, and fear.



Figure 1.5 Enthroned Persephone holding a piglet, at the National Museum of Rome, Diocletian Baths. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

Where did these metaphors come from? What caused the ancient people to perceive their relationship to the sacred in this manner? Why did they understand their purpose in life in terms of slavery and vassalage? These metaphors were drawn from the everyday experience of their lives as people ruled by terrifying kings and capricious oligarchs in slaveholding societies. Even nonslaves were dominated by the fathers of their households and were subject to a system of benefaction based on their service to wealthy patrons. In other words, their daily experiences of forced labor, oppressive

governments, patriarchal families, and the avaricious wealthy *was* their view of reality, and this extended to their conceptualization of the sacred and the transcendent.

Once these patterns of subservience toward the sacred were embedded within the myths, symbols, and rituals of the ancient religions, the religions themselves became powerful instruments that maintained society's patterns of dominance and servitude. The dominance of the mighty kings, the fathers, and the wealthy was reinforced by the teachings of the religions. The religions, then, became powerful advertisements of the human's place in the world and in society, as obedient and humble slaves to entities superior to them, whether these were gods or the men who ruled over them.

That is, until Gnostic spirituality arose to interrogate the status quo. It was the emergence of Gnostic spirituality at the start of the first century CE that provided an alternative model of reality, one in which the human is not a servant to the gods but is liberated from them. The first Gnostics flipped the old forms of spirituality upside down as they became aware of another reality altogether.

Their first suspicions that all was not right in the world must have been similar to Neo's initiation into the Matrix, which starts when Neo meets Morpheus for the first time. Morpheus tells him that Neo is meeting with him because Neo knows something is wrong with life. What he knows, he cannot explain, but only feels. He has felt it his entire life, that something is wrong with the world. Neo does not know what it is, but Morpheus tells him that it is there, like a splinter in his mind driving him crazy. Morpheus informs him that "it" is the Matrix, the world that has been pulled over his eyes, blinding him from the truth.

Neo is ready to split and run. He has had enough of this madness. He demands to know what the truth is. Morpheus replies in a slow, even monotone, "That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind." At this crucial Gnostic moment, Morpheus instructs Neo that no one can be told what the Matrix really is. "You have to see it for yourself," Morpheus says.

He gives Neo a choice of two pills. Swallowing the blue pill will flip Neo back into the Matrix as if nothing has happened. The red pill will catapult Neo down the rabbit hole to see the truth, an experience that will

utterly transform Neo. He is warned not to make the decision lightly, because once he has seen the Matrix he can never go back into it.

Curiosity kills the cat. Neo swallows the red pill, only to find himself suffocating in a goo-lined pod. Like a neonate struggling out of the womb, Neo pushes through the fluid and his cords are cut by Morpheus. He is the initiate faced with a new reality. The terror of this new birth is so immense that Neo immediately vomits. He is greeted by Morpheus and company: "Welcome to the real world."



CHAPTER TWO

The Gnostic True Man

Truman Burbank

Truman Burbank senses that something is not right with his world. An industrial spotlight labeled “Sirius Canis Major” falls from the sky and smashes in the middle of his street ([figure 2.1](#)). A torrential rainstorm washes in a single wave over him, like a solitary showerhead mounted in the heavens. Truman begins to notice the bicyclists on his street. Day after day, the same people ride past his driveway on a predictable schedule, like they are caught in a loop. On his way to the office one day, he runs into his dad, who supposedly drowned when Truman was a lad. In that chaotic moment of recognition, Truman suddenly is forced onto a bus by suited men he does not know, as if he is being intentionally directed away from a reunion with his father. Late to work, he sees a false door open in the back of his elevator, revealing a snack bar behind it. Truman is whisked away. Confused. Distraught. Frightened.

Every time Truman notices the cracks in his life, the things that just do not make sense, he tries to talk to his wife, Meryl, or his friend, Marlon. Every time, he is reassured and distracted by Meryl’s sexy body or Marlon’s chatter and booze.

But thoughts of his new acquaintance, Sylvia, haunt him. Her eyes, with their penetrating stare. Her red sweater, with the how’s it going to end? button. Sylvia whispers to him in the library. She is not supposed to be talking to him. They have so little time. He needs to listen to her. She tells him that everybody knows everything he does. “They are pretending. Do you understand? Everything I am telling you is the truth. Everything’s a fake. Get out of here.”



Figure 2.1 Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) examines a fallen spotlight in *The Truman Show* (1998).

What we know that Truman Burbank does not know is that he is trapped in a fake world of reality television, a movie set conceived and constructed by the arrogant TV mogul Christof, whose own headquarters is in the lunar module built into the domed ceiling of Truman's world.

In the opening scene of the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, Christof ruminates over Truman's predicament. Although he inhabits a counterfeit world created by Christof, Truman himself is entirely genuine. Christof remarks that Truman has no script, no cue cards. Nothing about Truman is fake; he is merely *controlled* from Christof's throne in the moon. "It isn't always Shakespeare," Christof explains, "but it's genuine. It's a life."

Gnostic Spirituality and the Experience of God

The Gnostic revolution in the first and second centuries CE was sparked by hairline cracks that some of the ancient people noticed in the surface of their world, things like Truman Burbank had noticed, that were not quite right, that did not align as they should.

Ancient religion was supposed to maintain justice and order, and the first Gnostics were disturbed by the fact that life is far from fair. Even though the king and the priests did their jobs, the big fish still ate the little fish whenever possible. Placating the gods with service and gifts was not always

successful. Plague and famine leveled cities, even those with top-notch priestly programs in place. Befriending the gods, while it had its benefits, was not foolproof. Bad things still happened to extreme devotees. Suffering was ongoing, no matter the magic. Life was chaotic, out of control. The life they were living seemed an elaborate hoax.

Like Truman, the first Gnostics decided that the time had come to get some answers. Like Truman, the answers they sought could not be found within the chaos of their world, a universe that seemed constructed to deceive them at every turn. What they sought was *reality* beyond the door in the sky, at the top of the celestial dome, beyond whatever cunning simulation this world might be.

The quest for reality is the central feature of Gnostic spirituality. The Gnostics understand this quest to culminate in the direct knowledge of a supreme God who dwells outside the known universe. The God of their quest is a hidden, secret God, unknown to most people.

It may come as a surprise that the word *gnostic* did not begin as a religious word at all. The word is a technical word coined by Plato four centuries earlier from the noun *gnosis* (knowledge). Gnosis referred to the discernable knowledge of objects, the direct apprehension or experience of things. It allowed people to be able to talk about *knowing* the thing, in contrast to knowing *about* the thing.

Plato invented *gnostic* as an adjectival form of the noun *gnosis* (Smith 1981, 799–801; Layton 1995; Marksches 2003, 7). He did so to contrast gnostic understanding with practical understanding in a famous discourse about the kind of person who would be the best statesman. He argued that the best statesman is the person who has gnostic understanding of the great ideals, such as the Good or justice, rather than practical knowledge of them. Gnostic understanding is an intellectual intuition of the ideals, whereas practical understanding is the secondary application of them, gained on the job.

There is a very famous contemporary thought experiment called Mary's Room, proposed by the philosopher Frank Jackson (1982, 127–36). The intention of the thought experiment is to refute modern views that rely solely on physical explanations for the way humans think. For our purposes, it illustrates the kind of knowledge meant by the word *gnosis*.

The thought experiment centers on a scientist, Mary, who is quarantined in a black and white room. For her entire life, she has been forced to learn

about the world through a black-and-white monitor in the room. She is a specialist in neurophysiology, having learned, from books and from observations through the monitor, all there is to learn about how we see. She knows the exact wavelengths of light that stimulate the retina to produce the color red. She can speak intelligibly about red tomatoes and understands how the vocal chords produce the sentence “The tomato is red.” What will happen when Mary leaves her room and sees a red tomato? Plato would have said that Mary would gain gnostic understanding, knowledge of the object that can only be acquired by the direct experience of it.

The Gnostics believed that they had gnosis because they had found and met the hidden God directly, by undertaking an ecstatic quest. What was shocking was that the God they found was not numbered among the gods of the Babylonian, Egyptian, Jewish, or Greek myths that were being worshipped in the temples down the street.

The Transcendent God of Egypt

Although it is abundantly clear that Gnostic spirituality was forged in ecstatic fires, it is less easy to identify the exact fire, particularly when we take into consideration how eclectic Gnostics were. In addition to personal revelation, Gnostic systems were fashioned from a wide variety of religious and philosophical sources. The first Gnostics were pluralists, drawing from any tradition or source that helped them answer their existential questions. So we have thousands of footprints but no animal.

First and foremost, though, we know that the Gnostics took the idea of a supreme transcendent God very seriously. In fact, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, identifies this as *the* central feature of Gnostic teachings. He opens his five-volume book series *Against the Heresies* by objecting to the Gnostics’ claim to be able to reveal to initiates a God who is more excellent and sublime than the biblical God, YHWH, who created heaven and earth (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.1.1, 1.19.1–2).

Different Gnostic groups recognize this sublime God by a variety of names. They call this God Perfect, Eternal, Unbegotten, Unoriginated, Preexistent, Before the Beginning, Forefather, First Father, Depth, Unspeakable, Unity, Hermaphrodite, and Greatness. This God is characterized in negative terms as well, as Invisible, Indescribable, and Incomprehensible. There are constant references to the fact that this God dwelled for countless eons in silence and quiescence.

It is out of this God, either from his mouth or his womb, that the primeval aspects of the divine world emerge, often in a primary collection of gods called the Ogdoad (the Eight). Gnostics picture the supreme God as a serpent, or his representatives as serpentine. The demonic is similarly conceived in Gnostic sources as a Leviathan, a serpent who lives in the outer darkness or in the ocean that surrounds the world. So there are two serpents, the good and the bad, who coil in and out of Gnostic stories (Mastrocinque 2005).

Some Gnostic theologians, such as Justin, identified this supreme God with Plato's Good, dwelling above the zodiac and whirling planets, but this is a secondary identification that has been blended into an earlier story about the awakening of a transcendent deity from primal waters. The Gnostic story of a primal supreme God waking up and generating the gods is not originally a Hellenistic or Greek story about Plato's Good. At the start, Gnosticism is not the acute Hellenization of Christianity.

Nor is the story of the transcendent God originally a Jewish story, with the first verses of Genesis read to reflect an invisible, unformed, primal God and his Ogdoad of helpers (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.28.1). The Gnostic understanding of the transcendent God does not arise originally within circles of rebel Jews, or even among the Samaritans, for that matter (cf. Broek 2013, 206–26). Instead, the transcendent God begins as an Egyptian story, with a twist (Parrott 1987; Adamson 2013). It is an Egyptian story transposed for a nonnative audience, so that the basic frame of the story remains in place while the names of the gods and other details are shifted to accommodate the viewpoints of non-Egyptians and to resonate with their own preferences, expectations, and outlooks. The Egyptian story is from Heliopolis, the City of the Sun, about the all-lord named Atum, who created the gods from his sweat and humans from the tears of his eye (see Faulkner 2004, spells 464g–465a).

He is pictured in the oldest layer of Egyptian mythology as the single God above and beyond the world and the deities who populate it. He is the self-created God who came into being alone within the primal waters of chaos, Nun (Assmann 2001, 177, 180). The Egyptian Coffin Texts describe the cosmos coming into existence as an act of Atum coming to an awareness of his self, making a transition from lying inert and weary in primeval water to becoming conscious and active. Atum stands up on a mound, or he begins to writhe around as a serpent in the primal ocean, encircled in his own coils.

As Atum gains awareness and comes into being, he is called by the name Kheprer, which means “The One Who Comes into Being” (Pyramid Texts 1587). Kheprer consequently manifests himself in the cosmos as Rê, the sun god who rises every morning. In the Book of the Dead, this process of *becoming* is expressed poetically (Book of the Dead 17):

I am Atum in rising up.
I am the only One.
I came into existence in Nun.
I am Rê in his rising in the beginning . . .
I am the Great God who came into existence by himself.

What happens when Atum is brought to consciousness and realizes his aloneness? He must diversify or go mad in the total isolation. For the first time, he experiences the erotic, the desire for others, and has an erection. “I am the one who came into being as Atum,” he says. “It was in Heliopolis that my penis became erect. I grasped hold of it and came to orgasm. Thus it was that the siblings, Shu and Tefnut, were born” (Pyramid Texts 1248).

But how were they born? The ancient Egyptians pictured Atum as a hermaphrodite whose mouth is his womb. He creates through a sexual process of autogenesis, where he inseminates his own uterine mouth. His offspring are differentiations of himself, one male and the other female. In the speeches of the Coffin Texts, Atum is shown to be the primeval hermaphrodite who creates his children, Shu the god of air and Tefnut the god of moisture, when he spits them out of his mouth in a great exhalation or a roar. Shu, whose own breath eventually enlivens the human body, is the manifestation of life, while Tefnut is the manifestation of *maat* (truth).

Shu and Tefnut, a gendered couple, mate, producing Geb, the earth, and Nut, the sky. The first Ogdoad, the eight gods, is completed with the birth of the children of Geb and Nut, who are none other than Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. This is the beginning of creation, initialized by Atum, the God Who Made Himself into Millions. He is the One and All. He is the supergod over all other deities, whose name and figure are hidden (Assmann 2001, 240–243). He is the undifferentiated unity from which everything emerges in differentiated forms, whether gods, humans, animals, or the cosmos at large.

The progression of gods from Atum does not start with a big bang but with the awakening from unconsciousness of a primal God of All, an awakening that starts the flux of existence out of Atum’s depths (179). In an Egyptian myth that is four thousand years old, we see an astute awareness of a unity

behind the diversity of the cosmos. This unity is identified with a single self-created God responsible for life, which flows from his mouth like an inundation of the Nile.

In the Book of the Dead, Atum is portrayed as a great serpent of the deep, dwelling in the ocean that the ancients believed surrounded the world. In his creative capacity, he is depicted as the circular ouroboros, whose tail is held in his mouth. This image recalls Atum's ability to continually create by inseminating his uterine mouth. As the ouroboros, Atum perpetually generates, sustains, and renews the world. His circular coil envelops the world as the unity from which the cosmos perpetually emerges ([figure 2.2](#)).

Atum is the creator, but he is also the destroyer. In this capacity, he is pictured as an erect, scepter-like snake with a protruding tongue. In this form he destroys chaos and evil. Just as he did at the beginning of time, he passes through the underworld on his bark every night, beating down the writhing coils of Apophis, the serpent of chaos who dwells below the horizon in the outer darkness.

What will happen when he releases the serpent tail that he is swallowing, when he decides to stop procreating and to lie down again in the primeval ocean? At the moment when Atum reclines in the waters, all cosmic differentiation will cease to exist. Atum will float inert in the primordial sea, as the potential for life once again.

The Religious Buffer

In seeking the first inklings of Gnostic spirituality, we must look within the Egyptian context. To be more precise, Gnostic spirituality first emerges within the "religious buffer" that had formed in Egypt by the turn of the first century CE.



Figure 2.2 Atum in his creative form, as an ouroboros birthing the sun god. From the Papyrus of Dama-Heroub, Twenty-First Dynasty, Egypt. Public domain image, Wikimedia Commons.

The religious buffer to which I refer functions like a buffer in the computing world, which holds in memory a variety of temporary items that can be immediately accessed and assembled into more permanent structures such as a novel or a Web page. Yet the religious buffer is not a computer, and we are not dealing with novels or Web pages. The religious buffer is an organic, dynamic buffer of communal memories that is perpetually forming as different religions interact in a very specific local environment.

One of the fascinating aspects about the way societies function is that communities, like individuals, create and share memories. Memory is not just a function of the individual's mind but a function that individuals share with one another as a collective. These communal memories transcend our individual memories, yet we as individuals still take part in them.

Scholars call this feature collective memory, or better, collective remembering. In any given society at any given time there exists a communal memory buffer, short-term storage of shared knowledge that involves an individual's working memory and the collective's assortment of gossip, news, written work, dramatic performances, material objects, and the like (Anastasio et al. 2012).

Thus, the religious buffer is a collective assortment of information about a variety of religions, revelations, spiritual sensibilities, religious experiences, and metaphysical speculations. Certain groups in any given society focus attention on particular items in this buffer, tagging them, contesting them, and blending them with long-term knowledge already familiar to them. And sometimes, when the blending occurs at just the right moment in just the right way, they consolidate, and a new, viable way of being religious emerges. Because it is useful or meaningful in some novel way, the memory stabilizes as a new concept and the emergent spiritual orientation sticks. This is what happened when Gnostic spirituality came online around the beginning of the first century CE and provided people with a new way to frame their relationship to the world and to God.

When we are talking about innovative ideas like Gnostic spirituality that emerge within the religious buffer, we are not talking about simple syncretism, when two ideas are associated with one another and are understood to represent the same thing, as when Isis is understood to be also the Greek goddess Demeter, or when Zeus is understood to be the same god as YHWH or Rê. Innovative structures that emerge from the religious buffer, such as Gnostic spirituality, are about the creation of a conceptual blend that is totally unique yet entirely contingent upon the matrix of the religious buffer. In this case, the whole is not the sum of its parts but something altogether new.

When we examine the complex diversity of Gnostic movements that arose in the first and early second centuries, we can get a good feel for what the religious buffer that birthed Gnostic spirituality must have looked like originally. By studying the oldest Gnostic memories, it is clear that we are

seeing a religious buffer, which was working at the start of the first century CE to accommodate arcane Egyptian religious sentiment about the All-Lord Atum to a nonnative audience, before Christianity came online.

The religious buffer is available to all people in a given society, but the people who usually innovate religion from its assortment of religious sentiments and eclecticism are those on the margins of traditional religion. They are the religious questioners, the spiritual seekers. They are dissatisfied with the way things are, sure that there is more to life than what regional worship or their ancestral religion has been providing. Like Truman Burbank, they worry that they have been living their lives blind, that the truth is out there, and that it is their mission to find it.

The True Man

In the middle of *The Truman Show*, Christof, the creator of Truman Burbank's world, is interviewed in his lunar control room. Truman has been asking too many questions. He has been flirting with trying to get out of Seahaven, the domed city, which he suddenly feels has confined him like a prison.

Why has it taken Truman thirty years to surmise that his world is not right? "We accept the reality of the world we are presented. It's as simple as that," Christof explains.

As Truman's perception of the world around him shifts, he begins to realize that he is the only real thing in his world. He is the true man. Meryl and Marlon are liars. He becomes convinced that everyone around him is "in on it," whatever "it" is. He is determined to figure out how to escape the deceit that has trapped him, to overcome his fears and free himself from the scam. He has to get out of his world. And so he begins the terrifying journey across the sea to see what is on the other side.

The predicament that Truman Burbank faces is the Gnostic predicament. The Gnostics, like Truman, come to conclude that the only real thing about our world is a *something* that revolves around them as human beings. Everything else is trickery and deceit.

What is this *something* that makes the human transcendent, that connects the human to God and a world beyond our mundane experience? The ancient Gnostics were not convinced by the people around them who said that humans are only mortal vessels molded from mud and animated by the breath of a god. They did not agree with the people who claimed that we are

destined to live out eternity as an underworld shade, an ancestral ghost, or even a bright star. Even the concept of the immortal soul was not big enough to contain the human. The human is much bigger than this. Of this they were certain.

To explain the transcendence of the human, the Gnostics turned back to the old religious stories. They began to ask what it *really* means to say that humans were formed as a flux of Atum's tears or that we were enlivened by God's breath, as all the old myths related? Was something more than a wind blown into our nostrils, to quicken a human body molded from clay?

Some Gnostics turned back to the writings of their philosophical heroes, such as Plato, in search of answers. We can imagine them musing over Plato's famous analogy of the psyche, the soul, as a charioteer with his two horses, one representing the moral impulses of the soul, the other the ignoble passions. The charioteer, the rational self, must work constantly to keep the two horses controlled and moving in the same direction. The Gnostics would have agreed with Plato that the human psyche comprises the reasoning, moral, and emotive aspects of the self.

But how does the charioteer, the rational self, know in which direction to steer his team? Plato explains that the charioteer's head must be lifted above the highest surface of the topmost heaven to view what is real. This reality is colorless, formless, intangible Being. It is Good, Justice, Temperance, Knowledge, and Intellect, but not in the forms that they take in our world. Reality, from this vantage, is glimpsed as absolute existence. The nous (mind) can gaze upon the transcendent reality perched above the highest heaven. Indeed, Plato calls the nous "the pilot of the soul" (*Phaedrus* 247c). The transcendent vision of the nous nourishes the soul and helps the charioteer to drive his chariot in the right direction.

The Gnostics understood Plato to be saying that the nous is a distinct intellectual organ of the human being. It is the eye that sees the Real. As such, it designates our capacity to discern and intuit Truth. It is the aspect of the human being that allows us access to knowledge beyond what we can reason intellectually or learn from our corporeal senses. The human nous runs on insight, intuition, and imagination, rather than logic and sense perception.

The nous is the aspect of the human being that can perceive what is bigger than us. The nous makes it possible for us to become aware of what is beyond our mundane day-to-day identities, to perceive what is universal about our existence, what is God. Because of its transcendent nature, the nous

links us to the supreme God. The human nous is, in the opinion of the Gnostics, the self that transcends the psyche. It is our true self, the True Man.

Adam the First Man

How did the transcendent nous come to inhabit the human being? To answer this question, some Gnostics turned to traditional creation stories like the Genesis story in the Bible. They thought that we received this transcendent self when the Creator God YHWH blew into our nostrils. At that moment, unbeknownst to YHWH, the incorporeal spirit of the transcendent God was instilled in Adam in a substantive way. Because the supreme God is incorporeal spirit, they reasoned, the nous instilled in Adam must also be God's spirit in a substantive way.

This is a very different perspective from that of other thinkers at the time who were arguing that the Creator's breath blew in a spirit that *resembled* God as closely as possible. No, the Gnostics said, the first human being contained an *actual piece* of the supreme God's mind or spirit. The human nous is equivalent to God's pneuma (spirit). As such, the human nous is not *like* God, not some derivative copy that makes humans *resemble* God. It *is* God within.

This clash of perspectives coincided with the trendy intellectual scene in Alexandria, Egypt, at the start of the first century CE. Alexandria was edgy. Artsy. Cerebral. It was the place to be. It is where Jews, Greeks, and Egyptians were discussing metaphysical topics, including the nature of the human mind. One of these Alexandrian intellectuals was a famous Jewish philosopher by the name of Julius Philo. We know of more than thirty philosophical books that Philo published during his lifetime.

In his publications, Philo rereads the Jewish scripture in light of Greek philosophers like Plato. So it is not surprising that he takes on the problem of the human nous and tries to sort out whether the philosophical concept is biblical. The kind of nuances and complexities that Philo raises when he talks about the nous are best explained as responses to the Gnostic assertion that the nous (or pneuma, as the Gnostics preferred) is the uncreated God within the human.

Although Philo thought very highly of the human nous, he is unwilling to conceive of it as God within, as the Gnostics understood this, and makes highly detailed arguments to this effect. He walks a razor's edge between exaltation of the nous as divine and subordination of it as human. For Philo,

the nous was the piece of the puzzle that helped explain the oddities of the creation story in the Bible. How can it be, he wondered, that chapter 1 of Genesis articulates a story about the creation of humankind in the image of God, while chapter 2 tells about Adam being fashioned from dust?

Philo solves this problem by arguing that [chapter 1](#) refers to the creation of a heavenly man, whereas [chapter 2](#) refers to the creation of an earthly man. The heavenly man is the ideal model for the creation of the earthly man. He is the spiritual prototype, the archetypal human being molded in the image of God. Philo calls this figure the Logos (Reason), as well as Nous (Mind). This figure represents mind or reason on the universal level.

Chapter 2 of Genesis refers to the formation of the earthly man from clay—Adam, who is endowed with a living breath. The earthly man is the visible, physical human that is formed with an individual human mind. The model for this human being is the heavenly man, who is God’s image.

For Philo, then, the individual human mind is the sovereign element of the soul, the aspect of the human that is most akin to God (Philo, *De opificio mundi* 69). It is the common denominator between human and God, linking them in kind (Kooten 2008, 272–75). The human being is more like God than any other creature on earth, Philo writes, because the human possesses a mind, which is “a closer likeness and copy than anything else on earth of the eternal and blessed Archetype” (Philo, *De decalogo* 134).

But how did our minds get into our bodies? What are they made of? Since Philo assumes that the mind is the closest thing to God we possess, certainly it could not have been created merely from the clay that was used to fashion Adam’s body. Philo insists that something has to happen to the “earthlike” human mind to make it incorruptible (Philo, *De opificio mundi* 135, 139–140). But what?

This is where Genesis 2:7 helps him out: “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a *living soul*” (my italics). Keep in mind that Philo was reading the Greek translation of Genesis, rather than the Hebrew. In the Greek version he was familiar with, this verse reads “living soul” rather than “living being,” as the Hebrew usually is translated in modern editions of the Bible.

Philo thought that the organ that was infused with God’s breath was the rational part of the soul, the “earthlike” human mind (Philo, *Legum allegoriae* 1.32). Because God himself is pneuma (spirit), Philo assumes that

the substance of the breath blown into Adam's nostrils was pneuma, a substance purer than the air, like that of which the stars are made (Philo, *Quod Deus sit immutabilis* 46–47). This must have been how the corruptible human mind was enlivened, when a puff of God's spirit infused the earthlike mind and Adam became a living soul.

This infusion of the spirit, God's fiery breath, took on a particular shape though. It was molded to resemble the universal mind or reason. When the earthlike mind received the divine pneuma, it was shaped to resemble as closely as possible the archetypal image of God, the heavenly man (Philo, *De opificio mundi* 139–40; *De plantatione* 18–20).

A Real Piece of God

So Philo, like the Gnostics, equates the human mind or nous with the human spirit or pneuma. In fact, most Jewish and Christian authors use nous and pneuma interchangeably when referring to this transcendent human organ (Kooten 2008). We must be cautious when we read the Jewish and Christian authors, however, because they were not arguing like the Gnostics that the inbreathing of the pneuma meant that there was a real piece of God within the human being.

In fact, Philo is making the opposite argument, perhaps to dispute some of the first Gnostic arguments to the contrary. Although the human mind is infused with God's breath, it is not God's mind. Its form is actually two generations removed from God himself. The individual human mind is an image of the image of God. The human mind or spirit resembles the Lord as closely as it can, but it is not identical with the Lord's (Philo, *De plantatione* 24). God remains for Philo utterly different from the human (Philo, *Legum allegoriae* 2.1; *De opificio mundi* 100; *De somniis* 1.73–4, 2.221).

But this is not so for the Gnostics, who will have nothing to do with the human nous as a copy of God that is not identical to God. This one tiny nuance had enormous consequences. It is the tiny flap of the butterfly wing that causes a hurricane on the other side of the world. It allowed the Gnostics to pose the question, if the highest aspect of ourselves is God, how is it that we are servants to the gods, either now or after death?

This logic assumed equality with the gods, at least, not subservience or enslavement to them. It might even assume superiority to the gods, they reasoned, especially if we understand our primal source to be a God who is above all the gods. The true human was the nous, the spirit or pneuma

embedded within the human soul. The soul, in its liberated state, could only hope to exist as a star in the sky or a hero in the underworld. The spirit, however, was superior even to the heavenly habitat of the immortal gods.

This is the type of reasoning that generated the Gnostic orientation. Our true nature as humans is superior to anything created, even the cosmic gods who themselves were born from the union of earth and heaven. The Gnostics postulated that our True Man is uncreated, deeper than our physical bodies, and even deeper than our human psyches or souls. They understood the true human to be something beyond the conscious mental processes that enable us to reason and learn and construct mundane identities for ourselves. It is the deep self, the nous, which the Gnostics identified as our pneuma or spirit.

This is not to say that the Gnostics were universalists. But then, neither were most other thinkers in the ancient world. The Gnostics were like the philosophers Philo or Plutarch, who also divided the human being into mind, soul, and body and proposed classes of human beings based on their perception of the intellectual and moral aptitude of people (Kooten 2008, 282–7; Dillon 1996, 211–14). In the absence of modern science, which has revealed to us the genetic basis of our shared humanity, the ancients perceived physical, moral, and psychological variations in human beings very differently from the way we perceive them today. Such variations led the ancient people to believe that not all humans were equal. Although there may have been a common human ancestor who was perfect when he was created by God, things happened along the way that resulted in differences and deficiencies among the human beings subsequently born. These differences and deficiencies led some ancient people to conclude that humanity consisted of a number of classes of people—or *races*, as they preferred to call them.

The ancient Gnostics were no more enlightened on this front than the people who lived around them. Observation taught them that not everyone acted like their true nature was a piece of God the Good. Some people were downright evil. Others rejected the truth. So, various Gnostic groups developed different strategies to deal with these facts.

Some Gnostics thought that they themselves were a special race of humanity. The God nature was exclusive to them. Everything was about the salvation of the God nature that they possessed singularly. Destruction would be the fate of all else.

Other Gnostics developed more complex and nuanced systems, which explained that every human was planted with the God nature, but that it was only a tiny seed. It was the job of the psyche or soul to cultivate it. The Gnostics claimed that they had an easier time with its cultivation because they possessed seeds that were more mature than those possessed by the rest of humanity. Although everyone had a divine seed and everyone was part of the system of its liberation and restoration, the Gnostic human possessed a superior form of the seed, which made it easier to cultivate.

That said, the Gnostic innovation in spirituality was their conviction that the human being is bigger than the body and the soul. The human being is also nous, or as the Gnostics preferred to call it, pneuma or spirit. This transcendent dimension is nothing less than the supreme God's own life essence, his own life breath or spirit, captured deep within the human psyche. The Gnostics were convinced that there is a spiritualness, a pneumatic flux of the supreme God, that enlivens us. It is uncreated. It is Other. It is captured in a human physicality of many layers, buried in our psyche, blanketed with our emotions, imprisoned in our flesh, where it exists dormant, unexpressed, and forgotten. So deeply is it embedded that we do not even know it is there. For most people, it is submerged or unconscious. It suffers in this state of isolation, latency, and stupor. It lies there pained, waiting to be awakened, cultivated, and reunited with its source, the supreme God.

This reunion is the ultimate goal of the Gnostic quest, an experience that the Gnostic calls gnosis or knowledge. This direct initiatory experience catapults the person back to the source of all, refreshing and regenerating the spirit as it is reintegrated within the depth itself, the supreme power beyond everything. Only such a direct gnostic meeting between the human spirit and God can ease the spirit's suffering, restore its integrity, and make it fully alive.

The Shamanic Quest

The supreme power beyond all is the God that the Gnostics ultimately sought in their ecstatic initiations. The closest analogue to such initiations may be the shamanic soul flight, at least as it was manifested in the Greco-Roman–Egyptian mystery rites. Yet the Gnostic flights had a very different orientation than those of the mystery religions that were solely focused on underworld journeys, such as the Orphics or those devoted to the great goddess Demeter.

They also were different from the heavenly journeys of the Isiac celebrants or the Mithraic worshippers, since the Gnostics were trying to get out of the universe and into another world altogether, the world where the supreme God dwelled. They were not interested in being transformed into a star or the sun god and charging around the skies in his chariot. They wanted to travel through the underworld, the sky, and the constellations but not remain within them.

How did the Gnostics think we go about finding the holy wholly Other and escaping chaos? In the same way that Truman Burbank figures he can. You have to journey out of the world. For Truman, this involved a secret night flight from the pit of his basement through an escape route in his ceiling, a harrowing boat ride across the ocean to the edge of world, and the ascent of a blue staircase to an open door in the painted celestial dome.

The Gnostics were ecstatics, using the same techniques as the priests who organized mystery initiations, only they fine-tuned them to fit their own loftier goal to invade the wholly other realm of the holy Other. The Gnostics used instruction and ritual to take their initiates on virtual cosmic journeys, beginning with a harrowing of hell.

From there, they invaded heaven, not to check out their future residence among the stars but to climb through it to the loftiest peak at the mouth of Draco or some other star portal, where they believed they would be spit out of the cosmos and into the otherworld of the supreme God. These journeys were extremely dangerous because the gods encountered in the underworld and heavens were not to be befriended but conquered.

In order to do this successfully, the first Gnostics developed elaborate training programs that relied on bodily endurance and intellectual prowess. Like other ecstatics, they believed that the human body could not journey to the other realms, whether hell, heaven, or the wholly otherworld. They needed a different body that could invade nonhuman realms.

Although they taught a progressive transformation of the body, the transfiguration of the body is less about taking on a new form and more about shedding the accumulated layers of human physicality, the weighty bodies of flesh and psyche, to recover and release the glorious spirit in residence. It was more about self-realization and actualization than a metamorphosis from one state to another. Their concept of transfiguration was understood in terms of uncloaking to reveal purer and purer bodies of light.

So their initiatory rites served to teach a person to progressively unveil the power of the spirit hidden within, to conquer the gods who ruled hell and the skies, and to journey along the safest route back to the supreme God. The journey was about the therapeutic growth of the divine self and its reunion with God, when our tragic human experience of brokenness and alienation is cured.

In Gnostic communities, the initiated were called the Perfected. They were the people who, following their ecstatic quest, had returned to earth to tell others about their experience. They considered themselves fully transformed, already resurrected, and more powerful than the traditional gods, including the biblical God YHWH. Because they believed that they had conquered the gods with their power, they conducted themselves as healers and miracle workers. The gods did their bidding, not the other way around.

Pilgrims in Egypt

This focus on ritual ascent to the supreme God beyond the cosmos points us again to the religious buffer of Egypt, which had a solid reputation in the ancient world as the source of the oldest religious truths. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there was deference in the Greco-Roman world to Egypt as *the* site of spiritual knowledge. This deference emerges in the literature as a sort of Egyptomania (Frankfurter 1998, 218). “Greeks,” Heliodorus comments in his ancient travelogue about Egypt, “find all Egyptian lore and legend irresistibly attractive” (*Aethiopica* 2.27).

It was on this esoteric reputation that the Egyptians built a lucrative business as a prime travel destination for religious tourists. The Greeks recounted stories of their own great philosopher heroes, such as Pythagoras and Plato traveling in Egypt, learning from the priests secret knowledge that only these religious masters possessed (see Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.29; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 3.6, 8.3, 8.87, 9.35; Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries of Egypt* I.1–2). The Egyptian priests were viewed as shamanic gurus ready to instruct and initiate Greeks and Romans into the ancient mysteries and philosophies of arcane Egypt. For instance, the priest Pancrates took on the philosophers Arignotus and Eucrates as students, sharing with them all his secret knowledge in a structure beneath the temple (Lucian, *Philopseudes* 33–4; Frankfurter 1998, 217–18; Dieleman 2005, 185–284). In a comedic novel about the adventures of Lucian the Ass, this view of Egyptian priests is confirmed. For a price, the Greek Lucian is taken

into a temple of Isis in Corinth and then in Rome and is initiated into her mysteries by priests who instruct Lucian from their sacred books and take Lucian on shamanic journeys through the underworld and skies to meet all the gods (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11).

The Egyptian priests were described by the Greeks as great philosophers who taught at the temples and performed rituals that conveyed the deepest truths to their pupils. They were portrayed as mystics who had renounced earthly pleasures in order to dedicate themselves to the contemplation of the divine world, which involved trying to understand the heavenly bodies and their astrological movements (Chaeremon, frag. 10 = Porphyry, *De abstinentia* IV.6; Van der Horst 1984, x). They were understood to be the keepers, if not the outright authors, of the sacred literature of the Egyptian god Thoth, who was also recognized as Hermes. The books of Thoth–Hermes were renowned for their arcane wisdom and truth, covering esoteric topics from astrology and healing arts to theology and ritual. The priests owned recipe books of magical spells, too, which they used to destroy enemies, bind lovers, heal migraines, and much more.

Priests could be hired as spiritual consultants by Greeks and Romans visiting Egyptian temples and shrines. For some coin, priests were known for their shamanic abilities to conjure souls from the underworld, whom the visitor could question about such topics as the immortality of the soul (see Pseudo-Clementine, *Recognitions* 1.5). In the ancient mind, if there was truth to be had, the Egyptian priest owned it, and he was willing to take on foreign initiates who could afford it.

It is within this religious buffer that Gnostic spirituality first manifests. At this point, it does not manifest as a religious movement. It is a moment of epiphany, when a new way of thinking about God and the human emerges. We can only imagine the moment in a painted crypt of an Egyptian temple when some religious pilgrims, seeking the truth outside their native regional or ancestral religions, asked to be taken to meet Atum, the god of preexistence, whom they had been discussing and learning about from their Egyptian guru. In their conversations with their guru, some of the Greek pilgrims may have identified Atum with Plato's Good, which dwelled above the zodiac, the whirl of the planets, and the rising and setting sun. If there were Jews among the pilgrims, they must have wondered how in heaven's name their ancestral God YHWH could be related to Atum.

Although it is true that in later Egyptian traditions Atum is amalgamated with Rê, the sun god, these pilgrims were not interested in boarding Rê's bark like the kings of old. They did not want to shake hands with Rê, Atum's cosmic manifestation. They wanted to meet the real Atum, the father-mother of all the gods and the source of all that exists.

They were not disappointed. Whatever they experienced during those ecstatic shamanic quests changed them and the face of religion forever. The religious pilgrims who met Atum in the crypt of an Egyptian temple were convinced that their unitive experiences with the transcendent God had renewed their inert spirits, enlivened them with the power of the primal God, and liberated them from the tyranny of the capricious gods who ruled the world.

They did not keep this knowledge to themselves. They shared their experience of the primal God with whoever would listen to them, and the spirituality they had realized as an epiphany in the crypt was shared. It began to spread and interact with the frameworks of different religions throughout the Mediterranean world.

Religion on its Head

Although it is evident that Gnosticism was forged within the fires of ecstatic spirituality, it also is true that it upset the foundational worldview of all three of the old types of spirituality—the servant, covenant, and ecstatic forms—by inverting their message of servitude. The Gnostics, with their vision of the God within as the True Man, literally overthrew the traditional gods and religious practices, especially rituals based on models of appeasement, such as sacrifice. The severity of this inversion is such that the element of transgression is enormous.

Imagine what this meant about the traditional gods. Who were the Olympians? YHWH and his host of angels? Isis and Osiris? Marduk and El? If the transcendent God was the source of all, including the human spirit, then why were humans the *servants* of gods like Zeus, YHWH, or Marduk?

The Gnostics were convinced that the traditional religious communities had been duped by trickster gods who were really demons or fallen angels. The traditional religions were fakes and their gods frauds. Without even being aware of it, human beings were trapped in snares of cosmic proportions that kept them locked in lifetime bondage to gods who actually were capricious and malicious demons.

It was this inversion of the conventional religions that made the Gnostics the enemies of the religiously faithful. What the Gnostics were saying is that the gods of conventional worship, including the biblical God YHWH, really are not gods but slaveholders who keep the truth of the real God's existence from us. We are not the property of the gods. We are something far superior and more powerful. We are children of the holy wholly Other, and the gods and their kings and priests can no longer trick us into believing otherwise.

This, in fact, is what really upset Plotinus, the great philosopher of Plato, about the Gnostic message. How audacious, Plotinus thought, that the Gnostics go around telling people that because they are children of God they are meant to be nobler than everything, including the gods. The Gnostics said that the gods we have been worshipping since antiquity are really the mortals, not us! The gods are mortal because they are not God's children. They do not contain his spirit. "You, without lifting a hand," the Gnostics preached, "are nobler than the very heavens" (Plotinus, *Ennead* 2.9).

Imagine the reaction at the street level when the Gnostics started insisting that the gods were not to be worshipped and feared. "We ought to stop making sacrifices," we can hear the Gnostics saying. "Why?" the people would have asked. "Because we are God ourselves," the Gnostics would have responded. "We have been tricked by cruel deities to serve them. The wool has been pulled over our eyes. The gods are really demons in the skies." The people would have said, "What kind of blasphemy is this?!"

When we think about it, what they were saying was unfathomable to most people back then. It leaped outside the boundaries of conventional metaphysics, which for centuries had operated from the position that humans were servants of powerful gods who had to be ceremonially and communally appeased. If appeasement ceased, there was no telling what horrible disasters might fall down upon them from the heavens.

Irenaeus, the late second-century bishop of Lyons, is one of the people who considered this Gnostic position blasphemous. He tells us that the Gnostics think of themselves as perfected and exalted and, consequently, are no longer properly fearful of behaving in ways forbidden by the God YHWH. They even eat meat that originated as a sacrifice to a pagan god in a temple, Irenaeus cites as an example. They attend pagan festivals and gladiator games. They marry divorcées and have second families with their new wives. And they mess with sacred scripture and Homeric literature,

interpreting it in ways that discredit the traditional meaning by accommodating it to their own topsy-turvy opinions.

Irenaeus maintains that he and his own congregation remain properly fearful of God, a posture that the Gnostics call “ignorant” (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.6.3–4, 1.8.1–2). According to Irenaeus, Gnostics viewed themselves as more perfect than anyone else, as better than the rest because of the greatness of their knowledge of the ineffable Power, the transcendent God. This included thinking themselves better than the apostles. Because they had attained a level of existence that exceeded all powers, the Gnostics felt that they were free from the fear of the gods. Forget YHWH’s laws! They could do as they pleased (1.13.6).

Demons in Charge

From carvings on Gnostic gems like the Ophian gem pictured in [chapter 7](#) and descriptions of the gods in their literature, we know that Gnostics imagined the dark lords of the heavens as brutal monsters, animal–human hybrids dressed in Roman military uniforms. Most often the monsters had the heads of ferocious lions or hissing asps. They carried the scepters of kings in their hands, and sometimes even displayed the heads of their slain enemies to terrorize their subjects.

There is a revolutionary edge to the Gnostic vision of the gods, one with political implications. Traditionally, kings and emperors were representatives of the gods, tasked with maintaining cosmic and civil order. When Gnostics characterize the traditional gods as demonic monsters in Roman military uniform, they are implying that their political leaders, the Roman power brokers, are demonic too. In Gnostic thought, the royals and their officials are the bad guys, terrorizing the rest of us, lying to us, and keeping us in servitude in the interests of their demonic overlords.

This vision shows that, to say the least, the Gnostics were dissatisfied with their political leaders. They felt alienated and estranged. But even more distressing is that they felt brutalized and terrorized by the Romans in charge. Their helplessness and fear is palpable. They lived in a world of barbaric colonialism. They lived with the constant presence of the Roman military. They faced forced conscription, slavery, massive social inequality, and overwhelming economic disparity.

Yet, as critical as the Gnostics were of the Roman government, they were not incited to organize political coups or rebellions, which they knew from

experience would be futile. Their criticism remained veiled in the narrative of religious stories. Instead of taking up arms against those in power, the Gnostics chose a different strategy to handle their political disaffection, alienation, and helplessness.

To gain a sense of control over their lives, they focused on the task of overthrowing the *cosmic* powers. They believed that this cosmic coup would be the ticket to improving their lives because it dealt with the brutality and terror at its existential root. If they could control the source of terror, the demonic overlords that their Roman leaders embodied, then their public situation had to improve. For instance, to change their political situation, the Hermetic Gnostics actually developed daily prayer cycles that tried to break the king's connection with the demons and to realign him with the transcendent God (Corpus Hermeticum XVIII.8–16).

Since these demonic overlords also were responsible for the creation of the human soul and body, overpowering the demons through ritual purgation was cathartic and empowering for the Gnostics at the personal level, too. These active ritual practices gave Gnostics the impression of an internal locus of control. Even though the world they experienced around them was chaotic and tumultuous, they could gain control over their own bodies and selves.

So it is not surprising that most Gnostics focused on creating for themselves extreme bodies, with serious regulations on diet and sex. These regulations did not necessarily demand withdrawal from meat, wine, and sex; they just had to be transgressive. They had to defy the normal expectations of society. They had to subvert the order that the demonic overlords wanted their Roman agents to maintain. To this end, different Gnostic groups engaged in both libertine and ascetic behaviors.

Beyond the Borders

When it comes to attitude, transgression is the heart of Gnostic spirituality, giving it its vitality and edge. It is what distinguishes Gnostic spirituality from the ecstatic, which had been operating within the acceptable boundaries of the old traditions for centuries.

This transgressive attitude means that the Gnostic did not always act in ways that could be tolerated by those who aligned themselves with the traditional forms of spirituality. They violated the conventional forms of spirituality that were the bedrock of the ancient religions. These violations

on the part of the Gnostics, intentional or not, drew reactions from those around them, who marked them as deviant and heretical.

I do not mean that their transgression was merely “different” or “less tolerated.” Gnosticism was not just an alternative spirituality, and the movements and religions it spawned were not just alternative religious groups on the margins of acceptability. The transgression I am talking about runs much deeper than this. It is “beyond the obvious” (see Wolfreys 2008, 1). It cracks the code, crosses the line, steps outside convention. And when it does so, it draws sanctions from others. A deviant group identification is created for them (see Clinard and Meier 2008, 4–6).

The Gnostics literally turned ancient spirituality inside out and upside down. They inverted the traditional orientations to such an extreme degree that others around them viewed the Gnostics as heretics. Those around them reacted to them as threatening and anointed them transgressors. They were called beasts, poisonous asps, monsters, imposters, magicians, charlatans, and liars. The amount of threatening language hurled against the Gnostics is, in itself, evidence of the power of their message to transgress traditional spirituality and create a pervasive religious counterculture (see Franzese 2009, 6–11).

The transgressive attitude, however, is elusive. It is dependent upon the perceptions and reactions of other people within the community. Its rhythm and strength fluctuate, fade, and even die. Because transgression is only named when it bursts through a boundary that previously may not have been known, its very existence establishes borders and tests limits. When a limit is pushed long and hard enough, it moves, and what used to be out of bounds is suddenly inbounds. This is the moment when the transgressive becomes the mainstream. It is the moment the tattoo, once the mark of the rebel and dissident, becomes the kiss of the flower fairy.

Although the Gnostic came to identify the deviant and the cursed in antiquity, in modern America the Gnostic is something quite different. In our world today, the boundaries that the ancient Gnostic inverted and breached have been permanently moved. The Gnostic message of the God within is no longer a terrifying one of defiance against the gods. The Gnostic reformulation of religion as a quest for spiritual wholeness has supplanted religion’s older parameters of forced servitude to powerful gods.

When the Gnostics overthrew the old gods, there was no turning back. Their revolt slowly eroded the old forms of spirituality so that, in our culture

today, much of the Gnostic message has become mainstream spirituality. Religions that are proving most successful in modern America offer therapy for souls, not judgment and punishment. Even within many forms of American Christianity, God is no longer viewed as the capricious or righteous Old Testament YHWH. Though the punitive YHWH may haunt the memories of Christians, he is fading away in favor of the *Touched by an Angel* God of love and mercy, whom the Gnostic Christians brought online in the first century.

You're the Star

Across the ocean at the edge of Truman's world is a hidden blue staircase. At the top of the staircase is a door. When Truman finally discovers it, he climbs it, frantic to take the exit at the top. Christof cuts in, and Truman is shocked to hear his voice. Someone is beyond the door. Someone who knows the truth. "Who are you?" Truman demands.



Figure 2.3 Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) in the final scene of *The Truman Show*.

Christof identifies himself as the creator of an inspirational TV show. Truman looks around and then asks the question that has tormented him since he first recognized the cracks in his world. "Who am I? Was nothing real?"

Christof tries to trick him again, hopeful that Truman will climb back down the stairs and go on living in Seahaven. He wants nothing more than for Truman to continue entertaining the masses glued to their tubes. So Christof tells him, “You’re the star. *You* were real. That’s what made you so good to watch.”

Christof continues to dissuade him, telling him that the world beyond Seahaven is no more true than the one Truman inhabits. It contains the same lies, the same deceit. The difference is that in the world beyond the door Truman has everything to fear. But in Christof’s created world Truman is safe. “You’re afraid,” he tells Truman. “That’s why you can’t leave.”

It is the moment we all have been waiting for. How’s it going to end?

Truman pivots on his feet and raises his hand in a final wave. “In case I don’t see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night” ([figure 2.3](#)). He vanishes through the door into the real world. Like the old lady watching Truman exit on her TV, we shout, “Go, Truman!”



CHAPTER THREE

Superpowers and Monsters

Clark Kent

Lara screams the primal scream of a mother giving birth. Jor-El stoops to deliver their son, a beautiful infant glowing in his father's hands, the first natural birth on Krypton for centuries. We know that these parents have gone to extreme lengths and that they are alone in what they are doing. This is confirmed when Jor-El transfers the Codex into his newborn son, infusing his cells with the DNA of all people who have ever lived on Krypton.

Krypton is dying, its core depleted from eons of mining, but Jor-El has a plan for its survival. He and Lara will send their son Kal-El down through the stars to earth, where they hope Krypton will survive through their son (figure 3.1). Whether the Krypton DNA will survive by replacing human DNA or merging with it must be Kal's choice, once he has had a chance to live among humans and get a feel for things on earth.

Lara is worried that Kal will be an outcast among humans, alone. Jor-El responds, "No, he will be a god to them." Jor-El sees Kal as humanity's guide and beacon of hope. This hope is the potential that every human can be a force for good. This is what he thinks Kal can bring us. He will be an ideal for humans to strive for, to be the greatest we can be.

Yet things turn out not to be so easy on earth, where Kal, as Clark Kent, has superpowers that set him apart from everyone else. Whenever he uses those powers to help the people around him, the people become suspicious and afraid. His human father councils Clark to hide his powers until a time comes when it is necessary to use them to save the world. He is convinced that Clark's real father sent him to earth for a reason, and that Clark needs to find out what that reason is.



Figure 3.1 Kal-El (Henry Cavill), also known as Superman, in *Man of Steel* (2013).

David Goyer and Christopher Nolan's 2013 remake of the legendary DC Comics story about Superman, *Man of Steel*, plays with trope of the Gnostic incognito superpower, resident of an alien world, sent to save us. In this film, Superman is not just Clark Kent hiding behind big, dark-rimmed glasses, as he is in the comic book and earlier movies. In fact, Clark doesn't don these glasses until the last scene in the film, when he walks into the *Daily Planet* in his new reporter disguise.

Rather, throughout the film, we have watched Clark constantly disguise himself in jobs that are "out of sight"—as a fisherman on a small boat in the ocean, as a bartender in a loggers' joint, as a bag handler in the Canadian wilderness. When Lois Lane gets wind of him and wants to track him down, she wonders how she is ever going to find someone who has spent his lifetime covering his tracks. Little does she know that Clark is a god hiding among us.

Eventually, Clark is found out when he ignites a Krypton distress beacon by accident. This is how General Zod and his militia, fascist monsters from Krypton, find Clark and begin their plan to terraform the earth. They plan to remake the earth as Krypton, using Clark's DNA. But to do this, Zod first has to kill Clark. Clark's physical powers incredibly match his own, making this a tough job. Clark is faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap buildings in a single bound. Look up in the sky. Is it a bird? Or a plane? No. It's Superman.

Pagan Gnosticism and the Hermetics

Like us, the Gnostics, too, had their superpowers and their monsters. The stories that they constructed to express their newfound spirituality were classic pageants of trickery, skirmishes, and defeat, featuring the struggle of powerful gods and monsters for control of humans and their affairs. Humanitarian gods descending from alien worlds, ascending transfigured humans, incognito identities, clandestine plans, secret knowledge, and feats of magic all are standard fare in their stories. The good god and his emissaries fight to triumph over evil and to liberate humanity from the monsters and their tricks, so that humans can assume their true station as gods themselves. Like us, the Gnostics expressed and spread their truth in the powerful language of story and myth.

For the Gnostics, however, these stories were not comic book fiction or Hollywood movie magic (see Kripal 2011). These stories actually narrated the reality beneath all that is going on around us. Gnostic truth isn't so much that our surroundings are illusory but that, behind it all, something bigger is happening, some reality of which most of us are unaware most of the time. What is going on behind the scenes of our normal lives? A cosmic power struggle between good and evil, and the fate of the human being as slave or free, as impotent or empowered, hangs in the balance.

The Gnostic story took many shapes as it was popularized by the ancient people to express their novel countercultural spirituality with its emphasis on the divine human. Fantastic versions of the story surged across the ancient religious world, forging new pathways in the conventional network of religious thought and practice. By the early second century CE, the power of its countercultural current had already carved two new pathways—one pagan, another biblical—across the old Nile delta and into the Mediterranean world. Gnostic spirituality had gone viral.

The pagan pathway is a form of Gnostic spirituality that emerges within religious circles of men and women devoted to Hermes Trismegistus, the Thrice-Great God. We call these people Hermetics. The biblical pathway focused on the Jewish hero Seth, the youngest son of Adam and Eve. We call these people Sethians. The Sethians have an old ancestry, emerging in the first century CE, although whether they first formed in Alexandria, Palestine, or Mesopotamia is debated (Turner 2001, 256–301; Pearson 2007, 15–19, 51–133; Denzey Lewis 2013, 118–29). There is evidence that the Hermetic tradition may have an even older history within Egyptian religion (Fowden 1986, 155–76). From the Hermetics and the Sethians we have highly

developed writings that already were composed as early as the last decade of the first century or the early second century CE. These writings include the Hermetic Definitions, sections of Trimorphic Protennoia, and a pre-Christian version of the Apocryphon of John.

The Superpower Hermes

Who is this thrice-great god the Hermetics venerate, their superpower? At the most basic level, he is an amalgam of the Egyptian god Thoth the Thrice-Great and the Greek god Hermes (Fowden 1986, 26.). Thoth the Thrice-Great is the Egyptian lord of language, science, and knowledge, of what is known and unknown, of what is revealed and secret. He is the personification of reason and understanding, bearing messages to humans from the gods. He participates in the judgment of the deceased in the underworld and conducts the pure of heart to Osiris's throne ([figure 3.2](#)). He is associated with everything from medicine to the moon.

Greeks who settled in Egypt identified Thoth with their god Hermes, who likewise conducts the deceased to the underworld and brings messages from the gods to humans. Hermes, like Thoth, crosses impenetrable boundaries and traverses impervious barriers to communicate with humanity across the chasm that separates the human and divine worlds.

In Hermetic circles, Hermes Trismegistus becomes a powerful new god whom the Hermetics identify with the creator of heaven and earth. He is so great, so extraordinary, that he is recognized as the world ruler, who presides over fate and justice. He is a cosmic deity of cosmic proportions. He is called Poimandres, a title which means "the Mind of Rê" (Kingsley 2000). Hermes Trismegistus is the mind of the sun god himself.

Yet this new god who emerges from the religious buffer is not just a simple syncretic blend of Thoth with Hermes. He is not just a powerful cosmic divinity who appears on earth as a god. He is not just an alien superman descended to earth to help humanity. In fact, the Hermetic literature makes it clear that he was once human. So Hermes is also a superpower of another type. He is a human who has been transformed into an extraordinary being, a human become a god.

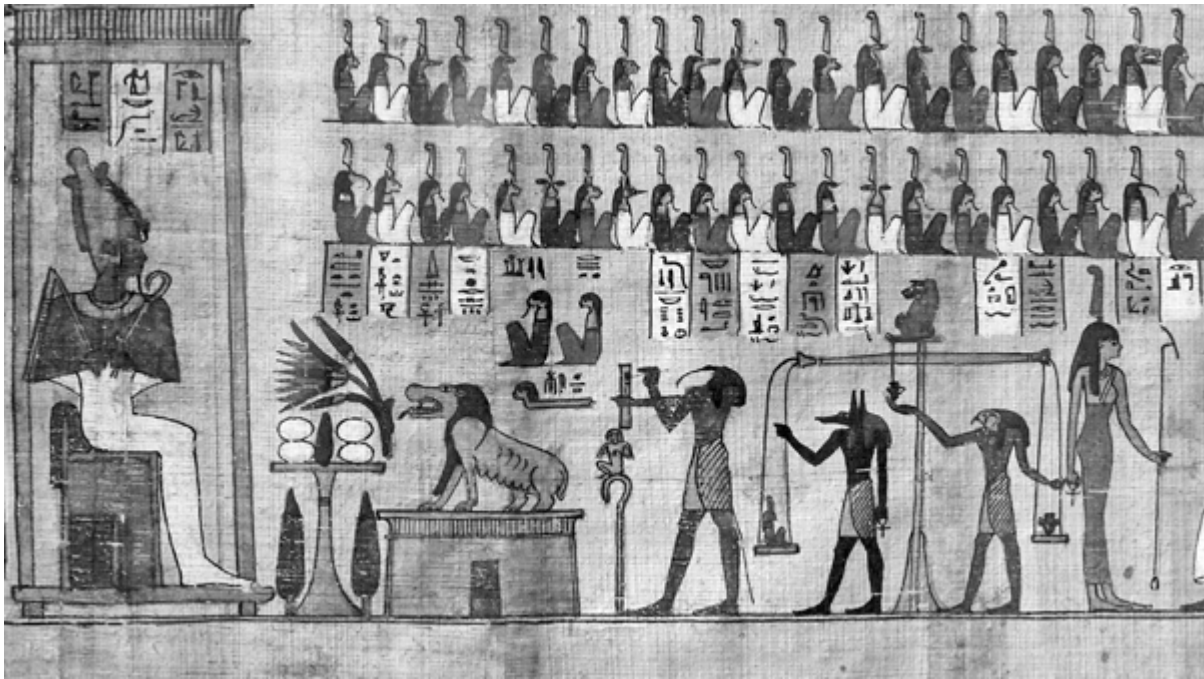


Figure 3.2 Thoth (central figure) performing his duties before the enthroned Osiris during the judgment of the deceased, from a version of the *Book of the Dead* displayed in the Museo Egizio, Turin, Italy. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

In the stories we weave, transformations into entities of amazing superhuman strength and wisdom usually are not spontaneous; it typically requires a mechanism of transfiguration that creates the new being. Our stories tend to focus on special substances that the person ingests, absorbs, or is exposed to. Also we like augmentation—when the person wields a special physical object that amplifies and boosts agility, strength, and wisdom. Education and training, especially in secret lore, is another popular motif. This training often involves braving arduous journeys that develop extraordinary skills along the way.

Consider Spiderman, the transformed Peter Parker. Peter's body and mind morph when he is bitten by a radioactive spider. He gains a sixth sense, a spider sense that alerts him to danger, along with amazing agility, balance, and speed. There is also Captain America, whose frail body is transformed into a body of total perfection by vita-ray treatment and Super-Soldier Serum. He is able to conquer Hitler's monsters as well as bench-press 1,200 pounds. There is Tony Stark, who, suffering from a chest injury, engineers for himself an amazing suit that augments his vital systems, turning him into the invincible Iron Man. Even exploding nuclear warheads can't stop him from saving the world.

We might also consider Doctor Strange, whose way to immortality depends upon shamanic instruction. It all starts after an accident destroys his surgeon hands. Doctor Strange wants to be healed, so he wanders the world seeking a cure. He comes across a guru, the Ancient One, who lives in the Himalayas. There, Doctor Strange is initiated into the mystic and magical arts, morphing from a selfish surgeon to an immortal wielding his acquired powers against evil. With his training, Doctor Strange is transfigured into a being of immense power whose job it is to stave off the demons and rulers of the dark dimension so that the world will not be destroyed by them. He is capable of doing just about anything. He flies through the air, resurrects dead bodies, reverses time, and restores entire universes.

The Gnostic Hermes is comparable to these modern human superheroes. The mechanism that underlies his story is like the mechanism underlying Doctor Strange's story: shamanic initiation. Through an initiatory process, the human Hermes ascends through the spheres. Once he reaches the pinnacle of the world, where the gods live in the skies, Hermes claims that his mind switched out. His mind left his mortal body and permanently entered the immortal body of a god, so that "I am not what I was before" (Corpus Hermeticum I, XIII.3). After this transfiguration, he descends to earth as a new god, Hermes Trismegistus, the Mind of Rê, and remains in the world to reveal the secrets of the divine world to other men and women ([figure 3.3](#)). His revelations, according to the Hermetics, are recorded in the Hermetic literature.

In the eyes of the Hermetics, Hermes Trismegistus was the perfect candidate for the job of revelation and redemption because he was able to naturally straddle the human and divine worlds. Because he himself was once a human and discovered the route to divinity, he is *the* authority on initiation and can effortlessly conduct others through their own process of transfiguration into gods. Because he is the Mind of Rê descended to earth, he possesses knowledge more expansive than we can imagine, and he can effortlessly communicate this knowledge to us. He is a Gnostic superhero caught somewhere between Superman and Doctor Strange.



Figure 3.3 Hermes Trismegistus, pictured in a floor inlay in Siena Cathedral, Italy. Public domain image, Wikimedia Commons.

Kryptonik Weakness

The revelatory message of Hermes Trismegistus did not jibe with the traditional forms of servant, covenant, and ecstatic spirituality. Hermes's message was disruptive; his understanding of the divine was unaccepted by the general populace. People outside the Hermetic circles called the Hermetics crazy and ridiculous. The Hermetics tell us that they endured scorn, hatred, and even murder because of their teachings about the supreme

God and humanity's divinity (Corpus Hermeticum IX.4). Their peculiar beliefs about the immortality of the soul were treated by those outside their group as comedic and delusionary (Asclepius 25 [Latin]).

What did Hermes Trismegistus reveal to them? It is the tragic story of how God came to be human, trapped in sentience and unconsciousness—a story similar to the story of Atum. Hermes Trismegistus tells them about primordial time, when a coiling snake arose from a deep watery darkness with a wailing roar. From its cry emerged the four elements of fire, air, earth, and water (Corpus Hermeticum I.4–6, III.1–2).

They call this God “Father” because of his procreative capacity. Indeed, he is pregnant with all things (V.9). This God is a hermaphrodite from whom emerges life and light. He is the God who begins, contains, and encompasses all things (VIII.5). He is called “good” because this is the only word that can describe God's entire nature (II.16–17). He manifests himself as the cosmic mind (nous), which generates a second god, of fire and spirit, the sun god who actually produces the cosmos. Out of self-love, mind also produces an archetypal human who is a powerful clone of God himself.

Curious about the activities of the sun god, the clone stoops down to peer through the cosmic ceiling. When he does this, he sees his own reflection in a pool of water on earth and becomes immediately enamored with how he looks in material form. He loves his earthly appearance so much that he wants nothing more than to inhabit it. What he wishes for comes true. He and his natural form embrace and make love.

Because of this, we are taught by the Hermetics, humankind is dual. Although the natural human body is mortal, the rational part of the soul, our mind or nous, is immortal. The human mind, being God, has authority over all things. But the human mind has been affected by its incarceration in a mortal body. It has become subject to embodiment and fate. Although the human mind is superior to the cosmic framework, it has become a slave within it (Corpus Hermeticum I.9–15). It is the human predicament that humankind is superior to the gods but a servant to them (Asclepius 22–23).

It is also the human predicament that a peculiar form of narcissism brings about the demise of the human being. The fatal weakness, the tragic flaw, is God's desire to become human, not the human's desire to become God. God is captured in an erotic embrace with his own self in physical form, a body that weakens him like kryptonite weakens Superman.

The Hermetic journey is long and arduous, guided by a guru. It is a flight traversing many cosmic realms and stellar circuits. It is envisioned as a literal road through the stars to an exit at the top of the universe. The initiate is promised that he or she will be shown vistas of the solid earth, the fluid sea, the streaming rivers, the pliant air, and the coursing stars as the heavens rotate at amazing speed (*Corpus Hermeticum* V.5). The initiate is encouraged: “Let us seize the beginning and travel with all speed, for the path is very crooked that leaves behind familiar things of the present, to return to primordial things of old” (IV.8–9).

During the journey, the soul of the initiate gains strength to shed the material body. The soul flies up to heaven, where nothing can hinder it—not the sun’s fire, nor the ether, nor the whirling planets, nor the stars. The soul cuts through them all. Then, at the top of the universe, the human mind breaks forth from the soul and is propelled through the universe’s domed perimeter to gaze upon the things outside the cosmos (XI.19).

This fantastic quest begins with ritual immersion in a vat of water that represents cosmic Mind. Through immersion in the waters of Mind, it was believed, the initiate’s individual mind begins its process of repatriation within the whole (IV.1–4). This baptism works like a vita-ray treatment, creating a supermind within the initiate. It renews the human mind’s ability to comprehend all things, whether on earth, in heaven, or beyond heaven (IV.5). This enables the initiate’s mind to access its power, a power so great that it reframes the person as God.

The initiate is taught the importance of awakening the human mind with this water treatment, because “like is only understood by like.” Only what is God can understand God, the Hermetics believed. “Make yourself grow to immeasurable immensity, outleap all body, outstrip all time, become eternity and you will understand God,” the initiate is taught. “Having conceived that nothing is impossible to you, consider yourself immortal and able to understand everything . . . Collect within yourself all the sensations of creation . . . Be everywhere at once . . . Be not yet born, be in the womb, be young, old, dead, beyond death” (XI.20).

This transcendent, mystical moment outside of time is achieved through guided ascent through the celestial realms, the closest analogue of which may be the shamanic soul flight. Through controlled ecstatic experiences, the initiate progressively sheds at each planet the cosmic accoutrements that birth has wrapped around it, trappings that imprison the human mind within

the material realm—things such as growth and aging, evil inclinations, deceitful lust, domineering arrogance, rash presumption, greed, and deceit—and that, like kryptonite, enfeeble it.

Once released from these kryptonic trappings, the mind of the initiate enters the Ogdoadic region, which is the zodiac above the seven planetary spheres. At this eighth level, the initiate sings hymns to the father who lives above and beyond the Ogdoad in a region all his own. Subsequently, the mind of the initiate hastens beyond the Ogdoad, out of the cosmos, to the One and Only, surrendering to the powers of that superior place. This is the place beyond the cosmos where Mind is a whole wholly enclosing itself, free of all body, unerring, unaffected, at rest, containing all things, and preserving all that exists (Corpus Hermeticum II.12). It is the moment that the initiate sings to the all-lord, and afterwards is moved to silence (V.11):

You are whatever I am.
You are whatever I make.
You are whatever I say.
You are everything,
And there is nothing else.
What is not, you are as well.
You are all that has come to be.
You are what has not come to be.
You are the Mind who understands,
The Father who makes his craftswork,
The God who acts,
And the Good who makes all things.

This is how the initiate enters God and is made God. This is gnosis, when the initiate, like Hermes, flies through the air and becomes a superpower too (Corpus Hermeticum I.24–26). His guru tells him that he has come to experience himself as “a godlike living thing, not comparable to the other living things of the earth, but to those of the heaven above, who are called gods.” The Hermetic guru continues, “Even more so, if one dare tell the truth, that the one who is really human is above these gods as well, or at least they are wholly equal in power to one another.” The human on earth is a “mortal god” whose ability to cross boundaries is superior to the celestial gods, who are only “immortal men” (X.24–25).

Hermetic Rescue

One of the distinctive features of the pagan pathway of Gnostic spirituality is its more favorable view of the cosmos than we find in the biblical pathway. That said, the Hermetics did not think that the world is without fault. It is conceived by the Hermetics as a place of entrapment, and the body as a hideous prison that bars us from the truth.

Yet the cosmos also is viewed as an inundation that ultimately flows from the all-lord (Corpus Hermeticum VII.1–3). It is the result of the diversification of the One and Only (XI.5). So the cosmos is perceived to be a second god, an immortal living thing. It partakes of the eternal being of the primal God, its originator and sustainer (VIII.1–2). What is beautiful and good about the universe is that it comes into being from the constant procreative activity of the all-lord, the life giver (XI.13–14). When we contemplate the universe, we are seeing God made visible (V.5).

Still, the Hermetics were aware that there is vice all around us (VI.3–4). So where did the vice come from, according to their philosophy? What happened?

This is not entirely clear from the Hermetic literature that has survived. What we do know is that the Hermetics understood the nested incarceration of the human mind within the soul within the material body to be problematic. It made the immortal soul and the mind subject to fate and mortality, desire and suffering. It crippled them like kryptonite cripples Superman.

This first occurred when man, the archetypal clone, lusted after his material form in the pool of water, when he wanted more than anything to mate with it, and did. This desire for the body keeps the mind, soul, and body mated, it keeps the psyche and the nous embedded in material existence.

So the Hermetics identified lust and bodily desire as the problem behind all evil. Procreation itself was viewed as sacred, between Hermetic men and women, but lust was something that had to be controlled even during their own sexual trysts (Asclepius 21). If it wasn't, then the True Man would never be freed but would continue to live in darkness and error, suffering the effects of death (Corpus Hermeticum I.19). The True Man would remain attached and bound to a mortal body, with all its limitations.

The Hermetics have left us with a large number of documents that outline their beliefs, and all of them point to the religious buffer where Egyptian lore about Atum mingles with Greek philosophical sensibilities. The Egyptian gurus who composed the documents did so at a moment in Egyptian history when their land had been colonized by the Greeks and then by the Romans.

They felt that their ancestors had been faithful to the Egyptian gods, had been pious and reverent, but that it had not paid off. What good had come of all their sacrifices to the gods? What was the consequence of their reverence? Foreigners were occupying the land. The temples had been abandoned. The holy land of Egypt had become a land filled with tombs and corpses. Irreverence, disorder, and evil were all around them. Old Egypt had died (Asclepius 24, 26 [Latin]).

We might have expected these Egyptian priests to blame the foreigners for the destruction of the old Egypt. But they did not. Instead of blaming the foreigners for the disorder and chaos around them, they blamed their ancestors instead. They thought their ancestors had erred gravely when it came to understanding divinity. Although their ancestors had been attentive to the worship of the gods, they had been inattentive to the worship of God, the all-lord. Instead of focusing their reverence on the Unbegotten, the One and All, Atum, their ancestors had focused on the begotten gods, a second tier of deities who had been generated to govern the land (37 [Latin]).

What had their ancestors done? They had made cult statues, which they successfully implanted with the souls of various gods through magic. Because these cult gods had been formed by mixing the souls of the gods with precious metals and stones, the cult gods had earthly natures as well as heavenly. The cult gods needed to be appeased and entertained by constant sacrifices, hymning, and praises, so that the heavenly entity could be enticed to stay within the earthly statue and assist humankind. Although the divine entities in the cult statues could be manipulated to do good, they also could become annoyed and inflict punishment. In fact, this is just what happened. When different local populations treated various cult statues differently, honoring some and not others, the gods became angry and withdrew from the land (37–38).

The Hermetic gurus said that the only remedy is to worship the supreme all-lord, who, unlike the begotten gods, is offended by sacrifices and incense-burning. Worship of the God Who Is All Things is conducted by singing God's praises and hymning in silence rather than by offering up the fragrance of frankincense and spices. This is the proper way to address the God who is beyond the sun, the God to whom all the heavenly gods submit as their king and ruler. Hymns of praise should be directed toward this God beyond, who ultimately is the one who limited the sea, who settled the earth, who determined the circuit of the stars (Corpus Hermeticum V.3–4). By

reorienting their worship in this way, they hoped they could reestablish the lost connection with the one God, which, in turn, would renew their land and bring peace at last.

In the last paragraphs of the famous Hermetic teachings called Asclepius, we find a beautiful example of such a hymn recorded. We can only imagine the power of its words set to a vocal harmony (Asclepius 41 [Latin]):

We thank you, supreme and most high God,
By whose grace alone we have attained the light of your knowledge.
Holy Name that must be honored,
The One Name by which our ancestral faith blesses God Alone.

We thank you who deign to grant to all
A father's fidelity, reverence, and love,
Along with any power that is sweeter,
By giving us the gift of mind (nous), reason (logos), and knowledge (gnosis).

Mind (nous), by which we know you,
Reason (logos), by which we seek you in our dim suppositions,
Knowledge (gnosis), by which we rejoice in knowing you.

We who are saved by your power
Do indeed rejoice, because you have shown yourself to us wholly.
We rejoice that you have deigned to make us gods for eternity,
Even while we depend on the body.

For this is humanity's only means of giving thanks, knowledge of your majesty.
We have known you, the vast light perceived only by reason.
We have known you, true life of life, the womb pregnant with all-coming-to-be.
We have known you, who persist eternally
By conceiving all-coming-to-be in its perfect fullness.

Worshipping with this entire prayer the good of your goodness,
We ask only this:
That you wish us to persist in the love of your knowledge
And that we never be cut off from such a life as this.

The Hermetics believed that, once they reestablished the connection with the all-lord through prayer and praise, their ritual commendation could be extended to earthly kings as well. As in heaven, so on earth, they thought. Prayers and praises offered for their political rulers would realign the earthly kingships with the peace and goodness of the supreme God—or so they hoped (Corpus Hermeticum XVIII.8–16).

The Hermetics performed their prayers to the all-lord and the kings twice daily on temple grounds: at sunrise, facing east, and at sunset, facing south. Following the evening prayer, they ate a communal vegetarian meal. At their sacred meal, they refused to consume “living things” because they did not

wish to harm even the irrational souls of the beasts, which too were undulations of the One and All (Asclepius 41 [Latin]).

Biblical Gnosticism and the Sethians

At the same time that the pagan pathway of Gnostic spirituality was forming in the Nile delta and developing Hermetic conventicles, a second pathway of Gnostic spirituality was absorbing the Bible. At first, these biblical Gnostics were only concerned with revisiting Jewish scriptures in light of the Gnostic innovation in spirituality that had begun in Egypt. This was at a time before the composition of the Christian scriptures. These first biblical Gnostics, with their focus on integrating Jewish scripture with Gnostic spirituality, developed into a coherent religious movement, complete with its own unique mythology, ritual, and communal identity.

Although we do not know where their first community emerged geographically, whether in Alexandria, the Jordan valley, or the region of the Euphrates, we do know that they called themselves the Children of Seth, the Incorruptible Race, and the Holy Generation (Williams 1985; Turner 2001; Logan 2006; Brakke 2011). Their communal identity as the offspring of Seth is derived from the biblical Seth, who is the last son of Adam and Eve. He was born to replace his brother Abel, who had been killed by Cain. He was said to be the spitting image of Adam, an exact likeness of his father. This Gnostic group understands Seth to be their founder and inaugural ancestor. This is why we call them Sethians.

The earliest Sethian communities represent the initial collision of Gnostic spirituality with the Jewish Bible, before Christianity began to form in the Mediterranean. Once Christianity began emerging, some Sethian communities started to engage Christian perspectives and scriptures, too, blending them with their received Sethian views. In these cases, forms of Christian Sethianism grew alongside non-Christian Sethian communities, as Gnostic spirituality absorbed both Jewish and Christian versions of the Bible.

Cracks in God

What makes this expression of Gnostic spirituality unique is the way it penetrates the biblical narrative, transgressing the very foundation of conventional Jewish covenant spirituality and scriptural interpretation. It leaves no stone unturned in its quest to figure out how the biblical narrative

confirms the new revolutionary Gnostic orientation. In other words, the first biblical Gnostics were unwilling to give up their belief in the veracity of the Jewish scriptures. They wanted nothing more than to align the Jewish sacred scriptures with Gnostic spirituality, to reconceive the story of YHWH in light of their own direct experiences of the supreme God.

At first, the biblical Gnostics were concerned about whether or not YHWH is the ineffable supreme God they had come to know. To this end, they were obsessed with explaining a crack that they perceived in the biblical narrative: that YHWH exhibits human characteristics and emotions. He walks in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day and interacts directly with the first humans, Adam and Eve. He claims to be jealous of other gods. He does not work alone but creates human beings with the assistance of other beings, as he himself says in Genesis 1:26: “Let *us* make man in our image, after *our* likeness” (my italics).

It is this hairline crack that suggested to them that something was amiss with conventional Jewish wisdom about the identity of YHWH. All of these verses, and many more like them, were indicators that YHWH was not the supreme God. In the opinion of the biblical Gnostics, these indicators made YHWH a deity subordinate to the supreme God, who is beyond human categories and descriptors.

It is fascinating that the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, Philo, is worried about the same crack when he discusses the Bible and the nature of God. Like the biblical Gnostics, Philo conceives of God as Plato’s transcendent Good. Like the biblical Gnostics, Philo agrees that God could not have hands and feet, eyes and ears, tongue and throat. He does not have emotions that move him to destructive behavior. Such a literal reading is a monstrosity (Philo, *De confusione linguarum* 27). However, Philo claims, we cannot conclude from this that YHWH is not God. Instead, it means that the Bible is doing something different with language. Because the Bible is a teaching tool, it employs images of God that humans can easily identify with and understand. The biblical references to YHWH’s humanlike characteristics are not literal descriptions of God, who really is transcendent and inconceivable. They are merely concessions to the limitations of the human mind and language (Philo, *Quod Deus sit immutabilis* 11).

The biblical Gnostics weren’t convinced by Philo’s argument. They held their ground and continued to insist on a literal reading of the Bible. The Bible says that YHWH is a god who walks and talks. Consequently, the

biblical Gnostics were certain that YHWH must be a deity subordinate to the ineffable supreme God.

If YHWH is really a subordinate god, then who is he and how does he fit into the bigger scheme of things? To answer this question, the biblical Gnostics rely on long-standing Jewish traditions of angels and demons as creatures that cross human and divine realms. They were particularly interested in an Old Testament figure, the angel of YHWH, which is translated in most English Bibles as “the angel of the LORD.” This figure is impressive in the biblical narrative, because he is the earthly manifestation of the God YHWH himself and consequently possesses YHWH’s sacred and personal name. This angel is YHWH in human form. He speaks with the authority, will, and voice of YHWH, and appears in many stories to be interchangeable with the God YHWH.

One of the most pronounced identifications of the God YHWH with his angel occurs in the story of Moses and the burning bush. In this story, the angel of YHWH appears to Moses in the burning bush. But whose voice does Moses hear calling out of the bush? Not the angel’s, but YHWH’s own voice calls out, “Moses, Moses!” Moses hides his face because “he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:1–6).

These and other biblical passages where YHWH and his angel stand in for each other confirmed for the biblical Gnostics that the God YHWH was not the superior all-lord but a secondary god or angel who created the world and rules it. So whenever the name YHWH is used in the biblical stories, the biblical Gnostics thought that it must point to this creator angel or god, not God with a capital G.

Once the biblical Gnostics figured this out, it was not long before they began to wonder about the relationship between the all-lord and YHWH. Was YHWH an extension of the all-lord, creating the world according to the will of the supreme God? Was YHWH the supreme God’s agent?

As they thought about this, other cracks began showing up in the scripture, revealing a biblical God with a capricious nature whose goal is to jealously bind a segment of humanity to himself. When YHWH speaks of himself, the biblical Gnostics pointed out, he describes himself as a jealous God, making generations of children suffer for the wickedness and sins of their fathers (Deuteronomy 5:9). Because YHWH is jealous, his anger is often stirred up, even to the level of genocide, when he destroys whole communities out of his

wrath (6:15). He himself says in Isaiah 45:7, “I make weal and create woe, I am YHWH.”

Beyond these emotions, YHWH appears ignorant on occasion. Didn't he have to call out to Adam and Eve and ask them “Where are you?” because he didn't know their whereabouts in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:9)? These and other scriptures were used by the biblical Gnostics to determine that YHWH is not the supreme God's agent. He is his adversary.

This is the moment that the biblical Gnostics became transgressors. It marked them as heretics in the eyes of other Jews. Although the identification of YHWH with the angel of YHWH would have raised some eyebrows and garnered argument within Jewish circles in Alexandria, it wasn't until the biblical Gnostics viewed YHWH in adversarial terms that they crossed the line and found themselves cut away from the synagogues. They were Gnostics on their own.

The Gnostic Monster Ialdabaoth

YHWH was the supreme God's adversary. It was this point that the biblical Gnostics rallied around, and it was this point that began to mark them as the unique Sethian community. They began to toy with the idea that YHWH must be like Lucifer, the rebellious angel-turned-demon. If YHWH was jealous, angry, and ignorant, was he like Lucifer, who led a revolt and was thrown down from high places? They thought so. They were convinced that YHWH is a rebel, an apostate god.

The Sethians christened him Ialdabaoth, which means “YHWH God of Hosts.” This title reflects YHWH's well-known warrior alias in the Bible, as the king who leads his armies of angels into battle to protect his interests. For the Sethians, he is the king who leads his heavenly host in an ongoing battle against the supreme God. He is like General Zod in the Superman stories—arrogant, ruthless, a genocidal maniac who finds pleasure in dominating humans with his super strength. The Sethians also called him Saklas (fool) and Samael (blind god).

Because Ialdabaoth is viewed by the Sethians as a jealous, rebellious angel, his creation is viewed as fallen, too. As his domain, he establishes the cosmos, which includes the celestial spheres, earth, and the underworld. He populates his domain with powers like himself, who make up his army of heavenly host. The lieutenants in his army are perceived as fallen angels or demons. They are called by the Sethians archons, which means “rulers.”

Each of Ialdabaoth's lieutenants is given a territory to oversee, which is a planet or an abyss of hell, and a special name of power, which the Sethians derive from the various names of God recorded in the Bible. Ialdabaoth, a monstrous lion-headed serpent, arrogantly declares himself the one God and ruler over all creation, when he says in the Bible, "I am God and there is no God besides me" (Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 43:10–11, 45:5–6, 18, 22, 46:9, 47:8, 10; Hosea 13:4; Joel 2:27).

In fact, Ialdabaoth is ignorant of the existence of anything superior to himself, until the moment when he hears a voice call down from above him, "Man exists and the Son of Man." He reacts in disbelief. He assumes that the voice is only that of his luminous mother, Sophia, the great goddess of wisdom. He does not realize that there are immortals superior to himself and his mother, because he has been living exiled in a cloud since his birth.

Ialdabaoth was born an ugly monster, the unfortunate son of the most beautiful goddess of light. Immediately, he becomes envious of his mother's beauty and decides to capture it. When he steals her luminous power, her spirit, she casts Ialdabaoth out of the realm of the immortals and hides him in a cloud. She does not want the supreme God or the divinities that populate the divine world to see her monstrously ugly son or know of his thievery. So she quarantines him outside the divine world. His exile is the only existence he has ever known, until the moment he hears the voice thunder down from above him.

Ialdabaoth is even more surprised when man, the archetypal human, leans through the cosmic ceiling and projects his luminous image in the waters that make up the underside of the firmament. This event reflects the Sethian understanding of the opening verses in the Bible in which God brings forth light. In the Greek translation of Genesis, the word "light" is the Greek word "*phos*," which can mean either "light" or "man," depending on how the word is accented. The Sethians loved this pun. They were convinced that this verse taught about primal times, when the supreme God revealed on the waters the reflection of a luminous, archetypal man, which was God's own image.

His stunning appearance causes Ialdabaoth's entire creation to tremble and shake with fear. Ialdabaoth and his lieutenants realize that there is a supreme God who exists above them and who is more powerful than they can imagine. What are they to do?

They decide to try to reproduce the luminous image of God in their own realm by creating a human form built from the substances available to them in

the cosmos. They hope to be able to create something as powerful as the God who had revealed himself in the water by endowing their creation with their own best features. But they are disappointed. The creature, Adam, is inert, unable to stand up.

So Ialdabaoth gets the idea to blow his own breath into Adam's nostrils. When he does this, he blows into Adam not only his breath but also the luminous spiritual power that Ialdabaoth had stolen from his mother, Sophia, although he does not realize this at first. He is an ignorant god who does not know that he has given away the most powerful thing that exists, the spirit of the supreme God, by blowing his breath into Adam.

Ialdabaoth's action does the trick, though. Adam stands up, and he glows. He is more beautiful than Ialdabaoth and his lieutenants. And more powerful.

The rulers are immediately seized with jealousy and the realization that they have given away their greatest features when they constructed Adam. They fear his great intelligence and his obvious superiority. So they throw him down from the heavens into the lowest realms of matter, on earth. This descent into matter subdues Adam and wipes away his memory of his true identity. The rulers further distract him with the pleasures of food and sex with his wife, Eve. This is how Adam and Eve become the servants of Ialdabaoth in the Garden of Eden, crippled by the kryptonite trappings of physical existence.

Stealth Sethian Superpowers

The rest of the interpretation of the history of humankind is portrayed as a struggle between the monster Ialdabaoth and the supreme God, over the luminous spirit embedded in the human soul. Ialdabaoth wants to keep it within his creation because possessing it empowers him to enslave humans. The supreme God wants it back. This means that the supreme God must send emissaries incognito to alert humans to their plight. These are stealth Sethian superpowers who travel down through the realms of existence, from the world of the supreme God to the world of Ialdabaoth, to fight him.

The Sethian superpowers are very much like Superman and Superwoman, who disguise themselves as weak human beings. The Sethian emissaries are divine entities that belong to the world of the supreme God. As they descend, they take on bodies appropriate to the realms through which they pass. These bodies help them blend in so that their descent is hidden from the eyes of Ialdabaoth and his lieutenants, who suspect nothing until it is too late.

In Sethian mythology, the supreme God is conceived as a hermaphrodite. This hermaphrodite all-lord is known as the Father God and the Invisible Spirit. In the Sethian stories about the origin of the world, the first thing to happen is one of the only things that a solitary numinous being can do: he thinks about himself.

His first thought about himself manifests as the hermaphrodite Mother God, who is known by the name Barbelo. As an overflow or extension of the father, Barbelo is also called the First Man. Barbelo embodies God's thoughts. She is his Protennoia (Forethought), his Ennoia (Thought), and his Epinoia (Afterthought). She generates foreknowledge, indestructibility, eternal life, and truth.

In this process of emanation or dilation, Barbelo produces a hermaphrodite son named Autogenes (Self-Originate), also known as Logos (Reason). He is the Son of Man. He is responsible for generating the angel Eleleth and the divine archetypes of Adam, Seth, and Seth's offspring.

Because of God's hermaphrodite nature, gender boundaries play no role in the descent of the superpowers to earth, where they take on male forms as easily as female. For that matter, the boundaries between species are breached as well. The emissaries can appear human as easily as animal or vegetable.

Who are the Sethian superpowers? The most common emissaries are the Mother God, Barbelo; her son, Self-Originate; and his progeny, Seth and Eleleth.

In some of the Sethian stories, Barbelo as Afterthought descends to Adam and enlightens him in the Garden of Eden. She hides in Adam's body as a spiritual archetype of Eve. When she does not occupy Adam's body, she is a luminous female angel, the Mother of the Living, who stands next to Adam and talks to him. At times in the stories, when Afterthought wants to hide from Ialdabaoth and the other rulers, she inhabits the tree of knowledge of good and evil, from which Adam and Eve eat. She becomes the tree. Other times, she is an eagle nesting in the tree and appearing to the human couple. In some versions of the story, she enters the snake who instructs Adam and Eve to eat the fruit. When they do, their minds are opened and the light of knowledge shines upon them. They become aware of themselves and the beastly nature of their gods, Ialdabaoth and his lieutenants, whom they now loathe.

The appearance of Afterthought in the Garden of Eden is the first descent of a Sethian superpower to instruct humans about their predicament. Of course, this does not work. When the rulers realize that Afterthought has descended from her high place and has instructed the couple about the truth, the rulers attack Adam and Eve with curses, shorten their life spans, and bind them to lives of toil and servitude outside the garden. Their memories are erased. They lose track of who they really are.

After Abel is killed by Cain, Adam and Eve have a son, Seth, whom the Sethians identify as their primordial ancestor. Seth is chosen because he is the only early character in the Bible who never interacts with or worships YHWH. Also, he is described in the biblical narrative as a son born in Adam's likeness and image. The Sethians interpret this to mean that the human Seth is the reflection of his divine archetype, Seth. Whereas Adam is the progenitor of all humans, including the vast majority who were not Gnostics, Seth is the progenitor of the Gnostics.

In other words, the luminous spirit that Ialdabaoth blew into Adam's nostrils had lodged itself within Adam and Eve's child Seth and his offspring, although the offspring were not always aware of this. Ialdabaoth tries at every turn to keep them in the dark about their true nature and strength. And God tries to keep them informed via a string of emissaries who serially descend to earth as instructors.

History was viewed by the Sethians as a real struggle, because most of the population had been blinded or distracted from the truth and went on worshipping Ialdabaoth. In the Apocalypse of Adam, we find a Sethian version of history that divides the human race into thirteen kingdoms and one kingless tribe. Twelve of the kingdoms represent the twelve tribes of Israel, who swear fealty to Ialdabaoth. A thirteenth kingdom is produced from their "seed," too. This is a reference to early Apostolic Catholic Christians, who the Sethians say also worship Ialdabaoth.

The people of all thirteen kingdoms failed to recognize the Gnostic superpowers, including the greatest of all the superpowers, Jesus, who had descended incognito to illuminate them in the last age. Only the kingless tribe, the tribe that does not worship Ialdabaoth, has recognized all the emissaries and has learned from them the correct way to baptize in order to liberate the spirit. These emissaries teach them that they actually are superior to Ialdabaoth and his lieutenants, that they have been trapped in perpetual servitude to false gods, that they have been incarcerated in bodies that, like

kryptonite, subdue their innate power. These emissaries teach them water rituals, including a ceremony they call the Five Seals. The Sethians believed that these water rituals aid in the release of the spirit from its incarceration and progressively guide the spirit into the realms of the divine world of the supreme God.

Samaritan Gnosticism and Simon the Great Power

The revolutionary message of Gnostic spirituality quickly migrated north into the district of ancient Palestine known as Samaria, a region that extended from Judaea in the south to Galilee in the north and to the Jordan River in the east. It was home to a group called the Samaritans, who understood themselves to be the true keepers of the law of YHWH. They trace their origins to the northern tribes of Israel, Ephraim, and Manasseh, rather than to Judah in the south. So they did not worship YHWH at the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, but had built their own temple of YHWH on Mount Gerizim. Even today, the majority of Samaritans live in the shadow of this holy mountain and worship YHWH there.

In the first century CE, a man by the name of Dositheus founded a Samaritan sect with unusual features (Fossum 1989). It is difficult to piece together what actually happened, from the sources that have survived, but the recorded memories identify Dositheus as one of John the Baptist's disciples. This is the same John the Baptist that turns up in the Christian stories about Jesus.

After John's death, Dositheus is said to have formed his own group, which was made up of thirty of the Baptist's leading disciples, including a woman nicknamed Luna (Moon). It is obvious that the group marked time by the lunar calendar, given that their number (thirty) represented the number of days in the moon's cycle and that the woman among them took on the name of the moon. The group was a Samaritan baptist group, practicing water initiation and ritual bathing. Indeed, they were known for saying their prayers while standing in water, fully clothed, because they believed water to be holy.

Dositheus claimed to be the figure promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15, a prophet like Moses himself. The Samaritans believed that this prophet would be sent by God to restore the law of Moses (Torah) at the end of time. Dositheus spent much of his time rewriting the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish scripture, as well as composing his own books (Fossum 1989, 320). His followers believed that Dositheus had come to restore the

law of Moses, which, they also thought, had been corrupted over the centuries by fraudulent priests.

Dositheus had a reputation as “the Standing One,” a title that pointed to his exalted status. According to the Samaritans, when Moses ascended the mountain to receive the law, he joined with the angels standing next to God. The assumption of this title by Dositheus reflects the belief that he, like Moses, had ascended to God, had taken his place among the angels, and had come back to earth with revised laws to distribute to those who would listen.

It was not long before Dositheus’s status was challenged by one of his students. This particular student was Simon of Gitta (later known as Simon Magus). Stories tell of a young Simon who goes to Alexandria, Egypt, to receive the very best Greek education he can (Pseudo-Clementine Homilies 2.7). When he returns home to Samaria, he joins Dositheus’s group. He and Luna are enamored with each other and they want to marry. It appears that Dositheus thought that Luna belonged to him, because in order to marry her, Simon is obliged to first take over the leadership of the community. So he steps forth to challenge Dositheus’s credentials by claiming that he, not Dositheus, is the Standing One.

Simon says that he is the Standing One because he is able to wield the power of God to do amazing things: “I can make myself invisible to those who wish to capture me, and I can reveal myself openly again when I wish to be seen. If I wish to escape, I can tunnel through mountains and pass through rocks as if they were mud. If I were to throw myself headlong down from a high mountain, I would be carried down to earth, unharmed, as if carried in a vehicle (Pseudo-Clementine Homilies 2.9).” He claims that he can transform his face and can become a sheep or a goat. His favorite form of travel is flying through the air. He was the Great Power (Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.2, *Commentary on Matthew* 24:4–5; cf. Acts 8:10; Pseudo-Clementine Homilies 2.9).

With the community watching, Dositheus snatches up a stick that is lying on the ground. He is in a frenzy to beat Simon in a duel over the title and the girl. The two men circle each other, Dositheus waving his stick high in the air. Dositheus advances and thwacks Simon again and again, beating him mercilessly with the rod.

But Simon does not flinch. He does not fall. The stick passes through his body as if his body were made of smoke. Dositheus is astonished. His blows do not devastate Simon. Instead, Dositheus is devastated. Dositheus

immediately withdraws from the group, leaving Simon the Great Power and Luna in charge (Pseudo-Clementine Homilies 2.11).

Helena's Entrapment

Under the leadership of Simon and Luna, whose given name appears to have been Helena, a once small and unknown Samaritan sect transcends its national borders and escalates into a Gnostic religion with universal scope and appeal (see Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 26; Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 23.1–4; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.19.5; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 21). Simon puts into practice the Gnostic spirituality he brought back with him from his sojourn in Egypt. At the center of this Gnostic religion are Simon and Helena as superpowers descended from on high to save the spirits of humankind.

Simon's message was simple and appealing. He said that there is a Father God, YHWH, whose Ennoia (first thought) is nous (mind), also called the Holy Spirit. She is the Mother God. The father thought and thought, and when he did so, he also conceived the idea of archangels, angels, and the cosmos. His first thought, the Holy Spirit, understood his will, and she leaped forth and descended into the lower realms where, as the Mother God, she generated the angels and powers the father had wished for. In turn, these angels and powers created the world the father had envisioned.

But things did not stay orderly. The creator angels became jealous and lusted after YHWH's first thought, the Holy Spirit, who was more beautiful than they. They seized her and incarcerated her in a material body, so that the spirit became subject to the cycle of birth and death, reincarnating in human bodies lifetime after lifetime. She suffered exceedingly, unable to realize her liberation and release, unable to return to the father. She was trapped by her own creation.

The only solution to this horrific predicament is for the father to intervene, to descend to earth to save her personally. Simon declared himself to be YHWH manifest, the Great Power, the son of God, come to earth to free First Thought from her enslavement to the rebellious angels. On earth, Simon appears to humans as a human. He wanders around earth looking for his lost spirit.

He finds her and marries her. She is his beloved Helena. In order to diminish her power as much as they could, the rebellious angels had incarcerated her in the most unholy body possible. For much of her present

life she had been a prostitute working in a brothel in Tyre, a Phoenician city. But Simon recognized her as the superpower she is. She is his first thought, the Mother of All. He has come to take her home and to liberate humanity from the rule of the rebellious angels.

Flying High with Simon

Simon and Helena establish a religion that is open to all who believe in them as the superpowers they are. Their simple myth is taught as a metaphor for all humans, who are like Helena—humans in whom the spirit of God is bound. *The Great Declaration*, a book attributed to Simon, explains that the infinite Great Power resides in all humans as the human spirit (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.9.4–18.7). Most scholars dismiss this work as a late second-century forgery because the book appears to be more theologically developed than Irenaeus's account of Simon's teaching. But we must be very cautious when drawing such a conclusion from this evidence. It is just as likely that Irenaeus represents for us a distillation of Simon's public teaching, whereas *The Great Declaration* is a theological exposition written by Simon, meant for a more advanced audience. It explains fully the movement from an unoriginate power to the genesis of the human being as an embodiment of that power. To do this, the author examines the Genesis story in a uniquely Gnostic manner, blending into his biblical exegesis medical knowledge about conception and the development of the fetus as well as Egyptian mythology of Atum, the bisexual god who stands up on his mound and roars.

According to *The Great Declaration*, the human spirit is trapped in a cosmic system that has drained the spirit of its power. In this weakened condition, there is nothing that humans can do in terms of piety to release their spirits from the bondage they face. There is no amount of righteous living that will liberate their spirits from the dominion of the rebellious angels who rule the world.

The spirit's freedom, its liberation, is a matter of grace. Its release and empowerment can only be attained by the grace of God, who takes it upon himself to descend to earth and set straight the disorder the rebellious angels have instigated. God comes to earth as Simon to instruct humans about their predicament and to reveal himself to humans so that they may *know* him. With this gnostic experience, the little seed of the spirit, the "divine potential" within us, is fully formed into a perfect fruit. According to this Simonian

document, in this way the divine potential has been actualized, so that now God is within us.

Simon and Helena set up a priesthood to officiate their worship as the Father God and Mother God. They use the titles of the Greek gods Zeus and Athena for themselves in order to broaden the appeal of their worship so that those living outside the borders of Samaria might be more likely to join. Statues of the two were used in the community's worship.

Central to their ideals is the belief in a corrupted Jewish scripture, an idea they must have developed out of their former Dosithean roots. They went further than Dositheus, who taught that the Jewish scripture had been corrupted over the centuries and needed to be rewritten. Simon declared that no rewriting was necessary. God the Father is not the author of the Torah at all. Rather, it is corrupted, because it originated from one of the lesser rebellious angels to enslave humanity. Each book of the Prophets, according to Simon, was authored by one of the other rebellious angels. To free humanity from the dominion of the ruling angels, he commanded the law to be forsaken. He declared that anyone within his community found observing the laws of the Jewish scriptures would be subject to death.

He and Helena also established initiatory rites through which believers were inducted into the religion. Water rites played a role, since we have records that Simon's successor, Menander, baptized all those who joined the group. We know that Simonian initiations also involved the memorization and pronouncement of all of the names of the angels-turned-monsters. This program likely was part of the group's attempt to first conquer the rebellious angels through the incantation of words of power, and then to return the spirit to its lofty origins.

Since the marriage of Simon and Helena as God the Father and God the Mother is characterized as *the* redemptive act, the catechism that the initiates underwent also involved sacred sexual practices within a consecrated space they called the Holy of Holies. They considered their ritual sexual intercourse to reenact the blessed union of the Father God and Mother God. They called the ceremony Perfect Love (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.19.5; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 21.4.1–2). This was the pinnacle of the initiation. After the initiate's spirit had conquered the rebellious angels and returned to its lofty origin, it was reunited with the Father God in sacred matrimony.

The expansion of the Simonians was swift. Simon and Helena did not stay put in Samaria but traveled to major cities of the Roman Empire, including

Rome itself, where they gained instant allegiance. In their travels, they encountered missionaries from competing new religions, including nascent Christianity.

The early Christian stories do not deny the appeal of Simon's religion, which was so similar to their own that some Christians wondered whether Simon and Jesus were one and the same (Acts of Peter 4). In order to lay claim to the authenticity and distinctiveness of their own superpower, Jesus, the Christians portray Simon as negatively as possible. In the Christian stories, Simon emerges as a charlatan and magician who competed with Peter and the first apostles and lost.

In one of the stories preserved in the New Testament book of Acts, we learn about the "great power" Simon, who had a large following of converts in Samaria. When the Christian apostle Philip arrives there for the first time, he is successful in converting the Simonians and baptizing them in Jesus' name. Even Simon himself converts, because Philip outdoes him in terms of the miracles he can perform. When Peter and John arrive to help Philip transform the Simonian community into a new community of Christians, Simon offers to purchase the Holy Spirit from them. Simon is berated by Peter. He goes on to beg Peter to offer prayers to the Lord on his sorry behalf so that Simon does not rot in hell (Acts 8:9–24).

Although this story may preserve a historical kernel that some of the Simonians were the first to convert to Christianity in Samaria, Simon's conversion is bogus. It is a Christian attempt at propaganda, to dismiss Simon the superpower and elevate their own, Jesus, the Power and Glory of God.

The same sentiment can be seen in another Christian story, in which Simon and Peter duel it out in the Forum at Rome. Simon tells a crowd of onlookers in Rome that he is going to ascend back to God the Father from whence he came. He flies all over the city of Rome, to the astonishment of everyone.

Peter curses, asking the Lord to make Simon fall from the sky and break his leg. Peter's curse succeeds. Simon falls from the sky, crumples on the ground, and is stoned to death by those who once believed him to be their superpower. From that day forth, the story goes, the Roman Simonians changed allegiances. How does this Christian story end? Instead of paying honors to Simon, the Roman Simonians were persuaded by Peter that the true superpower is none other than Jesus (Acts of Peter 32).

Savior of the World

In the Gnostic world, there is only one way to deal with the monsters, the dark lords who rule us. A divine emissary or savior descends to earth from the great realm of power in order to guide and save humanity. The Christian versions of Gnostic stories feature the emissary Jesus, not just as the revelator of the truth but also as the power who takes on the monsters and defeats them in a cosmic struggle. This struggle is most often associated with the crucifixion, when Jesus' death defeated the monsters who rule the world. Gnostics engaging Christian scriptures thought that Jesus' powerful spirit was released when he died, something that took the enemy by surprise. In this moment of chaos, Jesus was able to subdue the cosmic monsters so that his followers would be safeguarded from them forever.

In *Man of Steel*, the voluntary sacrifice of Superman to the monster Zod could not be more transparent. Standing in the middle of a desert with the U.S. Marines behind him, Clark offers himself to Zod with no struggle. Zod thinks he and his lieutenants have won. He is unaware that a trick is in play.

What Zod doesn't know is that Clark will not follow the evil plan of Zod and his lieutenants. Clark will not destroy life on earth to recreate Krypton, because while Clark has lived among humans, he has developed a moral self and a love for humanity that galvanizes him. Clark will choose to save humanity, even if it costs him his own life.

Zod also doesn't know that Clark is now twice as powerful as all other Kryptonians, including Zod and his militia. Clark's body contains the Codex, the entire genetic pool of Krypton, but this alien DNA also has been exposed to the human environment for thirty years, which has transformed it into something new and formidable.

So, in scene after scene, Superman takes on Zod and his militia, and one by one they are eliminated. In the last of these action sequences, Superman has Zod in a deadlock. When Zod decides to use his laser eyes to randomly kill humans around him, Superman takes Zod's neck and snaps it. With this unexpected sleight of hand, this final trick, Superman saves the world.



CHAPTER FOUR

Paul and Gnostic Dogma

Bethany Sloane

Bethany Sloane is lying at home in bed, fitfully staring at the ceiling. She hears a creaking floorboard and grabs a baseball bat from under her pillow. She peers into the darkness, fanning her bat. Without warning, a violent explosion of flame bursts forth at the foot of her bed. Alarmed, she stares into the flames, trying to make out what is going on. She is frightened by the outlines of a humanlike figure immersed in the flame ([figure 4.1](#)).

A booming voice erupts from the flames: “Behold the Metatron, herald of the Almighty and voice of the One True God!”

Bethany does the only thing she can think of at that moment: she jumps out of bed and returns momentarily with a fire extinguisher. She blasts the flames and figure with white retardant, wielding the nozzle like a pro. Metatron sputters and coughs as he drops to the floor and the flames disperse.

Bethany yells out, stunned by his presence, “Who the fuck are you and what the fuck are you doing in my room?!”

Metatron tells her that he is God’s voice, an angel of the highest order. He unfurls his wings as proof. In disbelief, Bethany wants to know why God can’t speak for himself. Metatron explains, “Human beings have neither the aural nor the psychological capacity to withstand the awesome power of God’s true voice. Were you to hear it, your mind would cave in and your heart would explode within your chest. We went through five Adams before we figured that one out.”



Figure 4.1 Bethany Sloane (Linda Fiorentino) meets Metatron in *Dogma* (1999).

In the 1999 comic farce *Dogma*, screenwriter and film director Kevin Smith sets before us the iconic tale of a nonbeliever confronted with an experience so overwhelming that life is never the same afterward. We travel along with Bethany, the woman who has declared both her faith and God dead, as she takes up Metatron's charge, which involves her in a holy crusade. She is to travel to New Jersey and stop a couple of renegade angels from entering a church.

Metatron explains to Bethany that the renegades, Loki and Bartleby, have been banished from heaven for all eternity. Loki, the angel of death, meted out God's judgment and wrath in the old days, when God was vengeful, but after setting the tenth plague on the Egyptians, Loki quit his job. He was convinced by his Watcher friend, Bartleby, that killing in God's name was a bum deal.

After suffering thousands of years of exile in Wisconsin as God's punishment, Bartleby thinks that he has found a loophole in Catholic dogma that will force God to take them back into heaven. If they cut off their wings and enter the church as mortals, God will have to forgive their sins and take them back. However, there are consequences to their actions. When God admits them to heaven, God will be proven wrong and creation will cease to exist. Bethany's mission is to foil their plan and prevent this.

The next day, reluctantly, Bethany packs up and heads for New Jersey, feeling that her life has been violated, that it is no longer completely hers. Yesterday she didn't believe God even existed. She was a rogue Catholic working in an abortion clinic. Today she finds herself the leader of a holy

crusade to save all of humanity. It is a job she is called to do but didn't ask for. No matter how much she wants to, she can't quit. She has been chosen.

Bethany is like the great apostle of the Christian church, Paul, who never knew the man Jesus but whose sudden mystical vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus made his previous religious life “shit,” as he puts it in vulgar Greek (Philippians 3:8). No matter the consequences, there was no turning back for him. He experienced God in a way previously unimaginable to him. As a result, his religious affiliation shifted from zealous Jew to newbie Christian, overnight.

What is most striking, however, is Paul's swing in spirituality, which, as we will see in this chapter, had a remarkably Gnostic flair, something that has been vehemently denied by modern church historians. Yet we know that Paul's writings were used as foundational scripture both for second-century Gnostic Christian groups and for Apostolic Catholic groups. His letters (most likely written in this order) are 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians (ca. 40 CE); Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon (ca. 50); 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians (ca. 51); and Romans (ca. 52). The authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Colossians is contested by scholars, but I remain unconvinced that these letters come from anyone other than Paul (see Campbell 2014).

Gnostic and Catholic groups developed their own religious sensibilities out of their independent study of Paul's letters. Both owned Paul as their apostle. Modern church historians have argued that this is the case because the Apostolic Catholics read Paul correctly, whereas the Gnostics imposed their own views on Paul and misread him. This is a convenient argument that serves only to legitimate Apostolic Catholicism as heir to Paul. It does not recognize that both parties, Catholic and Gnostic, were reading Paul in directions that supported their own faith while ignoring elements of Paul that might contradict that faith. They were able to do this because his letters actually contain tendencies that lean both ways. There are both Catholic and Gnostic seeds in Paul's writings. Since this is the case, we need to understand what Paul's letters tell us about the emergence of Gnostic spirituality within the Christian communities that Paul sponsored in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome.

Emergent Christianity

Gnostic spirituality knows no bounds when it comes to the religious interface. When Gnostic spirituality met Greek philosophy within the Egyptian religious buffer at the beginning of the Common Era, Hermetism erupted. When Gnostic spirituality merged with the Jewish Bible, Sethianism came online. With Simon Magus, Gnostic spirituality blended with a local Samaritan cult, and the universalist Gnostic movement known as Simonianism was born. What happened when Gnostic spirituality interfaced with nascent Christianity?

The story of nascent Christianity is not as straightforward as the book of Acts in the New Testament would have us think. The other New Testament literature, including Paul's letters, tells us that the early development of Christianity was not a romantic tale of the Apostolic Catholic church with a single message about Jesus that was altered disingenuously over time by Gnostics and other heretics. Rather, at its core, emergent Christianity was diverse, a kaleidoscopic new religion with competing expressions—the Apostolic Catholic was only one of them.

How could this be? Imagine what it must have been like after Jesus's death for the people whose lives he had touched. Different people may have been inspired by their own personal memories of Jesus to evangelize and share his teachings. These evangelists may have agreed with other evangelists, or not. Many would have been lone wolves, doing their own thing, with no formal ties to anyone but themselves and their God.

We don't have much information about these early days, aside from a few references like the one in the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus' disciples encounter a man they don't know, who is casting out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus tells his disciples to leave the man alone, that he is filled with power and should not be stopped. He reminds his disciples that whoever is able to do such things in his name is a friend, not a foe (Mark 9:38–41).

The other reference we have to this type of informal enthusiastic Jesus devotion is found in the book of Acts, where we are told about Apollos, a native Jew from Alexandria, who brought his version of Jesus devotion to Ephesus. His was a scripture-based program that focused on messianic prophecies, which Apollos thought applied to Jesus. His main targets were other Jews, whom he hoped to convince of Jesus' messiahship. Like John the Baptist, Apollos taught a baptism for the cleansing of sin only, knowing nothing about baptism for the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 18:24–19:7). This form of spiritless baptism also is known and criticized by the authors of

the New Testament Gospels, so it must have been prominent in nascent Christian circles outside their purview (Mark 1:8; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16).

While in the synagogue in Ephesus, Apollos runs into a Christian missionary couple, Priscilla and Aquila from Rome. They listen to his impressive speech, but afterward they take him aside and instruct him on their point of view, because they don't agree with everything he has to say (Acts 18:26). After this, he goes on his way to Corinth, where his message fosters animosity and division in the Corinthian community, which had been established originally by Paul under a different set of principles (Acts 18:27–19:1; 1 Corinthians 1:11–17, 3:5–9). It must have been a very confusing time for converts who weren't sure whose Christian message they should follow.

Paul's version of Christianity was only one of many, and by and large it was reactionary. He was reacting to an earlier influential church, formed after Jesus' execution in Jerusalem, under the leadership of James, Jesus' brother. So, to understand Paul and the revolutionary Gnostic spirit he instilled in his own churches, we must first understand to whom and to what Paul was reacting. In this case, he was reacting to James, Jesus' brother, and his faithfulness to the Jewish way of life. James did not identify himself as a Christian but as a Jew devoted to his brother Jesus as the Messiah.

Jews Devoted to Jesus

Although nascent Christianity was marked by freelance, self-appointed missionaries, it also is true that, very early on, the disciples of Jesus, under the leadership of Jesus' brother James, got organized and formed their own movement in Jerusalem. The early literature has left us with abundant evidence about what these people were doing and thinking. Their movement was called the Wayfarers (literally “people of the way”). It was a Jewish movement devoted to living according to the Jewish law or Torah, as interpreted by Jesus. It boasted authority based on the fact that its founding members had been Jesus' family and disciples, people who knew him personally and intimately. This personal connection with Jesus meant a great deal to potential converts, bolstering the validity and legitimacy of the movement in their eyes.

The Wayfarers believed that there were two roads one could walk: the narrow way of righteousness, which led to life, or the broad way of sinfulness, which led to death. Jesus' teachings outlined for them the way to

life that God had intended for his people when he gave them the law of Moses. To them, Jesus was the long-awaited Moses-like prophet, the Messiah who had come to restore God's law to its original intent and to prepare them for the Last Judgment, which they believed was looming on the horizon (Acts 3:19–26, 7:51–53; compare with Mark 6:4, 15, 8:28; Luke 4:24, 7:16, 9:8, 13:33, 24:19; John 1:19–27, 4:19, 25, 6:14; Hebrews 3:5).

Their point of view is best preserved in the New Testament letter of James (ca. 60 CE) and in an early Christian handbook called the *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (ca. 90 CE). But it is also remembered in some of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (ca. 80 CE), where Jesus proclaims that he has not come to abolish the Jewish law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17–18).

The Wayfarers saw Jesus as one of God's holy men, a righteous Jewish prophet and martyr who had been unfairly executed by unbelievers (Acts 2:24, 32, 3:15, 4:2, 10, 33, and elsewhere), a prophet in a long line of Jewish prophets who had been rejected by the unrighteous (Acts 2:23, 3:17–18, 7:51–53; Mark 6:4–5; Matthew 13:57–58; Luke 4:23–24; John 4:44). His cruel death, however, was not for naught. It was part of God's plan of salvation. Jesus' death served as expiation for the sins of Israel.

This was not an unusual claim, because the Jews at that time believed that the deaths of those martyred for the Jewish cause could atone for Israel's sins (compare Acts 5:31 with 2 Maccabees 6:12–16, 7:38; 4 Maccabees 6:27–29, 17:20–22). Jesus' reward, as was also the case with Jewish martyrs generally, was his personal resurrection from the dead and exaltation to stand near God's throne as one of God's holy host. He was believed to have become a powerful angelic intercessor, whose sacred name had the power to heal, protect, and forgive.

The Jerusalem movement served as mission headquarters for teams of missionaries who hit the road and preached their message in synagogues and marketplaces. Their message was simple: "Repent! The kingdom of God is near!" (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). By this they meant, "Time is short. God is coming. Reorient your lives to the teaching of Jesus the Messiah so that you will be prepared for his Judgment and for admittance to paradise when the world ends." With a sense of urgency, they baptized initiates in river water, which they believed cleansed the initiate of all past sin.

To distinguish themselves from the followers of John the Baptist, who were competing with them for converts, the Jerusalem missionaries began to

declare that their baptism was better than John's, because it not only forgave sin but also actually conveyed to initiates the Holy Spirit, a sort of guardian angel that took up residence in their souls. Their baptism imitated Jesus' own, when the Spirit descended into him and he became a child of God. The missionaries promised initiates that the Holy Spirit would assist them as they tried to live sin-free lives in obedience to YHWH by putting into practice the Messiah's interpretation of the Torah.

The devotees of Jesus who remained in Jerusalem went to the Temple every day, praying for the salvation of Israel and tending to the needs of the people who lived in their commune. In this mode of charity and poverty, they awaited the return of Jesus the Messiah from heaven, when they believed that they would be transported to an eschatological paradise as resurrected angelic beings like him.

Gentiles Convert

The Wayfarers had some success convincing fellow Jews of Jesus' messiahship, although they gained the most ground among the non-Jewish, Gentile God fearers who frequented the synagogues. These were Greeks and Romans who admired the monotheistic and ethical teachings of the Jews and so hung out in the synagogues and tried their best to live like Jews, without being circumcised. They were obligated to observe the Noachide laws, the seven laws that the Jews believed were given to Noah before circumcision was demanded of Abraham and his descendants. These laws are based on their reading of Genesis 9:9, among other scriptures. They were prohibited from worshipping idols, committing murder or theft, engaging in sexual immorality, blaspheming, and eating bloody meat.

The God fearers were attracted to the Wayfarers because the community used baptism, not circumcision, as its initiation ceremony. The God fearers were considered full converts to the Jesus movement without having to undergo circumcision. So many God fearers joined the commune in the first few years after Jesus' death that they began to have problems feeding everyone. To oversee the distribution of food and supplies to the non-Jewish members, who did not have the same dietary restrictions as the Jewish devotees, the disciples established a second leadership team made up of non-Jewish converts who could handle the Gentile foodstuffs (Acts 6:1–6).

Although the Wayfarers saw themselves as a single community, it is clear that, within this single community, two separate communities were forming,

one Jewish and one God fearing. The God fearing members, who were not obliged to be circumcised or to observe the Jewish law with its dietary restrictions, began to question the effectiveness of the Jewish law and to devalue it as the bequest of angels rather than of God himself. They began to preach in the local synagogues that Jesus had come not just to interpret the law of Moses properly but also to alter the Mosaic customs. It is with this group that Paul will initially align himself, once he enters the Christian story. But Stephen, the first Christian martyr, comes before him.

An Ineffective Law

The message about Jesus altering the Mosaic customs caused great anxiety among the Jewish population in Jerusalem, who were sensitive about the constant Roman threat to their religious identity and boundaries. The Roman colonizers had subjected them to the empire's harsh economic and political domination while also humiliating them as a religious people, with the pagan idols and images that they paraded through the streets and used to adorn newly constructed buildings. A rebellion for Jewish independence was brewing in Jerusalem, and identity markers such as circumcision became all the more important to the freedom fighters.

According to Luke's account in Acts, things came to a head when one of the God fearing Jesus devotees, Stephen, got embroiled in a debate in the synagogue of the Freedmen about the Jewish law. Stephen told the Jews present that Jesus of Nazareth had come to destroy the Temple and to change the Mosaic law. Those who heard him accused him of speaking blasphemy against Moses and dragged him before the Jewish council.

When he is asked by the high priest about the truth of these allegations, Stephen denies nothing. Instead, he tries to defend himself by arguing that God gave Abraham and his descendants the promise of the land of Israel before he ever involved Abraham in a covenant of circumcision (Acts 7:2–8). He went on to explain that the Mosaic law was given to their ancestors by angels, not by God himself. Furthermore, the bequest had been ineffective; their ancestors were never able to follow it.

If this were not enough, Stephen inflames the situation further by saying that the Jews in Jerusalem have continued to make a mess of things, having gone as far as killing the Messiah, Jesus. In Stephen's opinion, they had become murderers of a holy man and traitors to God. In anger, he calls his accusers stubborn men with uncircumcised hearts (7:51–53).

That was it. Stephen was dragged out into the streets and stoned to death by the angry mob (7:54–60). The high priest issued orders to find out who belonged to this blasphemous cult, to enter their homes by force, and to incarcerate them until they could be judged before the Sanhedrin on the charge of blasphemy. To save themselves, the non-Jewish Wayfarers fled into the countryside of Judaea and Samaria, while the Jewish adherents and the disciples hunkered down in Jerusalem to wait it out.

This is when Paul comes on the scene ([figure 4.2](#)). Paul never knew Jesus. But as a fanatic Jew, he becomes involved in the house arrests of Jesus' devotees. The author of Acts says that Paul, with the blessing of the high priest, heads out on the road to the synagogue in Damascus, where he hopes to locate and arrest the devotees of Jesus who had fled there (8:1–3, 9:1–2). Although this is reported in Acts in embellished detail, it is not complete fiction. Paul tells us in his own letters that he was once a fanatic Jew. He admits with shame that he violently pursued members of the Jerusalem church in order to destroy it (Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 15:9).

Something happened on the road to Damascus, something that caused Paul's life to be turned upside down and inside out. In the blink of an eye, his entire identity and life as a Jew was altered in ways so drastic that for the rest of his career he tries to explain and defend the change, in letter after letter written to his Christian foster children. Yes, the fanatic Jewish enemy of the first Christians becomes the father of a form of Christianity that profoundly transgressed his Jewish heritage and his commitment to the traditional covenant spirituality of his ancestors. The new religion that was built out of Paul's profound ecstatic experience and his reevaluation of his Jewish heritage was a religion that focused on the worship of YHWH by non-Jews. At its heart beat a spirituality that is Gnostic.



Figure 4.2 Seventh-century mosaic of Paul, in the Basilica of Saint Praxedes, Rome. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

YHWH as Jesus

There are many versions of what happened on the road to Damascus. Luke provides us with three varying accounts in the book of Acts, in which Paul experiences a light so intense that he is physically blinded and knocked to the ground. When Paul calls out, “Who are you?” he hears the response, “I am Jesus, the one you have been persecuting” (Acts 9:1–5, 22:4–16, 26:9–18).

Here, Paul's encounter is presented as a religious revelation much like Bethany Sloane's vision of Metatron in the film *Dogma*. But in Paul's case, it is not Metatron who appears as YHWH's manifestation, but Jesus (see Segal 1992, 34–71). According to Jewish biblical stories, when YHWH appeared to prophets like Ezekiel, Isaiah, or Daniel, he manifested himself as a luminous man or a great angel. What is so remarkable about Paul's encounter with YHWH's luminous manifestation on the road is that the manifestation is not identified with a great angel from Paul's ancestral past, like Michael or Gabriel, but with Jesus the Messiah.

On the road to Damascus, Paul comes face-to-face with a manifestation of the Lord YHWH that does not jibe with his Jewish past. Jesus? As YHWH? This was out of the blue. And it was utterly devastating to Paul, the self-described Jewish fanatic.

Paul himself describes the experience as “a revelation of Jesus Christ,” when he received a “blessed message” that changed the course of his life as a Jew. He says that the message he received did not come from a human source but from a direct experience of a God he never knew. What he learned from this experience forms the basis of Paul's new understanding of God and of his mission to tell non-Jews about him (Galatians 1:11–12).

The mystical event was so acute—simultaneously disorienting and reorienting—that he saw it as his own death when he was “crucified with Christ” in order to “live to God” (2:19–20). He sees his life before the experience as a “former” or earlier life in Judaism. He describes his previous self as a Jewish fanatic who was overly zealous about the religious traditions of his ancestors, more advanced in his religious education than his peers (1:13–14). He says that he was circumcised on the eighth day, according to the law, that he was born into the tribe of Benjamin, and that he considered himself an Israelite and a descendant of Abraham. He had been trained as a Pharisee to live his life according to the law. He was so zealous in this regard that no blame could be found with him (Philippians 3:5–6; 2 Corinthians 11:22).

The encounter with Jesus the Messiah as YHWH's glory, however, was so riveting that Paul said it surpassed everything he had ever experienced or ever identified with. It was an extra-ordinary Gnostic incident, which he describes as a transcendent moment when he *knew* the Messiah Jesus as his lord (Philippians 3:8).

This direct knowledge of God was so potent for Paul that he came to regard everything about his former life in Judaism as *skubalon*. When the traditional English translations of Philippians 3:8 render this word as “rubbish,” they hide the true impact of Paul’s remark. *Skubalon* is the Greek word for “crap” or “shit.” Paul’s use of the word in this letter is intentionally offensive and vulgar. It is a transgressive move for Paul when he pitches his previous life as a Jew as nothing more to him now than shit (see Galatians 2:18).

Paul considered himself a changed man, not just by a matter of degree but entirely. Communicating the gnosis (knowledge) of Jesus the Messiah as YHWH’s manifestation becomes his life’s passion and obsession. His life as a Pharisee and constable for the high priest collapses, and in its place he hits the road as an extreme Jesus devotee, working as both a preacher and a tent maker. Paul was convinced that he had been chosen by God, even before he was born, to receive the revelation of Jesus the Messiah and to proclaim this knowledge to the non-Jews (Galatians 1:15–16).

According to Luke’s account of Paul’s revelation in Acts, the vision was so blinding that Paul had to be led by the hand the rest of the way to Damascus. For three days he could not see or eat or drink. He eventually ended up in the company of a disciple of the Wayfarers hiding in Damascus, Ananias, who cured his blindness, baptized him in Jesus’ name, and fed him (Acts 9:17–19).

Paul is instructed about nascent Christianity from the point of view of the non-Jewish faction, which was questioning the validity and necessity of the Jewish law. He also is taught an early creed, “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

Paul tags along with the Jesus devotees to the synagogues, for worship, but then makes a point of talking to those attending the synagogue about Jesus the Messiah. Paul was publicly vocal about his convictions. So transgressive was his message that he soon found himself in conflict with the Jewish community in Damascus—so much conflict that he had to be sneaked out of the city, lowered in a basket through a hole in the city wall to avoid arrest and execution (Acts 9:19–25; 2 Corinthians 11:32–33).

Afterward, Paul spends years wandering south to the Arabian Peninsula, preaching as he goes (Galatians 1:17). We don’t know for certain why he chose Arabia, but it is the desert area south of the land of Israel where Mount

Sinai is located (4:25). Perhaps Paul felt compelled to visit the mountain upon which YHWH revealed himself to Moses and Elijah in his glorious form, seeking similar visions for himself (Exodus 3:1–6, 34:27–29; 1 Kings 19:1–18). Paul claims to have received multiple visions and revelations during his travels, including a revelation that involved a celestial tour to paradise, where he learned things that are impossible to communicate humanly (2 Corinthians 12:1–4). Throughout his letters, he claims that his gospel was not taught to him by human authorities but was conveyed to him in a revelation of Jesus the Messiah (Galatians 1:1, 11–12).

It's a Mystery

It is the experience of God in the form of Jesus Christ that Paul tries to communicate to converts throughout the rest of his life. At a loss for words to describe the overwhelming experience, Paul relies on Gnostic language. He says the experience is a revelation of a mystery that has been hidden since the beginning of time (Romans 16:25–27; 1 Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 3:5, 8–10). It is something that can't be rationally explained. Nor is it known to the archons (rulers) who reign over this aeon (age) (1 Corinthians 2:6–7). It is about God's wisdom and power, which is foolishness to human logic (1:20–25; 2:1). It is about gnosis, the direct apprehension of God in the form of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 1:17–19, 3:18–19; Colossians 1:9–10, 2:2). It is to know the love of Christ, the fullness of God, that surpasses all (Ephesians 3:18–19).

According to Paul, this Gnostic experience is not without consequence. It directly conveys a pneumatic (spiritual) gift that unites the human spirit with the spirit of Christ and transfigures the human mind (Romans 1:13; 1 Corinthians 1:5, 6:17, 7:7, 40, 9:11; 2 Corinthians 13:5). Paul promises to those he converts that he will reveal “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived” (1 Corinthians 2:9). He considers himself a steward of these mysteries (1 Corinthians 4:1; 2 Corinthians 11:5–6; Colossians 1:25–26).

What is the mystery that has been hidden? The very identity of God himself. Although the pagans or Gentiles recognized the power of God and divinity in nature, according to Paul, they went about worshipping it all wrong. Instead of worshipping the immortal God, they created idols and worshipped those. Paul says that the Gentiles did not recognize that, when they did this, they were really worshipping demons, a practice that enslaved

them to the elemental forces of the universe (1 Corinthians 10:20–22). So their minds were darkened as they became foolish and futile in their thinking. Since they did not acknowledge the real God, they fell under the power of wickedness and evil (Romans 1:19–29).

Following Paul's logic, the Jews fared no better on this account; they also had become idol worshippers, when they built the golden calf in the wilderness. Although they were chosen by God and had real opportunities to know him over the years, they too (with the exception of a few Jews) failed to understand him and did not seek him out (Romans 11:7). Because of their ignorance, they turned away from God and became idol worshippers in the desert (1 Corinthians 10:5). Because they did not know God, they became sinners caught in the confines of a law they could not keep (Romans 3:10–12, 19–20, 5:20, 11:1).

To illustrate his point, Paul refers to the story of Moses, who experienced a luminous transfiguration on Mount Sinai and then donned a veil to cover the brilliance of his face. Paul says that the veil is still there, preventing the Jews from seeing the authentic, glorious manifestation of God in Jesus the Messiah. This veil remains, covering their minds, keeping their hearts hardened to the true God (2 Corinthians 3:7–18).

Yet, while they had been disobedient and contrarian throughout their past, Paul was convinced that God never gave up on them or rejected them (Romans 11:1–2). He hopes that they will come around to the truth one day, even if their motivation must be jealousy that God shines his favor on the non-Jews (Romans 11:11–15).

Paul remarks that there are many so-called gods represented by idols. But these aren't the One God. For Paul and his converts there is only one God, the Father, and his manifestation as Lord Jesus the Messiah, from whom all things come and for whom we exist (1 Corinthians 8:4–6). Paul is quite positive that YHWH and his manifestation as Jesus is the One God of both the Jews and the Gentiles, even though both groups have failed to know him or worship him (Romans 3:29–30).

The human failure to seek and know the One God resulted in human disobedience, sin, and death, beginning with Adam and extending through the ages. It resulted in human bondage to the forces of wickedness, forces that are fueled and empowered by human disobedience in the first place. These elemental powers thrive on human ignorance and disobedience, and they have gained control of the universe because of this. Creation itself has been

subjected to their will and their futility. Humans are bound into their world of decay and death (8:20–22).

The Universal One God

Paul does not consider the Father of Jesus to be the tribal God YHWH but the One God YHWH who transcends the tribe (Romans 15:7–13). He is the universal Creator God who has been misunderstood by his fellow Jews in tribal and covenantal terms.

Paul uses the story of YHWH's interaction with Abraham, the celebrated patriarch of the Jews, to make the transgressive argument that, all along, God had in mind the non-Jews as recipients of his grace. Paul points out that God gave his promise of righteousness to Abraham and his descendants long before Moses and the covenant of the Jewish law came on the scene. God's promise of blessing was to all those who would be faithful to him. It was not limited to those who observed the Mosaic law and belonged to this covenant (4:2–16). Everyone who belongs to Christ is a descendant of Abraham—rightful heirs to God's promise, predestined children of glory, chosen by grace (Galatians 3:29; Ephesians 1:3–6, 3:6; Romans 8:28–30, 33, 11:5–6; compare with 2 Corinthians 1:12; Colossians 3:12).

Although the One God is righteous, according to Paul, his main characteristics are love and grace (Romans 4:16; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 3:4; Colossians 1:6). His love comes to live in humans when the Holy Spirit is received at baptism (Romans 5:5). Baptism is the initiatory mechanism that unites the human spirit with the Christ Spirit so that a person may be transfigured and walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:1–5, 8:9–11). This is the moment when the initiate's status changes, when he or she becomes a legal child of God with all the rights of inheritance, instead of a slave to the elemental powers of the universe and the Jewish law. Intimately the initiate can call upon God as Abba (Daddy) (Romans 8:14–17; Galatians 4:6–7). This new intimate, loving relationship with the One God convinces Paul that none of the elemental forces ruling the universe can interfere or remove the initiate from God's love as it is manifested in Jesus the Messiah—not death, not life, not angels, not archons, not things present, not things to come, not powers, not the height, not the depth, not anything in creation (Romans 8:38–39).

Paul does not view YHWH as a tribal God but as the universal One God who was unsought and unknown until the advent of Jesus the Messiah. Paul's

God lives in a distant heaven. He is the Father of Jesus, who in turn came to earth in his Father's stead, as his Father's manifestation (Philippians 2:6–11; Colossians 4:15–16). Paul's God is elevated above creation and all the powers and forces that have come to dominate the cosmos and enslave the human spirit. He is the God that makes no distinction between Jew and non-Jew.

Paul writes, "The same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him." Paul believed that everybody who called upon the name of Jesus the Messiah would be liberated from bondage to the forces of wickedness (Romans 10:12–14). He is the God who said in the opening of Genesis, "Let light shine out darkness." He shines in human hearts in order to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah (2 Corinthians 4:6). God's will is that the dividing wall between Jews and non-Jews break down, the law end, and a single, unified humanity emerge as a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:14–22).

Yet ignorance remains the big problem, in Paul's mind. How can unbelievers call on the God they do not know? How can they believe in the God they have never heard? How are they supposed to hear about God when there has been no one to proclaim him (Romans 10:12–14)?

Paul thinks that knowledge of God comes through revelations and epiphanies like those that he had. His job is to be an apostle of the unknown God, to go public to the non-Jews with "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" in order to fill converts with goodness and gnosis (Romans 11:33, 15:14; Ephesians 3:3).

The New Testament preserves a story about Paul addressing an Athenian audience (Acts 17:22–31). Paul's speech is usually dismissed by church historians as a figment of Luke's imagination. But I question whether we should be so quick to throw away Paul's speech as a mere invention of the author of Acts. It does in fact encapsulate Paul's entire message about the universal One God.

He begins the speech by commending the Athenians on their religiosity. He notes that they have temples and shrines to every god imaginable, and to be on the safe side, even an altar devoted "to an unknown god." Paul announces that he has come to proclaim to them the unknown God whom they are worshipping. He tells them that the unknown God is the biblical Creator God YHWH, who is lord of heaven and earth. This God is not a tribal god or an

idol who lives in a shrine or requires the service of humans. Rather, this God gives life breath to all and needs nothing from us.

In the Athenian address, Paul claims that the unknown God made all nations from a single ancestor, with the hope that his international offspring would search for and find him. Yet, Paul notes, even though we “live and move and have our being” in him, God’s offspring remain ignorant of him, thinking that his deity could be captured in idols. The time of ignorance is over, Paul says. Now God has been revealed and commands all people everywhere to repent and prepare for the Judgment and the Resurrection.

We may never know whether this is a real speech of Paul’s or Luke’s invention. But it certainly reflects Paul’s understanding of the unknown God and of that God’s relationship to all of humanity.

Mystical Baptism

Paul offers those he converts baptism in Jesus’ name. This is the ritual that Paul believed conveys the Gnostic experience of Jesus the Messiah as God’s form and figure. Paul thought that, in the baptismal waters, the initiate encountered directly and immediately Christ as God’s manifestation. This encounter transfers Christ’s *pneuma* and *nous*, his spirit and mind, to the person. Paul admonishes the converts, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

How could they have the same mind as Christ? The ancient people believed that visions of the divine were physically imprinted on the soul, like a seal in hot wax. Paul believed no different. He claims that their baptismal encounter with Christ literally imprinted them. As a result, Paul said, Christ’s Spirit united with converts’ human spirits, enabling them to grow in strength, to take up arms, to confront their demons and conquer them (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Ephesians 3:16–17, 6:10–12). The convert’s capacity for spiritual transformation and glory is ignited by the experience. Paul tells them that because their spirits have been united with Christ’s, they have joined Christ in his death. They are dead to their old lives. They also have joined Christ in his resurrection. They are alive to a new life as spiritually engaged creatures (Romans 6:3–11; 2 Corinthians 4:16, 5:17; Philippians 3:18–21; Colossians 3:7–10). They have come to know Christ and the power of his resurrection (Philippians 3:10).

In Paul’s opinion, this spiritual metamorphosis occurs progressively over the lifetime of the initiate, as the initiate’s unity with Christ’s Spirit works to

create a synergy between the human spirit and God's Spirit (Ephesians 3:20, 4:13, 22). Paul believes that the human spirit must be filled with God's Spirit in order for the person to have gnosis, knowledge of God (1 Corinthians 2:11–12, 3:16). He calls this instruction pneumatic (spiritual) and says that it is only given to pneumatics, who are converts filled with the Spirit at baptism. People who have not been initiated are called by Paul "psychics," people who have only their own psyches or souls but not yet God's Spirit. Because God's Spirit has not united with their own spirits, these people are unable to receive gnosis (1 Corinthians 2:13, 15:34).

The process of induction is gradual training, beginning with the public teaching about Jesus the crucified Messiah, baptism, and the gift of the Spirit. It concludes when the initiate's newly created spiritual body is resurrected at the close of time (1 Corinthians 15:37–51; 2 Corinthians 5:1–5). At first, initiates are considered babies, who must be given milk to drink before they can be given meat (1 Corinthians 3:1). Paul likens his own Gnostic experience to peering into a dim mirror, which can only convey gnosis in part. It is not until the end of the process that the convert will be able to see God face-to-face, to fully know God and to be fully known by God (1 Corinthians 13:12; compare with 2 Corinthians 1:13). Such fullness of the knowledge of God will come according to God's plan, when the end of time reveals the mystery of God's will, the ingathering of all things to himself (Ephesians 1:9–10).

All Things Are Lawful

Where does the Jewish law, the Torah, fit into all of this? Two thousand years ago, Paul recognized that God's law had never really been kept, because it was impossible to keep. And because the Bible prescribes the death penalty for anyone who breaks God's laws, Paul thought that this had resulted in the untenable situation in which all people stand condemned to death before God's throne.

In a grisly satire of this problem, Kevin Smith, in his film *Dogma*, plots out what it might look like today if the laws in the Bible and their death penalties actually were enforced. To stage this problem, Smith features an ongoing dialogue between the two rogue angels, Loki and his friend, the guardian angel Bartleby.

As the angel of death, Loki's job is to mete out God's punishments, to kill those who break God's commandments, as scripture demands. Loki is the one

who killed humankind in a flood that spared only the righteous Noah and his family. He rained down fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah and beset the Egyptians with plagues. Loki is the avenging angel, until Bartleby convinces him that killing people as a punishment for breaking God's laws might be cruel and unusual, that Loki should simply refuse to do his job. When Loki decides to stop the killings, God exiles him and Bartleby from heaven.

As the plot thickens and these rogue angels figure out how they might turn themselves into mortals and reenter heaven through a Catholic loophole, Loki decides that he had better take up his old job again. "What better way to show I've repented than by resuming the position I denied," Loki tells Bartleby.

As a demonstration of his repentance, Loki shows Bartleby an article about a company that he judges to be idolatrous, given that they are profiting off the image of Mooby the Golden Calf. So Loki drags Bartleby along to the company's corporate headquarters, where he faces off with Mooby's board of directors. He accuses each board member of a variety of sins, everything from adultery to profiteering.

During this tirade, all in the boardroom stand frozen in their sins, terrified by Loki. The angel of death is disgusted with them all. "What makes a human decent?" he asks them. "Fear . . . None of you has anything left to fear anymore. You rest comfortably in seats of inscrutable power, hiding behind your false idol, far from judgment, lives shrouded in secrecy even from one another. But not from God." His accusations end in a violent purge, his gun blazing, bullets ripping through all the men in the room.

What Smith sets before our eyes in cinematic gore is the gruesome reality that Paul pinned down two thousand years earlier, that the commandments God established in the Bible can never be kept by human beings, who are privately immoral. If the punishment for breaking God's commandments were actually enforced, practically everyone would be found guilty and executed. Everyone would be a hypocrite and charlatan facing God's wrath.

Paul's resolution for this impossible situation in which all stand condemned begins with his understanding of the Damascus experience. Paul's personal encounter with God on the road to Damascus, a revelation of Jesus the Messiah, was an experience of God in a form and figure that shocked Paul. YHWH manifest is Jesus the Messiah! This was something Paul never imagined possible.

After getting over the initial shock, Paul surmised that his ancestors must not have really known YHWH. YHWH wasn't the God of the Jews and the giver of the laws of Moses but the universal One God hidden in a distant heaven, largely unknown to both Gentiles and Jews until the advent of Jesus. This God, who wanted to be sought out and known, must have been concealed from humans because we were ensnared by fallen angels, tricked into worshipping them through idols (Colossians 2:18).

So although YHWH is far removed from earth, living in a distant heaven, demonic powers, including Death, rule the earth and its atmosphere. These are fallen angels who have taken control of the world and its inhabitants. They were able to take control because humans allowed themselves to fall under their wicked influence and were duped by their deceit. They keep humans enslaved to them through the temptation to wickedness and sin (Ephesians 2:3).

In addition to archon, Paul uses many terms to refer to these mighty demons, including *exousia* (authority), *dynamis* (power), *cosmocrator* (world power), *pneumatika* (spiritual forces), and *stoicheia* (elemental forces) (1 Corinthians 2:8; Galatians 4:3, 9; Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 2:8, 20). These forces include Satan, the traditional devil, whom Paul mentions several times in his letters (1 Corinthians 5:5, 7:5; 2 Corinthians 2:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:18). He also names the demon Beliar (2 Corinthians 6:15).

Paul thinks that one authority rules over all the other demons, but it is unclear who this figure is. Paul calls him the "power of darkness" and believes that he has kept humans as slaves in his kingdom (Colossians 1:13). He mentions this figure again in 2 Corinthians, only here he calls him the "god of this aeon [age]." This is the god who Paul says "has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3–4).

Most modern commentators have identified this figure with Satan. But this identification is debatable, especially when we take into consideration the passage in Ephesians in which Paul refers to the "archon of the power of the air." In this passage, Paul identifies the power of the air with the spirit of wickedness that works in the hearts of disobedient people (Ephesians 2:1–2). If this figure is traditionally Satan, then who is Satan's liege, the archon who rules over him? Paul never tells us who or what he has in mind. His remarks in his letters do not help us fill in all the details, but it is clear that the demonic world Paul envisioned included many more figures than Satan,

and perhaps a separate world ruler who reigned over Satan and the other fallen angels.

This worldview becomes even more interesting when we factor in Paul's position on the Jewish law. In Galatians, Paul is very clear that the law was handed over to the Jews by angels through an intermediary who did not represent the One God. This is very obvious in the Greek of Galatians 3:19 but is obscured in English translations because the literal meaning of the Greek is not orthodox Paul by any stretch of the imagination. The Greek simply reads, "Then why the law? Because of sins it was added." Paul goes on, "It was authorized by angels through an intermediary. The intermediary is not from the One. God is One" (Galatians 3:19–20; my translation).

Paul never identifies the intermediary. Did he have in mind Moses, who mediated the covenant according to Jewish scripture? Or one of the commissioning angels he mentions? Whatever the case, Paul does not view the law as something good that is ordained directly by YHWH (Romans 7:7–13). Instead, the law imprisoned sinners in a jail until Christ could come to free them (Galatians 2:23; Romans 3:19).

The law identifies sinful behaviors so that the transgressors, like the ancestors who worshipped the golden calf, can be identified and jailed (Romans 1:22–25, 10:5–8). Because the law is made up of codes of righteousness that are humanly impossible to keep, the law ends up binding the Jews under the jurisdiction of the wicked elemental forces that rule the universe (Galatians 4:3, 8–11; cf. Romans 8:2–3). Anyone bound to the law is bound to break the law and, as a sinner, is bound to the power of darkness and his demonic horde (Romans 3:9–18, 20, 8:2). So Paul writes that the law does not make the Jews righteous. Rather, the law condemns them and enslaves them to the forces of wickedness and death (Galatians 3:22; Romans 5:20–21; cf. Romans 4:15).

In Paul's opinion, this mess can only be resolved externally when the One God manifests himself as Jesus the Messiah. Paul understands God's manifestation to be his son, who is sent to earth to conquer the demonic rulers and rescue the sinners from perpetual servitude.

Paul identifies the crucifixion as the battle that defeated the archons and the other powers of darkness (1 Corinthians 1:17–18, 2:6–8). How did this work? Paul thinks that Jesus was a sacrificial substitute whose death set sinners free from the present evil aeon (Galatians 1:3–4). Jesus' unjustified death substituted for the death of all sinners, erasing the legal record that had

condemned the sinners and enslaved them to the powers of this age. It was set aside, nailed to the cross. This action disarmed the archons and authorities, taking away their power over sinners (Colossians 2:14–15).

Paul also uses the metaphor of ransom or purchase. He thinks that the death of Jesus the Messiah was the price necessary to buy sinners out of their slavery to the elemental forces and adopt them as legal children of God (Galatians 4:1–7; 1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23). Paul assures his converts that they have been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved son (Colossians 4:13).

Everything in Paul's message boils down to the overthrow of the rule of the wicked powers and authorities that had enslaved humans who were ignorant of the true One God. In Paul's mind, Jesus' resurrection is the evidence of their ultimate defeat. This is the moment when Jesus ascended above all the powers and authorities ruling the earth and put his enemies under his feet. Consequently, his body, as God's manifestation, now fills everything (Ephesians 1:20–23; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24–28). In light of Jesus' ultimate triumph, everyone who calls upon his name is liberated, freed from their servitude to the forces of darkness. What did this mean logistically? Christ brought about the end of the Jewish law. So Paul told his converts, "All things are lawful" (1 Corinthians 10:23).

No Longer Slaves

Throughout *Dogma*, Kevin Smith skewers modern Catholicism and what his characters call "organized religion" as a sham that ensures the destruction of our "inner being." There is no right religion because what we believe in is not as important as just believing. Rufus, the supposed thirteenth apostle of Jesus, puts it this way in the movie: "Humanity took a good idea and, like always, built a belief structure on it." This structure became foundational to wars and bigotry and led to the fracturing of religions.

"Organized religion," Loki explains to a nun he meets in an airport, "destroys who we are and who we can be by inhibiting our actions and decisions out of fear of an intangible parent-figure who shakes a finger at us from thousands of years ago and says, 'No, no!'" Smith feels that this servant mentality has to be shed because it mourns religion rather than celebrating faith. Religion should be about faith, about believing. It should not be about enslavement to dogma and beliefs imposed upon us by a parent or liege.

Smith has his finger on the pulse of modern spirituality, which struggles beneath the weight of an authoritarian biblical God, his laws, and his covenant, but this problem is very old. Paul's dissatisfaction with the covenant spirituality of his Jewish ancestors and the servant spirituality of the Greeks is palpable throughout his letters. Within a religious buffer where his ancestral traditions collided with his own mystical experiences and induction into the non-Jewish faction of nascent Christianity, Paul's spirituality takes on distinctly Gnostic characteristics. Paul's instructions transgress his own Jewish past as well as the teachings of the twelve disciples in Jerusalem, the apostles of the first church, who were demanding more and more obedience to the law.

In light of the insurgency of fanatic Jews in Jerusalem, the apostles were distressed by Paul's complete disregard for the law. So they thought it wise to visit Paul's churches in his absence and convince the new converts to undergo circumcision and learn to observe the law. They persuaded the congregants in Paul's churches that Paul was an interloper, a freelancer who was not commissioned by the Jerusalem church and who did not know what he was talking about because he had never known Jesus. The apostles were persuasive, and a large number of Paul's converts submitted to circumcision and began to conduct their lives according to the Jewish law.

When he got wind of the news, Paul was furious, quite certain that the apostles were nothing more than Satan's ministers dressed up as angels of light (2 Corinthians 11:14–15). They were “dogs” and “evil-workers” who preached a “different gospel” and offered a “different spirit” that reenslaved the converts to the elemental forces of the universe (Philippians 3:2; 2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6; 2:5; Colossians 2:20–21). He demands to know why, if with Christ they had died to the elemental spirits, his converts now wanted to submit to the regulations of the law, which consisted of human commands and teachings (Colossians 2:20–21). Why, when they had freedom in Jesus the Messiah, did they want to be enslaved again (Galatians 2:5)?

Paul reminds them that they are the descendants of Abraham and heirs to the promise of God. Yes, they had been minors enslaved to the cosmic forces before Jesus' advent. But at the designated time God sent his son, who was born of a woman, born under the law. His job was to liberate everyone from the law so that all believers could be granted legal status as God's children. And because we became God's children, Paul explains, God sent into our

hearts the spirit of his son. “So you are no longer a slave, but a child, and if a child, then also an heir, through God” (Galatians 4:1–7; my translation).

He asks the Galatians whether they received the Spirit by observing the laws or by believing the gospel that Paul disclosed. He wants to know whether they experienced it all for nothing (3:2–9). He tells them that before their conversion they did not know God but were enslaved to entities that are not really gods. Now that they had come to know the true God and to be known by him, how could they turn back to the elemental spirits and powers? How could they want to be enslaved by them again by observing the Jewish law (4:8–12)?

To illustrate his point, Paul uses the story of Sarah and Hagar, who each bore Abraham children, according to the Jewish scripture. In a very transgressive reading of the passage, Paul turns the tables. Traditionally, the Jews had claimed to be Sarah’s offspring, but Paul says otherwise. He argues that Hagar represents the Jews who are enslaved to the laws given at Sinai. The Jews who live in Jerusalem are Hagar’s children, not Sarah’s. Sarah, the free woman, is the mother of Christ’s followers, who are the heirs to God’s promise (4:23). He admonishes the Galatians to stand firm and to never again submit the yoke of slavery (5:1).

This antinomian message had its consequences, once it was mobilized within Paul’s communities of converts. The converts put into practice Paul’s message of gnosis and liberation. They had learned from Paul that they were Gnostics, that “all of us possess knowledge” (1 Corinthians 8:1–3). They believed Paul’s message that this knowledge released them from the cosmic gods and their laws, so that now “all things are lawful.” They were convinced that their liberation from the cosmic rulers had made them kings of their own, and that this was justification to disobey the civil authorities, who were nothing more than the earthly representatives of the archons (4:8). They partied with their friends at the temples, feasting on bloody meats sacrificed to idols. They were sexually promiscuous, indulging in the erotic pleasures of the body. Women were claiming equality with men, refusing to wear their veils during services. Arrogance erupted and inflamed discord and strife as some people were marked more spiritual than others.

Paul in Retreat

Paul was in trouble. He had no choice but to stand down from his message of gnosis and liberation, to retreat and regroup. He finds it necessary to qualify

his position that all things are lawful by adding “but not all things are helpful,” especially those things that result in sin, strife, or disobedience to civil authorities (1 Corinthians 8:5, 7–13, 10:23, 29). Paul is concerned that his converts no longer fear the civil authorities and that harm will come to them. So Paul curtails the converts’ liberation from law by emphasizing that spiritual liberation and social liberation are not the same thing. He tells his converts that their battle is not with human rulers but with cosmic rulers in the heavens (Ephesians 6:10–12). “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities,” Paul remarks, “for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Romans 13:1).

He continues by reframing his Gnostic and antinomian message within the parameters of a new form of indenture. To get control of the converts, Paul begins to talk about voluntary indenture to Christ. He uses himself as an example. Even though he is “free with respect to all,” Paul tells his converts that he has voluntarily made himself “a slave to all” and considers himself a “servant of Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:91, 9:19; Romans 1:1, 8:2; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23, 25–26). Even though his converts have been liberated from their indenture to the cosmic spirits, Paul wants his converts to consider themselves slaves to Jesus and to be beholden to the new law of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:5; Ephesians 6:6; Galatians 6:2; Romans 6:6, 22, 7:6).

Paul tries to rein in his converts by telling them that although they are freed from other gods and from the Jewish law, they have come under the obligation of the law of Christ, which is love. Paul claims that the law of Christ is not like the Jewish law but is a natural law that is scribed on the human heart by the living God, who writes with his Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:5). “For you were called to freedom,” Paul writes. “But do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:13–14).

Paul goes on to argue that it is love, not knowledge, that will bind the community together in perfect harmony (Colossians 3:14). So although all of us possess gnosis, Paul says, knowledge can cause arrogance. It is love that builds us up. Paul warns those who think they know: they do not yet know to the degree it is necessary to know. If someone loves, however, that person is known (1 Corinthians 8:1–3). Paul famously writes in this regard, “If I . . .

understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (13:2).

Paul finds it necessary to reframe his mission against the mission of Moses. He sets himself up as the mediator of a new covenant between the God YHWH and humans, whether Jew or Gentile, man or woman, slave or free. This covenant is not legalistic, written in stone to condemn and enslave. It is love, the liberating law of Christ, written on the human heart with the ink of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:3–6).

In his letters to his churches, Paul faces the sorry truth that Kevin Smith parodies in *Dogma*. Conventional religions are built on laws that inhibit and censor us because we fear an authoritarian God who is our liege. When people no longer fear this God, all hell breaks loose. As Loki says, there is not left a decent human among us. When the fear is gone, morality goes with it.

Smith deals with this dilemma by shifting the focus of religion from religious laws and dogma to faith, to the establishment of a personal relationship with God, which he thinks will morally build up the inner person. For Paul, the dilemma is handled by the Spirit of Christ, which comes to live within the Christian convert at baptism, when it writes upon the heart a liberating covenant of love. This covenant, Paul says, will maintain our moral compass.

Here Paul retreats into the language of servant spirituality and covenant spirituality in order to curb the negative consequences of the social mobilization of his antinomian Gnostic message. Gnostic spirituality is at the heart of Paul’s message, but in his letters it ultimately comes to us tempered and circumscribed by the very religious traditions of enslavement that Paul had worked so hard to reject. This is why Paul’s writings appeal to Gnostics and Apostolic Catholics alike; each sees their own views in his teachings.

The Surprising God

At the beginning of *Dogma*, Bethany declares that she has no faith left, that God is dead. This is not a declaration of atheism but a declaration of the inadequacies of modern Catholicism and its view of God, at least for Bethany. As her spiritual glass is refilled during the course of the movie, Bethany wants to know what God is really like. She surmises that she has been deceived by organized religion.

The revelation of the real God happens slowly for Bethany, presented in images that are transgressive and turn the familiar God unfamiliar. It is a Gnostic revelation comparable to Paul's experience, when he came face-to-face with the surprising God, Jesus, an image that transgressed his expectations. Metatron tells Bethany that God is lonely but has a great sense of humor. God likes Skee ball and from time to time comes down to earth, incognito, to play. Rufus, the apostle who falls out of the sky, insists that God is African American, because Jesus, he says, was black, not white.

The muse and stripper Serendipity swears that God is a woman who was written out of the Bible by sexist male authors. Not only did the male authors rewrite God as a male, but also all their writings are slanted and gender-biased. Serendipity notes, "A woman's responsible for the first sin, the fall of man, and the expulsion from Eden. A woman cuts Sampson's coif of power; a woman asks for the head of John the Baptist. Read that book again sometime. Women are painted as bigger antagonists than the Egyptians and Romans combined." The muse cannot understand why God as a woman is so surprising to Bethany, given that "women are the only gender that can create life, just like God created the universe." Bethany agrees that it makes sense, but she is not sure. All of this is pretty weird.



Figure 4.3 God (Alanis Morissette) standing at church entrance with Metatron (Alan Rickman) in *Dogma*.

So we all wait on pins and needles with the *Dogma* gang for the final scene, when the door of the church opens and God steps out with Metatron. What will God look like? Defying all odds, God looks like Alanis

Morissette, a beautiful white rock star with long brunette hair, carrying a small bunch of daisies ([figure 4.3](#)).

She is an image of contradictions, a surprising God beyond our belief. When she speaks, it is not in a woman's voice. Instead, she emits a noise so loud and cacophonous that Bartleby's head explodes. She kisses Jay, the foul-mouthed, sex-crazed prophet, leaving him speechless. She brings Bethany back to life with a wrist action that can only be compared to Mr. Miyagi teaching his student to wax a car. As Metatron says, "Wax on, wax off." God dances around, rolls on the ground, acting a little insane. We wonder, can this really be *it*?

When Bethany asks her *the* question of the movie—"Why are we here?"—God stares at her for a long time. Then she mimes the famous scene from the classic 1967 film *The Graduate*: "I have one word for you. Just one: plastics." God smiles and walks away with Metatron in tow. Then Metatron turns around toward Bethany and has the last word: "Didn't I tell you she was funny?"



CHAPTER FIVE

John and the Dark Cosmos

John Murdoch

John Murdoch lives in a dark and murky world, where midnight is also noon. He is unsure where he is, as are all the other residents of Dark City, an urban bricolage created from stolen human memories of cities spanning time and space. Whereas the other residents go about their business unaware of the strangeness of their world, Murdoch begins to suspect that all is not as it seems. Something ominous is going on and he is driven to discover the truth (figure 5.1).

He wonders how it can be night already, when it was never day. When he is caught and interrogated by Inspector Bumstead, Murdoch asks the inspector to confirm his doubts. “When was the last time you did anything during the day?” Murdoch asks. “Daylight. When was the last time you remember seeing it? I’m not talking about a distant, half-forgotten childhood memory. I mean like yesterday.” Pressing on, he says, “I don’t think the sun even exists in this place. ’Cause I’ve been up for hours and hours and hours, and night never ends.”

In each advancing scene of Alex Proyas’s 1998 film *Dark City*, Murdoch hides in shadowy rooms and races down dark streets, pursued by police and bald, ashen men clad in long, dark robes, the Strangers. The Strangers are powerful beings, aliens from another world who have psychokinetic powers. They have mastered the ultimate technology: they have the ability to alter physical reality by will alone, a technology they call “tuning.” They can shift things around and create new realities from the old with their minds.



Figure 5.1 John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) suspects that all is not well in *Dark City* (1998).

The Strangers are chasing Murdoch because they realize that Murdoch is different from the other residents of Dark City. He has powers that other humans do not have, powers that enable him to resist the Strangers and oppose them. With his mind, he too can shift objects, transform space, move through walls, and fly through the air. He can make things happen by will alone. Like the Strangers, he can tune.

Also like the Strangers, he doesn't sleep. When the clock strikes twelve and all of the other residents of Dark City drift into unconsciousness, John stays awake. Disturbed and determined, he runs up and down the streets and alleys, kicking cars, shaking people, and yelling, "Wake up! Wake up!"

The gray, gothic world of the cinematic *Dark City* is glimpsed beneath heavy shadows and thick smoke. Sinister aliens inhabit the bodies of deceased humans, collectively living like bees in a hive below the city. The city is their laboratory, where they experiment on the human residents, trying to find and capture the human soul in order to empower themselves. They are a dying alien race whose leader, Mr. Book, believes that the human soul will provide his race with a new life force, if the aliens can harness and unite with it.

But the aliens cannot stand the light. So everyone in their city lives in total darkness, except for a few buzzing artificial lamps flickering overhead. That is, until John Murdoch awakens and realizes that the world around him is a grand illusion of false memories and fabricated darkness that he alone has the telekinetic power to dispel. He can create by thinking a thing into existence

—even a new world, at the film’s finale, when light rises across the bay and drives out the last of the aliens.

The dark city in Proyas’s film, where alien demons control a world of darkness in which humans are bound, and where an extraordinary human, John Murdoch, wields alien powers to conquer the demons, is not unlike the dark cosmos portrayed in the Gospel of John. In the fourth Gospel, the world is depicted as a realm of falsehood and darkness. It is a world in which people live unaware of the sinister behind-the-scenes battle that is being fought over the human spirit. The contenders are the extraordinary Jesus and the demons who are led by their sinister liege, the world ruler. Jesus and the demons duke it out throughout the Gospel, as Jesus wields his superhuman power, overcoming the darkness with his light and, in the end, casting out the demonic world ruler (John 12:31–32, 14:30, 16:11, 33).

Jesus the Descendent Light

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is an extraordinary human because he possesses a powerful spirit from another realm, from a transcendent place outside the dark human cosmos (John 17:14). “I am from above,” he declares (8:23). Before incarnating as Jesus, this powerful spirit resided in a celestial realm where he lived with his Father. His Father is a God whose identity remains hidden until Jesus comes to earth and reveals his existence to humans (1:18, 3:27, 31–33, 6:38, 41–42, 46). Jesus announces that although the world has not known the Father, he has. He has made the Father known to the world so that the Father’s love might be experienced by Jesus’ followers (17:26).

This powerful spiritual entity is described in the opening verses of John as God’s Reason, his very Logos, or the Word (1:1). As the Logos, he is the author of life and light (1:3–4). He creates by bringing the thoughts of God into substantive form. The Logos descends out of the spiritual realm from a Father who is himself described in the fourth Gospel as *pneuma* (spirit) (4:24). The Logos “became flesh” and lived among humans as one of us (1:14).

The Gospel of John has no birth story, so the author of this Gospel did not envision the incarnation through virgin birth—or any physical birth, for that matter. Instead, the fourth Gospel has a baptism story reminiscent of that in the Gospel of Mark, in which the Spirit descends from heaven and takes up residence in a man from Nazareth named Jesus. This is the moment of incarnation, when the divine Logos appears as a human (1:32–34).

We never learn in the Gospel of John how the world came under the control of resident demons or how humans ended up mired in this miserable situation where “the flesh is of no avail” and they are “slave[s] to sin” (6:63, 8:34). But we do know that the Son was sent by a loving Father to be the light in the dark cosmos. His job is to incarnate as Jesus and awaken the spirits of humans with his light, so that they will be empowered to become children of God by being filled with the spirit of truth (1:9–13). They are meant to *know* the Father directly through his embodiment as the Son.

But the world and its dark entities are not kind to the community that identifies itself as the Children of Light (John 12:36) and their leader, Jesus. Like John Murdoch and his friends, they are pursued by sinister forces throughout the story. Because evil is active in the world of the fourth Gospel, the world hates Jesus and his followers (15:19, 24–25, 17:14). Like the covert aliens in *Dark City*, the sinister cosmic forces in the fourth Gospel work behind the scenes, through rival human subjects, to harm and kill Jesus and his followers.

On this point, the Gospel of John is not kind to those the author identifies as “the Jews.” Its hostile portrayal of the Jews is a painful testament to the competition emerging out of Second Temple Judaism between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, which were sibling rivals, each claiming the biblical scripture of Israel as its own. The author of the Gospel of John thinks Christianity surpasses and supplants Judaism, and because he thinks Christianity is superior to Judaism, he feels that the rejection of Christianity by the majority of Jews has to be explained. The author explains this rejection by viewing it as part of the cosmic conflict between the forces of good and evil, light and darkness. In the author’s mind, the Jews he knows who rejected Christianity have sided with the cosmic forces of evil against the truth that Jesus proclaimed.

So in this Gospel Jesus is constantly pursued by “the Jews.” The author identifies them as the Gospel’s antagonists, portraying them as men who looked for every opportunity to kill Jesus, which they eventually accomplish (John 5:16, 7:1, 32, 8:59, 10:39, 11:54, 57, 12:36, 18:3, 12–14, 30–31, 19:7, 12, 15). Because it is part of the historical memory that Jesus and his initial followers are Jewish, the author also recognizes that “salvation is from the Jews” (4:22), but he does not think that it remains within Judaism. In the Gospel of John Jesus warns his followers that they will be expelled from the synagogues, persecuted and killed by “the Jews,” who have not

acknowledged Jesus and have no relationship with Jesus' Father (9:22, 12:42, 15:20, 16:2–3). The only solace the Christians have in this Gospel is faith in Jesus' powerful prayer of protection that his Father will safeguard them from the hatred of the world and the world ruler (17:14–16).

Jesus promises his followers that they will know the truth and the truth will make them free from their slavery to sin and the forces of evil (8:31–32). To liberate humans from their enslavement to cosmic forces, Jesus must battle the forces of darkness and overthrow their leader, the world ruler (12:31–32). In the Johannine story, this moment happens at the crucifixion. Jesus' death is identified as the moment of triumph, when the powerful spirit that has been residing within Jesus leaves behind Jesus' human body and draws everyone up with him (12:31–32, 19:30). This is the moment of liberation, when Jesus conquers the world ruler and saves the spirit (16:10–11; cf. 14:30).

Gnostic Footprints

The Gospel of John tells a story about Jesus that is vastly different from those told about him in the other New Testament Gospels, in which Jesus is depicted as a prophet and Messiah chosen by God as the leader of God's kingdom. Only in John is Jesus portrayed as a divine emissary who descends from a transcendent celestial realm to reveal his Father to people lost in a dark cosmos controlled by the sinister world ruler. Only in the Gospel of John does Jesus descend as a spiritual entity of light to teach humans about an unknown God, conquer the demonic forces, and save the faithful.

This story is so different from the one written in the other Gospels that we have wondered for years whose story it originally was. Although none of this narrative would have been anathema to early Apostolic Catholics, it is also true that this narrative was the ultimate story of Jesus for the Gnostic Christians, who presented Jesus as the divine superman sent from the transcendent God to save them from the darkness.

So was the fourth Gospel penned by an early Apostolic Catholic or a Gnostic Christian? This is a tough question to answer, given that the New Testament Bible was not original to emergent Christianity. It is a particular collection of Christian books that was given authority in the fourth century by the Christians who called themselves catholic (universal) and apostolic, by which they meant that they were worldwide followers of the teaching of the twelve disciples. Apostolic Catholic Christianity was not the same as

Catholicism or Orthodoxy today, or any other form of contemporary Christianity. The Apostolic Catholics are best characterized as the ancestors or forebears of what would become Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and eventually also Protestantism.

Because of this triumphant genealogy, it is generally assumed that the New Testament books were actually written by and for Apostolic Catholics, representing the Apostolic Catholic point of view from the moment the books were penned. It is generally accepted that later Gnostics used New Testament texts and interpreted them in directions unintended by the original Apostolic Catholic authors. Any attempt to reexamine the New Testament texts as possible sites of Gnostic spirituality has met with very little enthusiasm in academia.

Yet the individual New Testament books from Matthew to Revelation were not written to be included in an Apostolic Catholic New Testament. Except for some of the letters of Paul, the actual authorship of most of the New Testament books is disputed even in our earliest sources. With unknown authors and early Christian movements that were more diverse than similar, we have to wonder about the prehistory of individual New Testament texts. The people who wrote these texts may or may not have been Apostolic Catholic Christians.

So, what if the fourth Gospel was not originally an Apostolic Catholic scripture? What if it originally wasn't even called the Gospel of John? We know that, early on, there were competing claims about its authorship. Although by the end of the second century the majority of Christians accepted the opinion that John the disciple wrote the fourth Gospel, a minority of Christians disagreed. They knew and believed an old story that Cerinthus, a Gnostic Christian, was its actual author (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 2.25.6, 3.28.1–2; Dionysius Bar-Salibi 101.1.30; cf. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.2.9; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51).

We also know that the interpretation of the fourth Gospel was hotly contested as early as the first decade of the second century, only a few years after the Gospel's final revision, when it came into its present format. At this time, an elder of an Apostolic Catholic church wrote a letter against some parishioners in his fellowship who were rallying around a Gnostic understanding of the fourth Gospel. The elder defends his Apostolic Catholic understanding of the fourth Gospel against their Gnostic interpretation (see

Brown 1982). Today we call this letter 1 John, although the author remains anonymous in the letter itself.

Clearly, in our earliest primary sources, there are Gnostic footprints circling the fourth Gospel. In fact, one of the most famous interpreters of the Gospel of John, Rudolph Bultmann (1971), was convinced that the fourth Gospel is dependent on Gnostic sources. Although Bultmann's commentary is well known, he certainly was not the first to note such footprints. As early as the nineteenth century, scholars had already conjectured along these lines.

But what does this primary evidence mean? If the footprints came late, then we might have an Apostolic Catholic Gospel that was simply reinterpreted by Gnostics in aberrant ways, as most historians suggest (see Hill 2004; Keefer 2006; Rasimus 2010). But if they came early, then we might have Gnostic sensibilities woven into the very fabric of the fourth Gospel. If this is the case, then the fourth Gospel would have had its origin outside the Apostolic Catholic movement, in a religious buffer much more complicated than we have been able to imagine previously.

Could it have emerged in a moment when Gnostic spirituality collided with emergent Christian mythology and the Jewish scriptures? If this is what happened, then its orthodoxy would have come later, as the result of a secondary interpretation that was imposed upon the Gospel by Apostolic Catholics who read into it their own view of the biblical God. If so, this would have ended up domesticating the Gospel, taming its wild Gnostic proclivities and bringing it in line with Apostolic Catholic Christianity.

Where in the Devil Is the Father?

Can we identify the original predisposition of the fourth Gospel? I think it is possible, although it may require some “undoing” on our part to recover it. The original thought world of this Gospel may have looked very different from the orthodox reading favored by the Apostolic Catholics who put the Gospel in their Bible and taught us over the centuries how it ought to be read.

A clue to the mystery of this Gospel's predisposition can be found in John 8:44, where we discover that the single preposition *of* can make all of the difference in the world. Buried in this verse is the tiny, seemingly innocuous *of*, a word that has been forgotten in English translations but remains in the Greek original. John 8:44 is traditionally translated in our English Bibles as:

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he

speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

But this is not what the Greek actually says. It reads instead:

You are from the father of the devil, and you want to carry out the desires of your father. That one was a murderer from the beginning, and he did not stand by the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar, and so is his father.

The father *of* the devil? Who the devil is that?

During the first four centuries of Christianity, the translation and interpretation of these words was hotly contested. The Apostolic Catholics, and then later the Catholic and Orthodox Christians, came to read it as it has been traditionally translated for us in our English Bibles. But all the various Gnostic Christian groups who used the fourth Gospel in antiquity favored the literal reading of the Greek, which clearly posits an evil God who fathered the devil.

These Gnostic groups argue that Jesus' own words here in the Gospel of John testify to the presence of an evil cosmic ruler, who was none other than YHWH the God of the Jews and the father of the devil. They believed that the fourth Gospel supported their own worldview, in which the God of the Jews is an evil subordinate creator god quite distinct from the sublime God that Jesus preached.

The Apostolic Catholics complain bitterly about the literal translation of this verse, arguing that although the verse might literally say this, it cannot be true, because the Christian scripture cannot contain such blasphemy. So they read it against its actual grammar, dropping the preposition and reading it "You are of your father the devil." When they discuss it in their own literary works, they prefer to paraphrase it as "You are sons of the devil," rather than quoting the actual Greek.

What is going on with this startling passage in the fourth Gospel? The early debate over the interpretation of this verse suggests that the Gnostic reading is the oldest, if not the original, whereas the Apostolic Catholic understanding of this verse came late to the game, to tame and domesticate it. The Apostolic Catholic understanding alters the textual fabric of the Gospel and dismisses what the verse actually says, because in their opinion what the literal words denoted simply could not be true.

Origen, one of the earliest Apostolic Catholic interpreters of this verse, admits that the literal reading says that "the devil has a father," and the Jews appear to be from this father. Yet Origen goes on to explain that it is better to read the text "from the father, the devil," even though this reading would be

clearer if the preposition *of* in the Greek were erased (Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.172).

In fact, some scribes felt the same. In at least two manuscripts of the Gospel of John (Codex Cyprius and the Old Syriac version), the preposition was eliminated by scribes who were certain that the Gospel could not be making reference to the devil's father.

The primacy of the Gnostic reading is further supported by the context of the verse, which delineates between the God of the Jews and Jesus' Father. In the larger passage surrounding this verse, Jesus is presented by the author of the Gospel in a debate with some Jews over his identity. In this narrative, Jesus is described as the light and life of the world (John 8:12). He claims to have come from above, having descended into the world (8:23). His Jewish opponents are confused about his identity and the identity of the Father he keeps talking about. Jesus responds in this passage by telling his opponents that they know neither himself nor his Father (8:19). He goes on to contrast the Father he has been talking about with the Father the Jews follow (8:38).

His Jewish opponents are naturally confused by this and reason that Jesus must be referring to Abraham. But Jesus says that if they were truly Abraham's children, they would not be seeking to kill Jesus, because Abraham never murdered anyone. According to the Johannine author, Jesus reasons that his Jewish opponents must have a different Father, commensurate with their wicked actions and murderous intent (8:39–41).

His Jewish opponents, who are monotheists, are unhappy with the polytheistic direction that this line of reasoning is taking, so they respond by insisting that there is only one Father, God himself, and that they are his children. But the Johannine author is relentless. He persists in the narrative, maintaining that Jesus and his opponents must be talking about different Gods, because if Jesus' opponents knew Jesus' Father, they would love Jesus rather than hate him (8:41–42).

The author thinks that the Jews' father is different from Jesus' Father. In the climax of this narrative, Jesus says, "You are from the father of the devil." It is clear that the author believes that Jesus' Jewish opponents are like their sibling the devil, who was a murderer and a liar from the beginning. The devil's nature is that of a liar, as is the nature of the devil's father (8:44).

The author's logic underlying this passage appears to be that Jesus' Jewish opponents share in the same nature as the devil because they share the same

father, the God of the Jews, whose nature is evil. This God is different from Jesus' Father, who remains unknown to the Jews (8:54–55).

Two Gods

So if we grant this literal reading of John 8:44, we are faced immediately with two gods commonly found in later Gnostic Christian mythology: the God of the Jews, whose nature is evil, and Jesus' Father, whose nature is love. If we track Jesus' Father throughout the Gospel, we find further traces confirming this dualism in the fourth Gospel. Jesus calls his Father "the only true God," as if the author of the fourth Gospel is making some distinction between this true God and some other god who is falsely worshipped as God (John 17:3). Jesus' Father is the "righteous Father" whom the world has not known but whom Jesus knows and reveals (17:25). His Father is described as a God of love, who wishes to save the world by sending his son into the world to judge and redeem it (3:16–19, 7:29, 17:18, 21, 23, 25).

Where does Jesus' Father reside? Repeatedly we learn that, before his descent, Jesus resided with his Father in a heaven very distant from the world. It is a place identified in the Gospel as "above." Jesus has exclusive knowledge of his Father, which Jesus reveals to a world that has no prior knowledge of this God (1:18, 5:37, 6:46). In the narrative, Jesus informs various Jews that the Father who sent him is the true God, whom they do not know (7:28, 8:12–44, 54–55, 14:7–8, 16:2–3).

The fourth Gospel also presents us with a contrast between the unknown Father who sent Jesus and the God who spoke to Moses. They are treated as separate Gods in the narrative. Some Jews in the story describe themselves as disciples of Moses who know the God who spoke to Moses. They are worried about people who follow Jesus, because he claims to be from a God and a place they don't know (9:13–34).

Correspondingly, the law of Moses is distinguished from the message of Jesus throughout the fourth Gospel, just as it is in all later Gnostic Christian systems. The distinction begins in the opening of the Gospel, where it is declared that "the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). Jesus gives commandments that differ from the Mosaic law. The Gospel describes Jesus' laws as coming directly from God his Father, and declares a new commandment of love (12:49–50, 13:34). Every chance he gets, Jesus distances himself from the Mosaic law, even referring to it as "your" law whenever he is speaking to the Jews (6:32, 7:19,

10:34). Why does the world hate and reject Jesus? The explanation is reduced to prophecy, as the fulfillment of what is written “in their law,” where it says, “They hated me without a cause” (John 15:18–25; Psalms 35:19, 69:4).

In addition to the Mosaic law, the traditional cultic practices of the Jews are censured, a criticism shared by subsequent Gnostic Christian groups. Jesus is portrayed as a harsh reformer of the common sacrificial cult, taking up a whip and driving out of the Jewish temple the sacrificial animals and the merchants who were selling them. He demands that his Father’s house cease being a place of trade (John 2:14–16). At the same time, he teaches a Samaritan woman that his Father is “spirit,” a God who must not be worshipped in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem or in the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim (4:21–24).

It appears that the author of the fourth Gospel understood Jesus to be purging the Temple of the worship of a false god who required sacrifices, so that he could set up the proper way to worship his Father. From this perspective, Jesus came to cleanse the Temple of impious people who were offering sacrifices to a false god. Because the fourth Gospel also recognizes the Temple as Jesus’ body, the author appears to think that the Christian church, as Jesus’ body, has replaced the Jewish Temple and is the true locus of worship of the Father.

In fact, this very understanding of the story can be found in Gnostic sources from the second century that represent our oldest commentaries on the Gospel of John, such as Heracleon’s commentary quoted by the famous Alexandrian teacher Origen (*Commentary on John* 10.210–28). There is no reason to assume that this understanding is secondarily imposed on the Gospel by later Gnostics. Indeed, it may very well represent the author’s original intent, which the Apostolic Catholics have to subdue. To be sure, Origen agreed with the Gnostics that the passage referred to the supremacy of the Christian church, which, as Jesus’ body, had replaced the Jewish Temple. What he tries to dismiss is the Gnostic insistence that this story demonstrated that Jesus’ Father is a separate God from the God of the Jews.

The Apostolic Catholic interpretation of the fourth Gospel won the day, but it does not appear to be the original or even the oldest known understanding of the Gospel. Rather, the amassed evidence leads us to envisage the metaphysical system woven into the fabric of the fourth Gospel as a unique cognitive blend. This innovative worldview emerged when

Gnostic spirituality interfaced with the Jewish Bible and early Christian mythology.

In terms of theology, YHWH has been bifurcated into the lord of the heavens, a celestial God, and the lawgiver, a cosmic God. The celestial lord remains in the highest heaven. He is the good, righteous Father, the God of love and mercy. The lawgiver, YHWH's capricious half, is demoted to live in the world with his son the devil. He is the malicious God of Moses, the world ruler. The celestial lord is identified with Jesus' loving Father, who had been unknown until the advent of Jesus. The celestial lord is the God who redeems the world by sending his son to conquer the world ruler.

This theology has more affinities with known Gnostic systems than with the theology of the Apostolic Catholics, but the metaphysical system presupposed by the fourth Gospel is not identical with the Hermetic or Sethian systems we learned about in [chapter 3](#). The supreme God in the fourth Gospel is not a transcendent deity who lives in another universe. We do not have Gnostic spirituality and Platonism meeting the Bible, where YHWH encounters the transcendent Platonic God, the Good.

Instead, we have a bifurcation of the Jewish God, when YHWH's two halves, his good and his evil natures, are treated as separate Gods. This theology is a distinctive blend, the consequence of an interface between Gnostic spirituality, Jewish scriptures, and nascent Christianity within a religious buffer that was unique to first-century Palestine and, as we will see shortly, to Samaria in particular.

Samaritan Converts

If Gnostic spirituality is woven into the very fabric of the fourth Gospel, creating a distinctive religious blend, we have to wonder how this happened, historically and socially. Where, when, and how did it occur? Can we identify the religious buffer that would have served as the environment for the birth of this emergent Gnostic system and distinctive Christian community?

There are several clues in the Gospel of John that help us reconstruct the early history of the Children of Light. The opening chapters of the Gospel single out five disciples as Jesus' first: two of John the Baptist's disciples, one of them Andrew; Andrew's brother Simon Peter; Philip from Bethsaida in Galilee, who was a friend of Andrew and Peter; and Philip's friend Nathanael (John 1:40–49). Most likely, these five disciples are privileged in

the community's memory because they represent the founders of the Children of Light. They represent a small missionary cohort that had been sent out from the church in Jerusalem to persuade people to become followers of Jesus. They founded the mission from which the Children of Light emerged.

We have to wonder what group of people the esteemed five initially converted. Who were the men and women who formed the bedrock of this newly established Christian church? What presuppositions and religious sensibilities did they bring with them? To answer these important questions, we must journey to Samaria, a region of Palestine that has a distinct prominence in the fourth Gospel.

The fourth chapter features the story of Jesus' unusual interaction with a Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob in the village of Sychar. This Samaritan woman is Jesus' first convert, following his calling of the esteemed five. After talking to Jesus, she is convinced that he is the prophet promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. But when she goes and spreads the word among the Samaritans in her village, those she talks to about Jesus become convinced that he is more than this. He is the "savior of the world" (John 4:19, 42).

Jesus teaches her about the "living water" that gives everlasting life (4:7–15). He explains to her that the Father God is "spirit" who can't be worshipped in temples such as the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem or the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. He tells her that she has been worshipping a God she doesn't know, whereas he worships a God he does know. He persuades her to follow him because he can give her knowledge of God that she doesn't have (4:22).

Over the years, scholars have surmised that the early Johannine community experienced an influx of Samaritans, although there has been less effort to distinguish what type of Samaritans they were (see Odeberg [1929] 1974, 171–89; Bowman 1958, 1975; Meeks 1967, 216–57, 286–319; Buchanan 1968; Freed 1968, 1970; Brownlee 1991; Purvis 1975; Brown 1978; 1979, 37–39, 43–45). This distinction is very important because the Samaritans were divided by a number of schisms in this era. So the question is not whether the formative Johannine community included Samaritans. It most certainly did. The question is what kind of Samaritans they were.

Simon Says

In the book of Acts, we learn that Samaria was among the first areas to be missionized by the Jerusalem church, and the Simonians in particular were targeted. According to the record in Acts, Philip travels to a Samaritan city as an ambassador of the Jerusalem church (see Samkutty 2006). A large number of people from this city convert (Acts 8:4, 6).

Who were these Samaritans converted by Philip? They were Simonians, devoted to the worship of Simon as the Great Power of God who had the Holy Spirit (8:9–10, 20). The Simonians are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, after becoming convinced that Simon did not really have the Holy Spirit because he could not outperform the great miracle worker Philip. After the Simonians were baptized and became Christians, Peter and John were sent to the mission to lay their hands upon the converts and convey to them the Holy Spirit (8:14–17).

Given the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as the descendent spiritual superman, the account of the conversion of the Simonians in Acts has real historical integrity. It is no coincidence that the Gospel of John portrays Jesus in terms analogous to the Simonians' depiction of Simon. Could the first converts among the Children of Light have been Simonians who transferred their Gnostic mythology from Simon Magus to Jesus (see Fossum 1985, 152–55)?

It is not difficult to imagine that, before the Jerusalem missionaries came into their city, the first Johannine converts were people who were devoted to worshipping Simon the Great Power of God, the potent healer and miracle worker who had trumped the religious master Dositheus. As we saw in [chapter 3](#), they believed that the Great Power Simon had descended into the lower regions of the world from a lofty place where he once lived with the unknown Father.

They identified Simon with God as the Father's manifestation on earth, as the Son who descended with knowledge of the unknown Father, and as the Holy Spirit sent to the nations (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.23.1–2, 5). He was known to say, "I am the Word of God, I am the Paraclete, I am the Almighty, I am all that is God's" (Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 24.5).

Simon's mission was to save the Father's Ennoia (Thought), which had descended into the world and consequently was suffering embodiment (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.23.3). Simon taught that Ennoia was the fallen Spirit, incarcerated and subject to the rule of rebellious angels (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 21.2).

This mythology was played out by Simon in the real world, when he redeemed Helena by buying her out of prostitution and marrying her. This real-world event appears to reflect otherworldly events; when Simon freed Helena from the whorehouse, it was believed that he saved all humans from their enslavement to the evil world rulers. Helena's lowly condition was the condition of all humankind. When Simon redeemed Helena, he was universally redeeming the spirit of God imprisoned in all humans. So the Simonians professed that Simon had saved them by the Father's grace (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.23.3; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.14).

This universalism was one of the features that distinguished Simonianism from other Samaritan sects. Whereas Dositheus' movement had targeted only Samaritans, Simon, Helena, and their successor, Menander, appealed to the broadest audience possible. They taught that although Simon had descended in Samaria, he had in fact come to save all nations—and humans generally—from their enslavement to the fallen angels who ruled the world (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.23.1, 3, 5).

The Simonians disparaged the Mosaic law, which they believed had been created by the autocratic angels to perpetuate human enslavement (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.23.3; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.14; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 21.4.5). As long as humans remained ignorant of the Father and instead obeyed laws that made them servants to the fallen angels, the spirit could not be released. The spirit remained bound to the bodies and the world in which the fallen angels had incarcerated it.

It is easy to see how the new converts could have applied this mythology of Simon to Jesus. The Simonians who were converted by the missionaries from Jerusalem would have transferred large parts of their previous religious conceptions about Simon to Jesus and would have reconfigured the rest as they began constructing the foundational mythology of Johannine Christianity. Or, to put it another way, they would have come to understand Jesus by adjusting Simon's frame. This reframing of Jesus became the basis for their new Christian community. The understanding of Jesus as prophet and Messiah, preached by the Jerusalem missionaries, was blended with the Simonian Gnostic mythology of a universal savior, the Son sent to earth from a distant, unknown Father to overcome the sinister forces that had enslaved the human spirit and now ruled the world with shrewd laws.

The fourth Gospel shows us how a particular Christian community was founded. It all started in a Samaritan village, when a small team from the

Jerusalem church established a mission among the Simonians who lived there. According to the book of Acts, the mission was established very early in the history of Christianity, not even a decade after Jesus' death.

These new converts were not blank slates. They already had preconceptions of their world as a hostile place controlled by fallen angels who had imprisoned God's spirit within the human body. The teachings about Jesus the prophet and Messiah, which they received from the Jerusalem missionaries, were blended into their preestablished Gnostic frame of the superman, the powerful miracle worker and healer who was God's son, sent to reveal the unknown Father and redeem the human spirit, which was a piece of God trapped in a dark world. This is how, in the fourth Gospel, the prophet and Messiah Jesus becomes God incarnate. In many ways, it is a game of Simon Says.

Baptist Converts

The Simonian converts learned from the Jerusalem missionaries about a special form of baptism, too, which concluded with an anointing ceremony that conveyed the Holy Spirit, just as Acts suggests. They used this distinctive baptism to initiate people who wanted to join their community. This is why the fourth Gospel focuses on the message of repentance and on a form of baptism that was supposed to deliver the Holy Spirit to the baptized (John 1:29, 33, 3:5).

In fact, baptism is so important to the Children of Light that the Gospel of John is the only Gospel that talks about Jesus, alongside his disciples, baptizing converts to his movement (John 3:22, 4:1–2). His detractors, the Pharisees, were alarmed that Jesus and his disciples were so successful in the rivers that they were “out-baptizing” John the Baptist.

This evidence suggests that, only a decade after Jesus' death, the fledgling Christians from Samaria, the Children of Light, were thriving baptizers, in competition with John the Baptist's movement. The Children of Light were trying to convert people who revered John the Baptist, thinking him to be the Messiah. So the Children of Light promised their potential converts that their baptism would be better than John the Baptist's because their ceremony concluded with an anointing of the Holy Spirit (1:26, 31, 33).

Because these baptist converts thought that John was the Messiah, the Children of Light counter this view in their Gospel, trying to persuade them that Jesus, not John, is the Messiah (1:20, 29–34, 3:28, 5:33). This was

tricky business, trying to convert people who revere John, so in the fourth Gospel the Children of Light give John honor while at the same time downgrading him so that his status is inferior to Jesus (1:6, 15, 30, 10:41).

An Apostolic Catholic Elder Reads the Gospel of John

What happened to the Children of Light as their community grew beyond Samaria and the Jordan River basin and their Gospel began to be read by other Christians? We are fortunate to have an account of the first Apostolic Catholic reading of the Gospel of John. It comes to us in the form of the New Testament letter known as 1 John.

This letter was written around 110 CE, about ten years after the fourth Gospel took its final shape. The letter is written by a person who identifies himself as one of the elders of a church that has just experienced a serious split in its membership. Part of the congregation has left, unhappy about the way this particular elder has been reading and interpreting the fourth Gospel. The elder is writing to the remaining members of this church to reassure them that his interpretation of the fourth Gospel is correct and that the elders and the congregants who left never knew what they were talking about.

As we will see, this elder's point of view is Apostolic Catholic, whereas the opinions of those who left the community are Gnostic. From the elder's letter, we can see the battle lines, the fight over the meaning of the Gospel of John. At the top of the list was their fight over the identity of the true God and his relationship to the devil. Next, they were quarrelling over human nature and sin. Finally, they were debating Jesus' nature and his role in salvation.

The vortex of their disagreement whirled around John 8:44. The elder maintains an Apostolic Catholic opinion about the verse. He insists that the text refers to the devil as the father of sinners like the murderous Cain. He does not read the text as a reference to a God who fathered the devil. His opponents, however, do (1 John 3:11–12).

The elder asserts that those who have remained with him in his congregation have known Jesus from the outset as the manifestation of eternal life (1:4, 3:16, 36, 5:24, and other passages). They have known the Son and the true God from the start (2:12–22, 5:18–20). The true God is righteous and sinless. He is the Father God, a just God whose laws, including his “love commandment,” must be obeyed (3:1, 4:7–8, 10–12, 16–17, 5:3). Jesus came to teach people about God's laws, the very laws by which they will be judged. The greatest of these laws is love toward one's sibling (3:19–24,

4:7–19). The elder insists that the love commandment is really not new but is already part of God’s older laws, which were imparted to the Jews (2:7–11).

Obviously, the elder assumes that Jesus’ Father is the God of the Jewish scriptures. He thinks that God’s laws are not “miserable,” and although there will be a final judgment, the believer who perseveres in obedience to God’s laws has nothing to fear (2:7–11, 4:17–21). The elder understands Jesus to be an advocate for believers who face judgment before the righteous Father. Believers can depend on God’s love, though, which was enacted when he sent his son into the world “to be the expiation for our sins” (4:10).

Because God is righteous and demands obedience from his children, the elder is certain that human nature is not fixed. So humans are not children of God or the devil in some genetic way, as seeded offspring. Rather, the individual’s relationship with God or the devil is determined by human actions, whether good or evil (3:7–12). Yet, because not every righteous person is a child of God, there has to be something more to it.

How does one get into God’s family, according to the elder? One must be born of God. This can only happen when God’s spirit is received by the believer during the community’s special anointing ceremony (2:20, 27, 3:24, 4:13). This birth means that God’s nature now lives within the believer, assisting him or her to resist sin. Believers should make every attempt not to sin, but if they do, they can be comforted in the knowledge that their relationship with Jesus absolves them of that sin (1:8, 10). The elder believes this absolution is granted by means of sacrificial atonement, an act of ritual compensation performed by Jesus on behalf of humankind when he was crucified (1:7, 9, 2:2, 5, 4:10, 5:6–7).

Because of Jesus’ role as a sacrificial victim, the elder finds it essential to view Jesus as God born as a human being. So he insists that the phrase “the Logos became flesh” in the first chapter of John is not a reference to Jesus’ baptism, when the Spirit settled in him. The elder understood the incarnation to be a kind of ensoulment of God’s mind in matter, when the Logos descended into the flesh at Jesus’ birth and became Jesus’ psyche or soul. So the elder insists that Jesus came into being not through the water baptism only, but through the blood of birth too (1 John 5:6; see Lieu 2008, 209–14).

A Hostile Takeover

Although this was the position of the elder and the people who stayed in his congregation, the elders and people who left felt very differently about

things. The people who left the congregation did so because they were convinced that the fourth Gospel taught that the true Father is not the God of the Jews who gave the laws to his people. They thought that the God of the Jews gave “miserable” laws to be obeyed because he himself was wicked, associated with darkness and the world (1 John 1:5–6, 2:15–17).

Those who withdrew from the congregation believed that the God Jesus preached is to be contrasted with the lawgiver God. Jesus’ Father is a God of love who gave a new commandment, to love one another. The God of the Jews is a malicious God who gave the old Mosaic laws to burden people. Jesus’ Father is the true God, whom they claimed to “know” (2:3–6).

The people who had left the congregation believed that they were part of a sinless generation that was genetically connected to the true Father. All who were members of the church were part of a pure and perfected sinless generation born of God, seeded with his spirit. Opposing this generation were the children of the devil, because they were similar to the devil in nature. Based on their interpretation of John 8:44, they assumed that this wicked generation comprised unbelievers fathered by the God of the Jews (1 John 3:4–10).

Jesus, according to this side of the debate, was not a sacrificial victim. Rather, he was a great power, the Logos, who descended from on high and became flesh at the moment of Jesus’ baptism, *by water only* (5:8). The spirit of God descended at Jesus’ baptism and was released at his crucifixion (John 1:32–33, 19:30; compare with Matthew 3:16, 27:50; Luke 3:22, 23:46).

This characterization of Jesus is one of the oldest views of Jesus, created by Christians out of the old Jewish tradition that God’s spirit anointed righteous men such as prophets and had in fact rested on a prophet in each generation (Wisdom of Solomon 7:27). The author of the Gospel of Mark knows this old teaching and applies it to Jesus, insisting that it was at Jesus’ baptism that God’s spirit resided in him (Mark 1:10). Matthew and Luke likewise know this old tradition, but they attempt to supplant it with secondary stories of a virgin birth.

Clearly, the teachings of those people who left the elder’s church are in line with the Gnostic predisposition of the fourth Gospel outlined earlier in this chapter. The view of the elder actually represents the newer of the two positions.

So where did the more recent view of the elder and his supporters come from, and how did it gain enough popularity to challenge and usurp the older position? How did the Children of Light come to experience a schism of this magnitude only a few years after their Gospel was finished and published?

Here we must imagine a scenario in which one of the churches of the Children of Light began to encounter Apostolic Catholic Christians. Perhaps a large Apostolic Catholic household moved into town and joined the congregation of the Children of Light. Or maybe a struggling local Apostolic Catholic congregation united with the Children of Light for economic or social reasons. Whatever the particular scenario, it is clear from 1 John that a powerful contingent of Apostolic Catholic Christians had joined their community.

The assumptions of the Apostolic Catholics about God and Jesus were very different from those of the original Children of Light, so when they read the fourth Gospel they did so with very different eyes. They could not imagine that Jesus had taught about any other God than the biblical YHWH. They could not imagine salvation based on nature rather than deeds. They could not imagine Jesus as a human container for God's spirit. So they imposed a new way of reading the fourth Gospel. They may even have been responsible for the final reconfiguration of the fourth Gospel itself, when the last chapter was added to showcase the faith of Simon Peter, the hero of the Apostolic Catholic Christians.

Needless to say, by 110 CE, the conflict over how the fourth Gospel ought to be read had fractured the community. The Apostolic Catholic interpretation was perceived by the original group to be an imposition on the Gospel and a rejection of their unique religious heritage. In their eyes, the elder and his supporters were usurpers who had pulled off a hostile takeover of their community. So they did what they felt was their only recourse. They withdrew from the congregation and reconfigured themselves as a reformed congregation of the Children of Light, claiming that they alone knew the true Father of Jesus. And he wasn't YHWH.

Cerinthus Is in the Bathhouse

By the year 180 CE, things had gotten out of hand when it came to the fourth Gospel, and Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, was tired of it all. He was fed up with Gnostic readings of the fourth Gospel and took up his pen to defend the Apostolic Catholic position against them.

At the center of the controversy, Irenaeus places Cerinthus, a man who was remembered as a contemporary of Jesus' disciple John (see Broek 2005). From what Irenaeus tells us about Cerinthus's catechism, it is obvious that Cerinthus knew the fourth Gospel very well. He taught about it point by point from the perspective of its old Gnostic sentiment.

From Irenaeus's record we can see that Cerinthus was teaching that the Father of Jesus in the fourth Gospel was a different God from the biblical Creator YHWH. Cerinthus believed that the fourth Gospel taught about Christ as a spirit from above, which descended upon Jesus and eventually left him to ascend back to its home.

Cerinthus did not think that the first verses of John referred to the creation of the material world at all. Rather, he thought they referred to the creation of entities in the spiritual world, when the Father originally diversified himself as the Only Begotten and his son, the Logos. The material world was not created by the Logos but by a power that resided far below the Father in a region shut off from the invisible and ineffable realms (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.11.1).

We actually know quite a bit more about what Cerinthus believed, because several of the Apostolic Catholic leaders mention him. Cerinthus taught that the primary supreme God is an unknown Father separate from the creator and ruler of our world (1.26.1). This lesser creator and ruler god was an angel who represented the God of the Jews and was the giver of the Mosaic law (Pseudo-Tertullian, *Prescriptions* xlviii).

Cerinthus thought that Jesus was born a natural child, the biological son of Mary and Joseph. As he matured, he grew to be an exceedingly righteous holy man, so that, at his baptism, "Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove." Cerinthus identified the Christ entity with the Spirit that had descended out of the heavens from the Father. After he was invested with the Christ Spirit, Jesus proclaimed the unknown Father and performed miracles no one else could do. At the crucifixion, the Christ Spirit left Jesus, so Jesus the man suffered while the Spirit remained "impassible" (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.26.1).

To put an end to Cerinthus's Gnostic teachings about the fourth Gospel and to give credence to the Apostolic Catholic interpretation as original, Irenaeus claims that the apostle John wrote the fourth Gospel to stamp out Cerinthus's teachings. Irenaeus designed this claim to apostolic authorship to put an end to the old Gnostic understanding of the fourth Gospel. If the Gospel were

given Apostolic Catholic credentials and an anti-Gnostic purpose, Irenaeus must have hoped, the old and persistent Gnostic understanding of the fourth Gospel would be undermined once and for all.

When we step back and weigh all the evidence, it is obvious that Cerinthus's views about the fourth Gospel are in line with the views of the Children of Light who were the opponents of the elder in 1 John. Cerinthus's interpretation of the fourth Gospel matches theirs point by point. In fact, it represents the oldest reading of the fourth Gospel and aligns perfectly with the Gnostic predisposition of the Gospel.

All of this makes me curious whether the early Christian references to Cerinthian authorship of the fourth Gospel, which most scholars today have dismissed outright, may have some merit after all. Could Cerinthus have been involved at some point in the actual composition of parts of the Gospel?

The oldest information we have about Cerinthus attaches him to the Samaritan Simon Magus. The reference occurs in the Letter of the Apostles, which was written around 150 CE. The authorship is pseudonymous, but the claim to have been written by the twelve apostles is important because it represents the letter's Apostolic Catholic orientation.

The Apostolic Catholic author claims to be writing the book against "the false apostles Simon and Cerinthus," whom he considers to be "enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ" because they alienate believers from the true word and deeds of Jesus Christ (Letter of the Apostles 1, 7). This association of Simon with Cerinthus has long perplexed historians. But now that we know that Simonian converts were foundational members of the Children of Light and that Cerinthus's theology reflects the earliest readings of their Gospel, the association is not coincidental. The author of the Letter of the Apostles is writing against the old Gnostic interpretation of the fourth Gospel, which was developed by the Simonian converts and then maintained by Cerinthus.

In fact, when the Letter of the Apostles is studied in more detail we discover that the points of controversy it tries to resolve revolve around refuting the Gnostic interpretation of the fourth Gospel. The letter insists that Jesus' Father is the "lord of the (whole) world" and the "maker and creator of it." Jesus, the Son, sits at the right hand of the Father in the heavens and, as the Father's Word, he created not only the heavens but also the earth and humankind (Letter of the Apostles 1, 3).

This Son did not become flesh through the descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism but was physically conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the

Virgin Mary, and then was birthed as a child. With reference to John 1:14, the author claims to have *seen* all of this (Letter of the Apostles 3). Several chapters in the letter are devoted to explaining how a great angelic power became flesh by descending through the celestial spheres and ending up in the womb of Mary (13–14, 17).

The author assures us that, at the Judgment, Jesus will redeem all those who are baptized and who have kept the Father's commandments, along with Jesus' own new commandment to love others. The author of the letter is convinced that Jesus will save the Children of Light from the evil rulers who have bound the soul and spirit with fetters in their jail of wickedness and evil deeds (28).

This fight to rescue the fourth Gospel from Cerinthus and Gnostic sentiment is reflected also in a humorous second-century tale that Bishop Polycarp liked to tell about the day that Jesus' disciple John went to soak in the warm waters of the local bathhouse in Ephesus. But he never got to bathe. Instead, he rushed out of the doors and into the street, yelling, "Take off! The bathhouse might collapse! Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is inside!" (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.3.4).

Although this is a funny, fictitious tale, in it we are again faced with Cerinthus and his connection to the fourth Gospel. In this case, he is set against the disciple John. By this time, the Apostolic Catholics had successfully begun claiming that John wrote the fourth Gospel, so the humor works because both men were connected with this Gospel. John flees because he, as the *real* author of the fourth Gospel, has identified Cerinthus's interpretation of the Gospel as so evil that it will bring God's judgment down upon all those who associate with him. The roof of the bathhouse will fall in upon them.

The other information we have about Cerinthus comes from a Roman named Gaius and his followers, who lived in the late second century. Gaius considered himself an Apostolic Catholic. He was very concerned about the fourth Gospel and the book of Revelation because they were being used successfully by an apocalyptic church movement called Montanism. Gaius hated Montanism. In his mind, the easiest way to undermine the movement was to deny the fourth Gospel and Revelation any authority. He refused to use either text in his church because, he said, they were not written by John the disciple of Jesus but by Cerinthus (Eusebius, *History of the Church*

2.25.6, 3.28.1–2; Dionysius Bar-Salibi 101.1.30; see also Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.2.9).

In the fourth century, Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, made a joke out of this, calling the Gaians the Alogoi, because they reject the Logos in the first chapter of the fourth Gospel. This is really funny to Epiphanius because the Greek *alogoi* also means “stupid” or “morons” (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51).

What is going on here? In order to destabilize the apocalyptic Montanists who depended on the Gospel of John and Revelation, Gaius appears to have relied on an old tradition that Cerinthus authored the fourth Gospel, and simply added Revelation to Cerinthus’s repertoire. After Gaius does this, portrayals of Cerinthus as a wild apocalyptic millenarian begin to circulate in the Christian literature, too, confusing his identity even more.

But Cerinthus was no wild millenarian. He was an old Gnostic Christian. His interpretation of the fourth Gospel aligns with the very fabric of the text itself, with its Gnostic predisposition. It aligns with the views of the opponents of the elder who wrote 1 John, the people who withdrew to reform their community by jettisoning the Apostolic Catholic interpretation of their Gospel. Although it is impossible to know from our sources whether Cerinthus actually had a hand in composing the fourth Gospel, we certainly can say that, at the very least, he was in the bathhouse.

What Makes Us Human?

No matter how we piece together the history of early Christianity, the fourth Gospel is at the vortex of the Gnostic Christian storm. It is true that Gnostics and Apostolic Catholics each had their own way of reading this Gospel in ways that supported their very unique worldviews. Traditionally, we have assumed that the Apostolic Catholic interpretation is the authored point of view, because the Gospel of John turns up in the Christian Bible. We have assumed that YHWH is Jesus’ Father, and we have read this into the Gospel with the help of the mistranslation of John 8:44 in our English Bibles.

But the internal textual evidence does not support this opinion. In fact, it demonstrates that the Gospel distinguished between Jesus’ Father and the God of the Jews who fathered the devil. This theology, which split YHWH into his better and worse halves, developed within a religious buffer where Gnostic spirituality merged with Simonianism and early teachings about Jesus. This unique religious blend began when missionaries from the Jerusalem church established a Christian mission among the Gnostic

Simonians in Samaria. The result of this merger is a Gnostic Christian system that resembles the well-known wisdom of Cerinthus, whose association with the fourth Gospel was remembered infamously in the early Christian literature.

The basic Gnostic system appears to have featured a supreme God, the Father of Jesus, who resided in a far-removed heaven. This Father sent down his son, the Logos, a spiritual being who entered Jesus at his baptism and left him at his crucifixion. This is how the Logos became flesh and empowered Jesus to perform miracles and reveal his Father, a God who previously was unknown.

Jesus' Father was viewed as the God of love who wished to redeem people from the darkness in which they were suffering. He sent his son for this purpose, to save those born of the Spirit, the Children of Light, from the evil world ruler, the God of the Jews. Jesus demanded that worship of YHWH cease, so that the human spirit might be liberated from its bondage to YHWH's laws and to sin.

The only commandment given by Jesus is the commandment to love one another. According to the fourth Gospel, the capacity of love is what makes us, as humans, equal to Jesus and the Father, so that we are no longer servants of God but friends of God (John 15:9–15). Our ability to love is what makes human beings transcendent. That is the beginning and the end of the story.

Which brings us back to the message of *Dark City* and its aliens who are trying to find the human soul. In their quest for the human soul, with the help of Dr. Schreber, the Strangers have removed all the memories of the city's human residents and have stored them in a vast vault. Every midnight, when the Strangers wave humans into unconsciousness, the city's avant-garde buildings slice through brick-and-mortar streets. The cityscape is altered when the Strangers tune the city and, with a medieval syringe, Dr. Schreber injects different memories into his human subjects.

Why this gruesome experiment? The aliens want to know what makes the human being human, to divine what makes humans exceptional creatures. Will a person imprinted with the memories of a murderer become a murderer? Or are we more than the sum of our memories? Is there something else about us that makes us who we are?

In a gripping scene, when Emma, Murdoch's wife, finds him in prison, Murdoch tries to explain to her that they are nothing to each other. They never

were husband and wife because their memories of each other are false memories that the aliens have injected into them. But Emma is not convinced. She tells him, "I love you, John. You can't fake something like that." Emma is sure that our ability to love transcends everything else about us, including our memories.

In one of the last scenes, Murdoch encounters the alien Mr. Hand staggering in the street. Earlier in the film, Mr. Hand had imprinted Murdoch's memories onto his own. Now he says to Murdoch, "I'm dying, John. Your imprint is not agreeable with my kind. But I wanted to know what it was like. How you feel."

Murdoch stares at him, realizing at that moment that Emma had been right. The aliens, by focusing their experiments on human memories, had been searching in the wrong place for the human soul. He says to Mr. Hand, "That person isn't me. Never was. You wanted to know what it is that makes us human. Well, you're not going to find it in here." With this, Murdoch points dismissively to his head.



CHAPTER SIX

Gnostic Altered States

Eddie Jessup

Before us stands a metal tank, tall and cylindrical, with a window up top. Through the window we can see water and the face of a man sleeping afloat (figure 6.1). Electrodes are fastened to his head. The camera angle changes and we are inside the tank, looking up at the bottom of his two feet. Except for his face, he is entirely submerged in water. So begins Paddy Chayefsky's psychedelic 1980 film *Altered States*.

We are in the research lab of Professor Eddie Jessup of Harvard Medical School, research specialist in drug therapy for schizophrenics. He is unorthodox, convinced that schizophrenia is not a disease but an altered state of consciousness. He works with this particular population because he is obsessed with what he calls "interior experiences," especially religious ones. Religious experiences, he tells Emily, his wife-to-be, are so significant in schizophrenia that he decided to switch gears from primate work to humans, to get inside the human mind. He wants to develop a way to do this, to strip life down to its minimal, to its origins. He thinks the isolation tank will do the trick.

Eddie is weird. He is one of those people who can't seem to connect to anyone, although he does agree to marry Emily because she loves him. He knows he will make an awful husband, and tells her so. It is not that he is cold or uncaring. It is that he is obsessed with discovering the truth of human existence. Nothing else matters to him.

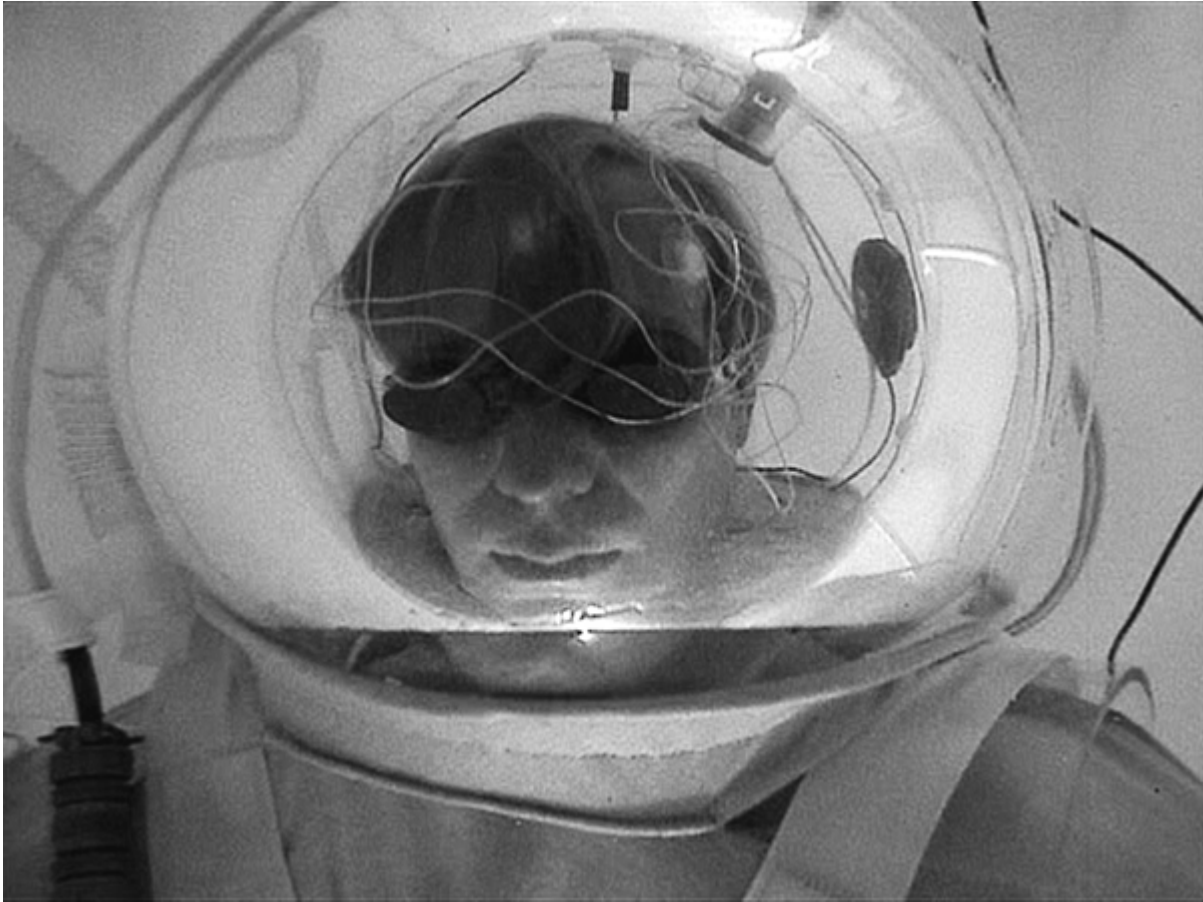


Figure 6.1 Eddie Jessup (William Hurt) afloat in a tank in *Altered States* (1980).

His father's horrible death and final words—"Terrible, terrible"—convinced Eddie that the purpose of all our suffering is just more suffering. There is no God. Only us. Ultimate reality, ultimate truth, is the self, the individual mind. Genetically, we are coded with atoms six billion years old and memories back to the big bang. Eddie is convinced that there is a way back to this earlier consciousness, to the original self. And he is determined to find it.

At a restaurant party, Eddie makes a scene with his esoteric jabber. "Everybody's looking for their true selves," he blurts out. "We're all trying to fulfill ourselves, understand ourselves, get in touch with ourselves, face the reality of ourselves, explore ourselves, expand ourselves. Ever since we dispensed with God, we've got nothing but ourselves to explain this meaningless horror of life. Well, I think that true self, that original self, that first self is a real, mensurate, quantifiable thing, tangible and incarnate. And I'm going to find the fucker."

His journey takes him to Mexico, to the Hinchí tribe, where he learns to prepare and dispense their hallucinogenic mushroom. This plant is called by the Hinchí the First Flower because it prompts visions of the primordial and trips to the First Soul, the Unborn Stuff, the Void. To meet the original self, Eddie combines this ancient Indian drug therapy with trips in his modern isolation tank, where he floats for hours in complete silence and stillness, high.

That is when really weird things begin to happen. Primate sounds come out of the tank. Eddie is removed from the tank listless, with blood smeared across his face. Has he bitten his tongue or has he undergone some genetic transformation into an apelike ancestor? We aren't sure, until the next trip to the tank, when Eddie emerges as a small primate and tears through the lab, nearly killing two guards. He is found later in the local zoo, transformed back into a human being after gorging on an antelope. These altered states of consciousness are getting out of hand. They aren't just matters of the mind. Eddie's mind is transforming his matter. Very literally, he is experiencing the evolution of the human self. And it is terrifying.

Separation Anxiety

Altered States is a modern manifesto on the death of God. It grapples with the meaning of human life after God has died. We are presented with two options. Emily is convinced that human life has no great truths. We are all born into doubt and we spend our lives persuading ourselves that we are really alive by loving each other. Eddie thinks that life is about the pain that we inflict on each other. He wants to strip away all attachments so he can suffer the pain alone as the singular self. He wants to get down to the embedded rock of life, the bare and barren soul. In this way, Eddie is a modern Gnostic, convinced that the natural condition of the human soul is suffering. He thinks that if he can return to the primal condition, he can find out the truth about the soul, what happened to it, how it came to be in its present state of terror.

The second-century Gnostic Christians that we will be meeting in the next three chapters believed that the soul's state of terror was caused by its separation from its original source, and they believed that they could use ritual therapies to heal it. Second-century Gnostic initiation and its religious ritual therapies represent our earliest form of psychotherapy. Before Freud, Jung, the behaviorists, and the cognitive psychologists of our modern world,

the Gnostics developed therapies to resolve anxiety and stabilize the human condition, although their therapies functioned within the context of religious practices rather than science and the counselor's office. The variety of Gnostic Christian myths and accounts of their activities focus on the origin of the human psyche (soul), how it came to be damaged, and how healing can take place within the context of religious initiation.

As we saw in [chapter 2](#), Gnostics trace humanity back to time primordial, to a god, a hermaphrodite or androgynous being, who like a great snake rests silent and inert in the elemental waters. This is before anything existed. What happens to this solitary being? Different Gnostic texts suggest different things, although there is not much a solitary being can do. He can look at himself in the water. He can think about himself. He can stand up. And he can masturbate. Different myths have him doing all of these things.

The result is that, through these actions, he takes form and multiplies or generates himself, birthing divinities like himself, creating a world of divinities in the process, which eventually leads to the creation of our universe and ourselves. The process is like a great chain of being falling down from utter transcendence. Creation ultimately is transcendence manifesting itself. And for these Gnostic religious thinkers, this meant that the transcendent, the pneuma (spirit), had become immanent in us. It had become part of who we are, mixed in denser forms of reality, enmeshed in our psyches and our physical bodies.

So Gnostic spirituality is oriented toward a sacred that is transcendent, that is permanent being, which overflowed and generated different realms of existence, including our own. The one becomes the many. But here is the catch: the Gnostics thought that this generation process was flawed in some way; that which overflows is in some way not exactly the original. It is a copy, a reproduction, an outpouring that eventually becomes corrupt or diminished.

This unavoidable corruption is not traced back to sin or error but to separation, when the whole God severs itself in the process of individuation. This process of separation and individuation results in suffering, anxiety, fear, terror, and remorse. This reminds me very much of the basic premises of developmental psychology today. We have learned that the child must separate from the mother, must differentiate, to become a healthy, functioning adult. But this process is not easy. It involves anxiety, feelings of alienation and isolation. The Gnostics thought that this separation anxiety is basic to our

nature because it is basic to how we came to be. It was the inevitable consequence of a solitary god dispersing into many.

Ultimately, the Gnostic story is about the human self, what it is, and how it became damaged. Gnostic psychology understands the human's psyche to have three dimensions: the moral self, the emotional self, and the rational self. Together these three dimensions form our personhood, our sense of "I" and "me." Together these three form our ego. Gnostics believed that this temporary, mortal self should not be mistaken for who we really are.

Who we really are has to do with a fourth capacity, our ability to intuit, discern, and imagine. They call this faculty "spirit." It is the capacity of our minds to reach beyond the experiences of the mundane world to realms of transcendence, to experiences bigger than our everyday. In modern lingo, we might associate this with the mind's capacity to achieve alternative states of consciousness such as ecstasy.

The Gnostics thought that the human soul is limited by language, emotion, and ethics, leaving us with an inadequate and false sense of who we really are. The psyche is delusionary because it thinks that it is all there is, that there is nothing more to us, that there is nothing beyond us. It is ignorant, like its creator the soulish Demiurge, the dark lord who calls out, "There is no god besides me!" As long as we identify our selves with our transient egos and bodies, we fail to grasp our ability to transcend the trappings of the transient and to return to what is permanent, the ultimate, which can only be intuited by our spirits.

So the Gnostic story is a story about the origin of the human spirit from a primal God Before All Gods, the transcendent source of everything. As this transcendent, primal God comes into being, differentiation and diffusion result. The generative process inevitably embeds the one into the many. The spirit, the true human self, becomes separated from its root. It becomes unconscious, trapped in psychic and bodily layers of delusions, emotions, and damaging appetites. It is alienated, damaged by a split it could not control. Its alienation is the cause of our deepest human anxieties and fears. The bottom line is that the anxieties and fears that plague all of us live deep within our unconscious, where the deep self, the spirit, is buried.

Universe in a Body

Now, this situation is not hopeless. Far from it. As we will see later in this chapter, the Gnostics were all about therapy, about making us

psychologically whole through spiritual maturation and integration. The existential fear, terror, ignorance, regret, and desire that we all suffer needs to be cured, they thought. If we healed our deep selves from this acute separation anxiety by reintegrating our spirits into the divine whole, we would be healthier individuals all around, even physically. So although we might think Gnostics were only interested in spiritual and psychological healing, it is clear from the literature that they believed that when we heal our deep selves, this affects the health of our physical bodies too.

To this effect, there is a wonderful description of the Gnostics who took part in Plotinus's Greek philosophy seminar. The attending Gnostics were some variety of Sethians, since they carried around the Sethian books *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes the Stranger* (and perhaps *Marsanes*). We now have copies of these books in the Nag Hammadi collection, so we can read them for ourselves. What did these Gnostics in Plotinus's seminar claim? "They tell us," Plotinus writes, "they can free themselves from diseases." The Gnostics believed this because they felt they had the spiritual clout to overcome the demons whose power had manifested as particular sicknesses.

In Gnostic therapy, the dark lords who created and therefore control every part of the human body are being made to stop harassing our bodies with disease and suffering. The Gnostics, Plotinus knew, used prayers, invocations, and hymns to make the demons obey their instructions. Certain melodies, special sounds, directed breathings, hissings, and popping noises were employed to this end as well (Plotinus, *Ennead* 2.14). In other literature we learn that the Ophian Gnostics thought that the summit of their wisdom was their power to heal. It enabled them to destabilize demons through the uttering of noisy sounds, secret names, spells of relief, and preventive formulas, along with the use of prophylactics such as special stones, plants, and roots. Calculations, likely astrological, also assisted them (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.38–40).

How did this work? Like many ancient people of the Mediterranean, the Gnostics believed that the alignment of the planets and stars at the moment of birth determined a person's emotional disposition and physical constitution. In the Gnostic story, this concept was elaborated to include the fact that the soul and body were created by the dark lords, the rulers of the planets and stars. The souls and bodies they created were stamped with their imprint, with whatever attitude the ruler of the planet possessed at the moment of the person's birth. The dark lords sealed and owned what they had created. Each

demon owned that part of the human being and had the power to infect or blight it.

The basic Gnostic story behind this idea is the belief that the transcendent spirit sinks into denser and denser cosmic materials as it incarnates in the human psyche and body. This process was understood as a descent of the spirit from the transcendent realm into the cosmos through various zodiac gates ruled by the planets. As the spirit sank into the world, it literally passed through various constellations and planets, receiving along the way the psychic or soul inclinations of each of the rulers of the planets and stars.

These inclinations were given to the soul when each star demon along the way created the soul, part by part. In the Sethian book the Apocryphon of John, we learn that the soul parts are given by each of the planetary rulers, including the soul's bone, sinew, flesh, marrow, blood, skin, and hair. Each of these soul parts is aligned with a psychic capacity, such as goodness, intention, piety, tyranny, domination, envy, or wisdom (Apocryphon of John, Nag Hammadi codices [NHC] II.1 11.23–12.25, 15.14–24; compare with Apocryphon of John in Berlin Codex 2 48.11–50.2). Lists of these psychic aspects are found across the ancient Greek and Roman literature (Gospel of Mary 16.5–12; Corpus Hermeticum 1.24–26; Macrobius, *Scipio* 1.12.1–16; cf. Proclus, *Timaeus* 1.148.1–6, 3.335.12–15; Servius, *Aeneid* 6.127; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.9–10).

The body is a similar matter in the Gnostic story. Every part, from head to the toe, is created by 365 named star demons, according to the Apocryphon of John. Nothing is left out. There are demons who create the ears, nose, lips, molars, tonsils, uvula, throat, fingernails, heart, stomach, spleen, and vertebrae, to name a few in the long list provided (Apocryphon of John NHC II.1 15.13–19.15). The Gnostic teacher Basilides agrees. In his system, there are 365 astrological powers responsible for creating each part of the physical body. Thus, each part of the human body was controlled by a different demon, understood to be a stellar entity within the celestial realms, corresponding to all the degrees of the zodiac (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24.7.6).

The association of body parts with stars and planets, called *melothesia* (literally, “limb assignment”), is very common in antiquity. In fact, it formed the basis for medical practice until the close of the medieval ages. Although ancient doctors did not try to control the demons that ruled an affected body part, many believed that their treatments, such as bloodletting, could only be

effective when performed at the right time, when the planets and stars were aligned in certain ways that corresponded to the body part in question. This was thought to work because the ancients believed in the efficacy of correspondences, that the human body is correlated with the universe and that this correlation can be manipulated to our advantage. Put another way, the human body is a mini universe, so every aspect of the body is linked with the universe through parallelism.

Belief in the power of this linkage led many physicians to refer to medical almanacs before they treated their patients, to make sure that the right stars were aligned with whatever body part they were trying to heal. To assist the doctors and patients, these almanacs often depict the human being charted from head to toe with the zodiac signs that correspond with the different body parts. Also included in these almanacs are tables and diagrams that enabled doctors to perform the necessary astronomical calculations for the successful treatment of whatever ailed their patients ([figure 6.2](#)).

The Gnostics were not ancient medical doctors. They weren't into bleeding their patients to balance out the humors when the stars aligned with the blighted body part. Rather, their closest parallel may be the shaman. They thought that the body would be cured of its ailments when the spirit had been integrated into God's wholeness in an ecstatic experience. This integration healed the damage caused by the primal separation of the spirit from God, empowering the spirit to take charge of the soul and body. The human spirit, when integrated with God, was now the superior at the helm, cosmically and personally. By its command, the subordinate demons had to give up control over the body. Wielding godlike powers, Gnostic healers invoked the name of the demon responsible for the particular injured limb or sick organ, displayed the stone and sign associated with that demon, and intoned the proper prayer for relief. Medicinal plants and popping noises helped, too.

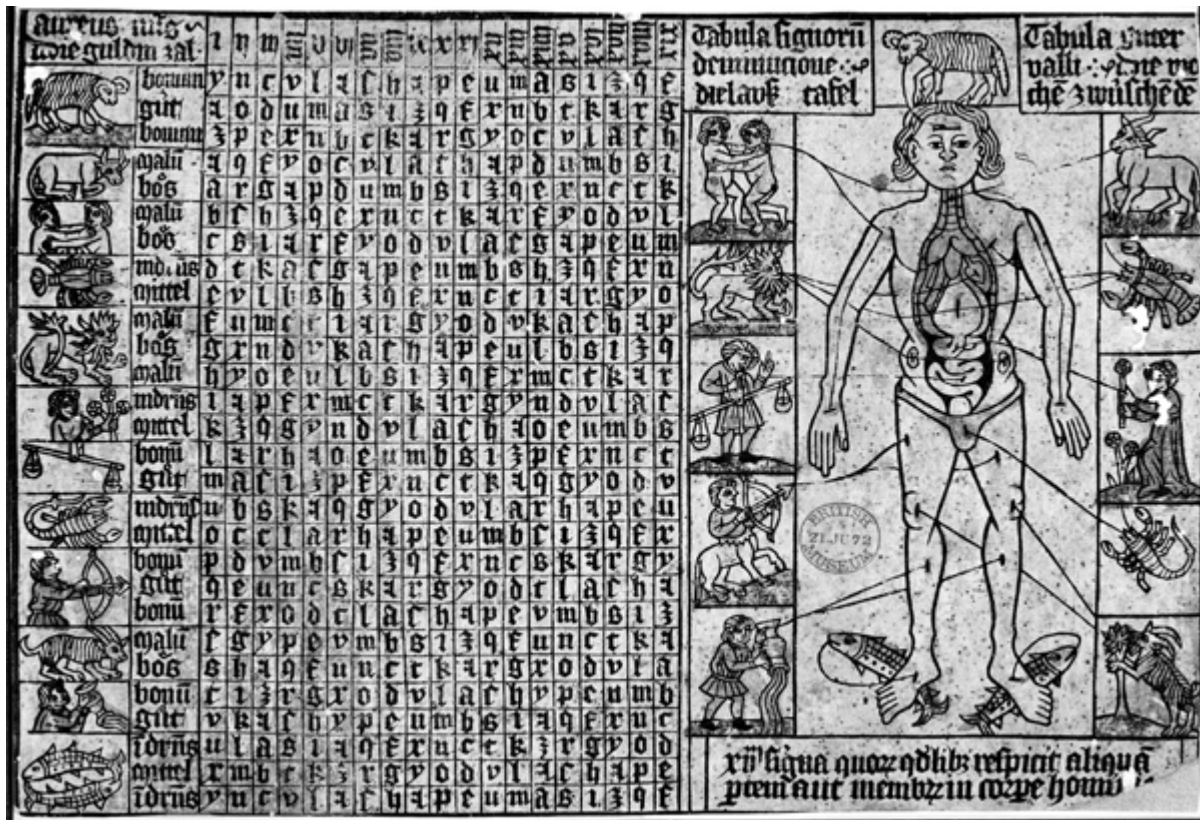


Figure 6.2 Zodiac man (1475) at the British Library. Reprinted with permission.

The Gnostic Cure

So the ultimate concern of the Gnostic is to mend our damaged psyches and bodies through deep spiritual therapy. That said, we must recognize that ancient Gnostics did not work like modern psychologists or like TV evangelist faith healers such as Kenneth Copeland or Benny Hinn. Instead, the Gnostics' therapy was bound up with religious ceremonies of initiation strikingly similar to Greco-Roman and Egyptian mystery religions.

In fact, ancient writers agree that Gnostic mysteries are most comparable to the mysteries of the Great Mother, Demeter, and her daughter Persephone, which were characterized by solemn oaths of silence, revelation of specialized knowledge, a protracted course of expensive induction, and the bodily torment and suffering of the initiates (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.4.3, 1.21.3–4; Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 1; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref.2–5, 5.6.34, 39–45). Demeter's mysteries were known for their dramas, when the initiates took up torches and wandered around in the dark, crying like Demeter as they sought her kidnapped daughter (Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation* 2; Tertullian, *Ad Nat.* 2.7; Lactantius, *Epitome* 23;

Mylonas 1962, 261–72). Stone reliefs at Demeter’s sanctuary in Eleusis show initiates robed and carrying torches as they walk in line ([figure 6.3](#)). Other finds, like the Lovatelli urn, the Torre Nova sarcophagus, and the Niinnion tablet, show the initiate actively involved in all aspects of the Eleusinian drama. Plutarch describes Greek initiations similarly: initiates were dragged around in the dark and in deep mud, walking in endless circles along frightening paths, shivering, trembling, sweating, terrified, until they were shown a holy vision of light (Plutarch, *Fragment* 178).



Figure 6.3 Stone relief from Eleusis, Greece, depicting initiates carrying torches as they participate in the Eleusinian mystery drama. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

It is clear from descriptions in the ancient literature and from archaeological data that the Greco-Roman and Egyptian mystery religions focused on the dramatic performance of the particular mythology associated with a particular god (see Schnusenberg 2010). The closest example to this audience-involved religious theater today may be passion play pageants that include actors from the congregation and audience participation as the crowds who wept (and jeered) at Jesus’ suffering.

By participating in the dramas of the ancient mysteries, initiates put themselves under the jurisdiction of that god, whom they met face-to-face in the performances. They believed that their theatrical participation in the dramas counted them among the original participants of the myth, whether it was the story of Demeter and Persephone, Dionysus and Orpheus, Isis and Osiris, or Cybele and Attis. They hoped that their submission to the god in this context would guarantee them succor in this life and, especially, in the afterlife.

With the emergence of Gnostic spirituality came a reorientation of religious ritual drama to the human spirit and its God nature. The central focus of Gnostic initiations became the purging, recovery, and integration of the fallen spirit. Because of this shift in focus, the initiations were innovative in their therapeutic orientation, an orientation unknown in the initiation ceremonies of the other ancient mystery religions. This reorientation of mystery initiation likely emerged from a religious buffer that blended what Gnostics knew about Greek shamanism and temple healing practices with what they knew about mystery religion rites.

The highly structured initiations of Gnostics took place within private religious communities rather than in visible public spaces. Many of these events may have taken place in private homes similar to the Christian house in Dura-Europos, with its specially built initiation baptistery, or the villa in Pompeii, with its painted dining hall depicting the mysteries of Dionysus (figure 6.4). But there also is evidence that initiation of some Gnostics took place in theaters where dramatic performances set to music occurred (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.9.7). We also have references to some Gnostic groups using special costumes in their mysteries, possibly even masks; to the use of special furniture, such as bridal couches; and to torches carried to light the way (see Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.39; Pistis Sophia 1.11). Some Valentinian Gnostics put on the helmet of Hades to become invisible to the underworld judges (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.13.6). It has been suggested that Origen's reference to the Ophians becoming lions, bulls, serpents, eagles, bears, and dogs (*Contra Celsum* 6.33) suggests that they were using masks in their ceremonies. Some have read Porphyry's description of the Mithraic initiates (*On Abstinence* 4.16) similarly (Chadwick 1980, 349, note 4). We have ample examples of recitations, lyrics, and dialogue in Gnostic literature, suggesting that these virtual dramas were regularly and consistently performed by the communities.



Figure 6.4 Fresco of initiation drama depicting the mysteries of Dionysus, first century CE, in the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

These dramas were not productions meant to entertain an audience, like a night out at the theater. Rather, these were simulations, virtual realities that fully involved the initiates, bodily and emotionally. Psychologically, the performances reinforced for the initiates what they already had learned about reality from their metaphysical instruction, a catechism that they had studied intensely before undergoing the rites. For them, the performances were not pretend. These initiations were virtual realities created so that the initiates experienced utter transformation, the emergence of a new sense of

themselves as mortal gods. These initiations involved the staging of otherworldly journeys along secret initiatory routes through the underworld, skies, and transcendent realms. The dark lords were confronted and the transcendent divinities were embraced along the way.

The Structure of Gnostic Initiation

Each Gnostic community prided itself on owning the “real” map to eternal bliss, the map that would guide the lost spirit back to its transcendent home, where it would merge with God in a bath of Being or in an embrace of the sacred erotic. Only then could it be healed of the terrifying aftereffects of its initial separation. Each Gnostic group defined itself by offering its own variation, its own esoteric spin on this magical mystery tour that actualized the divine human potential and led the spirit home, to a hidden place beyond the underworld purgatories and endless spinning of the stars in our cosmos.

In the next chapter, we will learn about five different second-century Gnostic groups and their particular initiatory paths to immortality. Before learning about the wild diversity of their stories and their regional programs of initiation, however, it is important to understand that they are not as diverse as they appear on the surface. Although there are wild local variations across Gnostic groups in terms of mythologies, doctrines, and ceremonies, there also are structural similarities, especially when it comes to ritual. There is a sense of sameness in the ceremonies performed across the vast spectrum of second-century Gnostic groups, a deep structure that stabilizes the variety, a scaffold that secures the difference.

This sameness is dependent on the deep cognitive structures that help us orient our bodies to our world, including our sense of being vertical creatures with standing, sitting, and lying postures (DeConick 2014). This means that for human beings *up* is associated with good things like God, health, weightlessness, light, and virtue, while *down* is demonic, death, heaviness, darkness, and depravity. The Gnostic initiations are structured to move the spirit back *up* to the transcendent realm of the Good Father from which it fell *down*. This means that the spirit has to be taken ritually through three regions, specifically the underworld below the earth, the celestial sphere above the earth, and the transcendent realm above the cosmos.

Add to these universal bodily orientations such as verticality the fact that ancient people were all speculating about the incarnation of the soul. A very popular theory was that the soul originates from a high cosmic sphere,

usually the zodiac belt of fixed stars. It has to pass through the planetary spheres and the stars on its way down into the body. This passage negatively affects the soul's constitution, weighing it down. For the soul to be liberated it must be purged of these negative effects. This purgation allows it to become lighter and fly home. This commonly known cycle is what forms the basis of second-century Gnostic initiation ceremonies.

When we realize that Gnostic spirituality is not focused on the liberation of soul but on the spirit, we find an innovation that makes its way into Gnostic myth and ritual performance. If the gods of this world are false, then the spirit has to come from wherever the true God lives. So we see in Gnostic thought the emergence of a transcendent realm that houses the true God and the human spirit. It is this spirit that descends down through the spheres and takes on a soul and a body in the process. Its liberation means purgation of the soul's negativity and the body's inclinations so that the spirit can become lighter and fly home.

Gnostic rites, whatever their form, were meant to be personally therapeutic, to awaken, purge, mature, and integrate the alienated human spirit, the real self, with its transcendent root. The goal was to heal the separation anxiety that had started it all. Usually, divinities from the transcendent world come to earth to assist and teach humans about their predicament and whatever rituals are needed to liberate the spirit. In the case of Jesus, many Gnostic Christian groups thought that his job was to clear-cut the spirit's path home.

Second-century Gnostic rites fall into four categories: ceremonies to awaken or quicken the spirit from unconsciousness; ceremonies to purge the soul of its demons; ceremonies to mature the fledgling spirit into an adult divinity; and ceremonies to integrate the mature spirit, the real self, with its transcendent root. This process brings healing because it repairs the separation that was the root cause of the person's anxiety and fear, without completely wiping out the individual's identity.

So the Gnostics were not Buddhists. The spirit does not experience emptiness, nor is it reabsorbed into its root so that it no longer exists individually. The Gnostic rites ensure that the personal spirit has grown its own identity, which then unites with its source.

Quickening

The ultimate concern of the Gnostic is to awaken the divine potential in each of us, to bring our permanent, deep self to consciousness. This is ritually performed as an incubatory underworld journey, when the sleeping initiate is awakened in Hades, usually by a divine being who has come from the otherworld as an emissary. The initiates are awakened with the smack of Hermes's or Christ's staff. Or they are startled awake by the call of the goddess Forethought.

As we will see in the next chapter, there are many examples of the underworld awakening, but one of the most beautiful in terms of liturgy is found in the Sethian Apocryphon of John (NHC II.1 30.33–31.25). Here the goddess Forethought descends into the darkness of Hades. The liturgical exchange between goddess and initiate follows. I imagine that Forethought's words were spoken by the community leader when the ritual was performed.

In the ritual, Forethought calls out to the initiate, "Whoever hears, get up from the deep sleep!" The initiate cries and responds, "Who calls my name? From where does this hope come to me, while I am in the chains of prison?" Then the goddess declares, "I am Forethought of pure light. I am the thought of the virgin Spirit, who has raised you up to the honored place. Arise! Remember, you are the one who has heard! Follow me, the merciful one, your root! Guard yourself from faulty angels, demons of chaos, and everyone who ensnares you! Beware of the deep sleep and the enclosure of the inside of Hades!" The goddess then raises up the initiate. She seals him five times in holy water, so that death may no longer have power over him.

This ceremony must be one of the earliest performed by any Gnostic group, because it turns up also in the very old Sethian treatise Trimorphic Protennoia (Three Forms of First Thought). In this text we learn that the first mystery involves a descent into the underworld, where the goddess Forethought calls out to her children in whom the spirit dwells. Forethought shakes up the underworld by destroying the bonds of the demons that had chained her children there. She awakens and liberates their spirits from Chaos (Trimorphic Protennoia NHC XIII.1 36.4–26, 40.30–37).

These types of underworld ceremonies are performed to awaken the spirit from sleep, to make it conscious, to quicken it. Some Gnostic groups include not only a moment of awakening or quickening but also a trek out of the underworld, along its rotting, bat-infested paths, guided by a figure like Hermes. We can only imagine the dramatic sets that may have been assembled to help initiates experience the terrifying atmosphere of the

underworld. At the end of this underworld experience, Gnostic initiates find themselves restituted, but with one big difference: they have been awakened as humans conscious of their spirits, aware of their authentic God selves.

Catharsis

After the divine potential is awakened, it must be purged through a cathartic process of emotional and psychic release. This process involves the purging of the delusions and passions that have kept the spirit unconscious for so long. The purge takes place through ritual, when the initiate overcomes each of the dark lords who rule the universe from the celestial spheres.

In these rites, Gnostics were quite literally facing and overcoming their personal demons, one at a time. They believed that our souls as well as our bodies are the reflection of our demons, marked by unruly desires, egotism, impudence, greed, anger, and deception. Every demon that controls us has to be purged through a process of ritual demonic defeat. This process of demonic defeat was conceived as a gradual ascent through the celestial territories of the demons, where the initiate came face-to-face with each demon and then vanquished the demon through a powerful prayer, direct naming, and the display of a potent object.

The rituals that the Gnostics invented and performed were meant to be cathartic, to strip away everything that had encumbered and enslaved their true selves in the realm of temporality. These cathartic ceremonies of initiation were conducted gradually, so that initiates moved slowly, usually in some ritual sequence, through the various heavens and star houses ruled by each of the demons.

As we will see in the next chapter, we have a complete record of the Ophian Gnostic rite of demonic purge, including the actual route the Ophians mapped through the demonic territories in the skies, their virtual prayers of demonic defeat, the secret names of the demons, and references to the objects they used in this cathartic process. Their ceremony was called the Seal. It was their rite of resurrection, when the soul was resurrected *from* the body (in contrast to the resurrection *of* the body) and flew through the star gates in order to return to the transcendent world.

The Ophian rite was conducted as a journey through the nocturnal houses of the zodiac, where the planetary ruler of each house was met and overcome with a physical seal and powerful prayer. Each ruler was associated with an animal form, and when the ruler was overpowered by the initiate, the initiate

returned to earth as a “lion” or “dragon” or whatever animal identity the vanquished star ruler had possessed. This suggests named stages of advancement in their ritual, a marked progression from one level to the next as the spirit purged itself of its demons.

Maturation

The next step in the process of Gnostic self-actualization is the maturation of the spiritual seed into a self-sustaining divinity. This is a process of individuation, when the child becomes the adult. For the Gnostic, the maturation of the true self involved instruction, especially ethical instruction. But more importantly it involved mimicry, when the child acts the adult. This was achieved ritually by the Gnostics in ceremonies of ascent, when they invaded the transcendent realms beyond our skies.

The Gnostic Justin tells us that he personally escorts his initiates through a brilliant star gate at the top of the heavens. On the other side sits the Good God, and next to him is a luminous bath of “living water,” by which Justin meant a flowing river sparkling with light. The initiates must bathe in the river of light to become living beings. So here we have a ritual bath that transforms the initiate into a self-sustaining divinity, a rehabilitated, individuated deity who is always welcome in God’s presence.

In the next chapter we will see that the Sethians had perhaps the most sophisticated ceremonies to this end. They believed that the transcendent realm is layered from lowest region to highest. Each layer is populated by divinities who are progressively more and more like the living Father. In their maturation ceremonies, the initiates see the divine beings who reside in the transcendent realms, and they are progressively transfigured into each type of being, from the lowest to the highest rank. Water ceremonies are performed at each level, as are contemplative feats of intense withdrawal and silence.

Integration

Once the true self has individuated, it is ready for the final step in the Gnostic process of self-actualization. The self is ready to be integrated into its transcendent root, to unify with the Ultimate, to achieve gnosis. Again, this is achieved ritually when the initiates ascend to the highest of the transcendent realms and merge with the God Before All Gods.

In Gnostic literature, we find exclamations of integration like the one called out by the initiate in Zostrianos: “The Virgin Light came before me and brought me into the First One Who Appeared, the great male perfect Mind. I saw all of the divinities as they exist in one. I joined with them all. I blessed the Hidden god, the virgin Barbelo and the Invisible Spirit. I became all-perfect and received power. I was written in glory and sealed. I received there a perfect crown” (Zostrianos NHC VIII.1 129.3–15, my translation). In the Naassene ceremony, this final integration into the whole occurs when the spirit attains to the Unoriginate by entering the house of God as God’s bridegroom. The spirit, as God’s betrothed, leaves behind its body and soul, venturing into the transcendent realm beyond the cosmos, where only the spirit can go (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.6.3–11.1, 10.9.1–3).

For some groups, the initiate actually united with the unknown deity during the initiation ceremonies, whereas for others this final moment was an eschatological feature that occurred either at the person’s death or at the end of cosmic time. Whatever the case, the goal was reunification of the matured authentic self with its parent in a unitary religious experience. This is sometimes envisioned as an erotic embrace of a married couple, as was Valentinus’s expectation, or as a joining in intellectual ecstasy, a Sethian fantasy, much like a Vulcan mind meld.

Gnostic initiation was a form of ancient psychotherapy that worked to bring about positive cognitive changes in the self through religious ritual. Gnostics perceived their initiations as medicine for the damaged soul, and some heavenly helper like Jesus as their physician. Gnostic initiation worked to make initiates aware of their unconscious selves as the source of both their greatest anxieties and their greatest power. Their initiations were largely cathartic; initiates faced their ultimate demons and conquered their deepest anxieties and fears. The process healed the broken and alienated self through a process of self-actualization. Gnostic initiation prompted the individuation and empowerment of the self beyond the impermanent ego, and then its integration into the transcendence from which it came. All in all, the experience was an ecstatic and erotic one.

Gnostic Incubation

The Apostolic Catholic Christians who write about the Gnostics report that, almost universally, the different Gnostic groups had secret mysteries, ineffable or unspeakable teachings and practices that were delivered to the

initiates “in silence” and were intended to remain in silence. By this, the Catholics meant that the Gnostics took pledges, often under oath, to never divulge the Gnostic mysteries to those who were not initiated. Apostolic Catholic authors state that Gnostic initiation did not start until after the initiates had intentionally committed to keeping secret the mysteries they were about to learn. Rightly or wrongly, their critics understood this culture of silence to reflect the obligatory silence that was required of the initiate into the Greek mysteries of Demeter and Dionysus or those of the Egyptian Isis.

Tertullian, a Christian lawyer in Carthage, sums up this attitude when he describes their earnestness to learn “and be introduced to true quiet” (Tertullian, *Valentinians* 11.4). He says that the Valentinian Gnostics configure themselves like Eleusinian worshippers, consecrated by a “profound silence.” The only thing celestial about them, he jokes, is their silence (1.3). Tertullian goes so far to say that the Gnostic God is one that *imposes* silence on his faithful (9.1). The Apostolic Catholics, including Tertullian, assume that this Gnostic orientation toward silence has more to do with Gnostic mysteries being abominations unfit to be spoken than with the likelihood that the Gnostic mysteries had nonverbal, experiential components.

It is certainly likely that various Gnostic groups might not want their initiatory mysteries divulged to the uninitiated, but I doubt that this is the whole story of the Gnostic culture of silence. Their attachment to silence, at least in their own literature, seems to have nothing much to do with a gag order. Rather, they value silence for entirely different reasons.

In their own literature, silence is both the primal state of the ineffable God they seek and a bodily practice in which they engage to withdraw into this primal state as they return to the source of life. The primal God in Gnostic myths is a silent God, and the goal of the Gnostic journey is withdrawal back into this original silence, rest, and stillness. Silence is considered the state of utter transcendence, the very essence of ultimate reality in its original condition (Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 129.20–29; Apocryphon of John NHC II.1 4.10–14). In Valentinian traditions, Silence is the Mother God from whose mouth emerges the first sound, Truth. Her speech is the manifestation of what is ineffable, indefinable, and indescribable (Gospel of Truth NHC I.3 37.7–12, 24.10–20; Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 55.35–40, 56.25–28; Valentinian Exposition NHC XI.2 22.19–27; Trimorphic Protennoia NHC

XIII.1 35.33–36.4; Eugnostos the Blessed NHC III.3 88.4–11; Thunder: Perfect Mind NHC VI.2 14.10). The Father lives in a state of quietude, sleeping in silence (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.29.5).

In Sethian texts such as the Gospel of the Egyptians (NHC III.2 40.12–41.12, 42.20–23), the primal transcendent state of providence is described as “living silence.” It is a state of silent light. It is the “silent silence” that births the Father, the Mother, and the Son, the original triad of transcendent divinities. The transcendent realm is populated with more divinities, who emerge as the “silence of silent silence,” so that there is a triple greatness of silence there, the perfect condition for the best nap or night’s rest (Gospel of the Egyptians NHC III.2 44.28, IV.2 56.5–6, 60.22–27; Sophia of Jesus Christ NHC III.4 100.9–16; Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 70.15–20, 92.5–9). Not surprisingly, the Gnostic redeemed exist in a state of eternal contemplative rest (Gospel of the Egyptians NHC IV.2 65.21–22, 67.15–17; Gospel of Truth NHC I.3 22.1–7, 35.22–33, 38.25–33; Treatise on the Resurrection NHC I.4 44.1–4; Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 131.20–22; Authoritative Teaching NHC VI.3 34.35–35.16).

In order to return to the primal silence, Gnostics learned in their congregations to be silent and still. So it is not surprising that intentional silence and stillness become essential in their rituals. In fact, the Valentinian congregants insist that they must act in such a way that their meeting places will be holy and silent, so that they are made into good spots for the divine unity to visit (Gospel of Truth NHC I.3 25.2–24). In the Valentinian tradition, the act of baptism for redemption is called Silence because of the quiet and tranquility experienced by the initiates (Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 128.30–32). As we will see in [chapter 8](#), this redemptive baptism is a second baptism. It is the act of Gnostic initiation, when initiates ascend to the transcendent world to greet and unite with their betrothed angel. According to the Valentinian text the Tripartite Tractate, redemptive baptism is an ascent by degrees into God’s wholeness. Its entrance is into “what is silent,” into a place where there is no need for voice, thinking, conceiving, or enlightenment because everything is already light (Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 123.30–124.25).

Similarly, in the early Sethian text the Sophia of Jesus Christ (NHC III.4 117.15–21), the initiated one is described as the person who has come to know the immortal spirit of light in silence. This person has reflected contemplatively on the truth so that he becomes “a light in the spirit of

silence.” Other Sethian texts support this. In the Three Steles of Seth (NHC VII.5 127.10–21), a triple liturgy for ascent into the transcendent realms of the Son, the Mother, and then the Father, initiates are told to praise the divinities individually and collectively. Then they are told to be silent. By means of their silent attitude, they ascend into the innermost levels of the highest of the divinities.

Practices of withdrawal and silence are constantly referenced in the famous Sethian treatises *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes the Stranger*, which were known to the great Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, and also the book of Marsanes. Ascent is presented as a withdrawal to the self, a self-imposed silence that results in coming to know the divinity, praising and blessing him (Marsanes NHC X.1 9.10–28). In *Allogenes the Stranger* (NHC XI.3 53.33–36, 59.10–25), the divinity appears to the initiate as a resting and silent power emitting the soothing sound of snoring: *zza zza zza*. Throughout this text, the initiate is counseled first to withdraw and abide silently, and then to stand immobile, mimicking the divinity who exists resting, silent, and inactive. The initiate is supposed to be still, imitating the pattern of quietude modeled by the human spirit intrinsic to his soul.

What did this mean? Gnostics like the Sethians believed that the initiate literally has to stop thinking about the incomprehensible God, who cannot be grasped with reason and can barely be known through revelation. As he follows instructions and withdraws into himself, the initiate comments that he actually feels the stillness of silence bodily within himself. As he does this, he notes that he comes into direct contact with his true self. In this way, the unknown God is revealed to him gradually, at higher and higher, deeper and deeper levels. His spirit is transformed into a divinity like the one he is contemplating (59.26–60.19, 61.25–31).

These texts and others suggest that Gnostics of all stripes cultivated intentional stillness by standing for long periods of time in a prayer posture. In *Corpus Hermeticum* (XIII.16), the Hermetic instructor tells the initiate that the hymns sung in the transcendent realm by the powers that reside there are something that cannot be taught but instead are concealed in silence. Then how is this hymnody revealed to the initiate? He is instructed to stand motionless and then to bow in adoration to the setting sun. He is to be still again until dawn, when he is instructed to bow second time, facing the rising sun. In the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III.2 67.15–20) we have mention of

a silent prayer beginning with the hands folded to the breast, then moving to an outspread position, and finally circling back.

Standing prayer postures were quite common in antiquity. Catacomb frescoes and ancient literature suggest that ancient people commonly performed prayer by standing with outstretched arms, in what we call the *orans* position. The standing prayer posture among Jews and Christians appears to be mimetic, in imitation of the angels who stand in God's presence, who have no use for knees but stand praising God for all eternity (1 Enoch 39.12–13, 40.1, 47.3, 49.2, 68.2; 2 Enoch 21.1; Testament of Abraham 7–8; see Fossum 1985, 55, 120–25, 139–42; DeConick 1996, 89–93). It is the posture of the deceased righteous, who stand in God's presence and participate in heavenly cultic services (Ascension of Isaiah 9.9–10). Later Christian monks and hermits did the same thing, believing themselves to be like the angels standing in rapture next to God's throne. Simeon, a Syrian monk, was so convinced of the efficacy of devotional standing that he built a series of ever-higher pillars upon which he stood for his entire adult life, contemplating God. These types of parallels go a long way toward explaining why the Sethian Gnostics called themselves the Immobiles or the Standers, traditionally translated by scholars as the Immovable Race (Williams 1985).

The Ecstatic Brain

Why bother with such rigorous practices of bodily stillness? Were such practices merely mimetic of the divinities, or did they achieve something more for the Gnostic initiates? The literature suggests that the practice was associated with altered states of consciousness, that the Gnostics stood silent in moments of great ecstasy. Their records remind me of the tale of Socrates, who was known to stand still for twenty-four hours in ecstasy, as if his soul were absent from his body. Were the Gnostics using bodily stillness and silence to prompt ecstasy?

The Gnostics claimed to offer initiates out-of-body experiences and unitary raptures with a universal Good. This is the stuff of ecstasy, or what we today might call altered states of consciousness. Ecstatic states of consciousness are universally attested phenomena. Beneath the layers of local divinities and locations that populate ecstatic experiences, we find a set of commonly reoccurring characteristics, including an awareness of disembodiment and liberation, feelings of ineffability and timelessness, an

altered sense of the self and its boundaries, and participation in or integration with a transcendent category of being (Shantz 2009, 71).

Modern neurological studies show that these types of ecstatic states of consciousness have a biological basis (McNamara 2009). Although it has long been known that the ingestion of certain pharmaceuticals can induce altered states of consciousness, what we are now discovering is that brain structures actually undergo increased activity during an ecstatic state of consciousness. These have been identified as a circuit involving the limbic system (figure 6.5). This circuit starts in the prefrontal cortex when attention is directed away from the external senses (1). This triggers a decrease in the activity in the parietal lobe and the right orientation association area (2). The right hippocampus is stimulated, leading to the activation of the quiescent centers of the right amygdala and hypothalamus (3). This arouses the autonomic nervous system, leading to changes in the midbrain and feelings of peacefulness (4). The continual stimulation of this circuit results in the deafferentation of the orientation association area and feelings of transcending space, time, and self (5). This brain circuit is regulated mainly by dopamine and serotonin neurotransmitter systems. During ecstatic states, serotonin levels fall and dopamine levels rise.

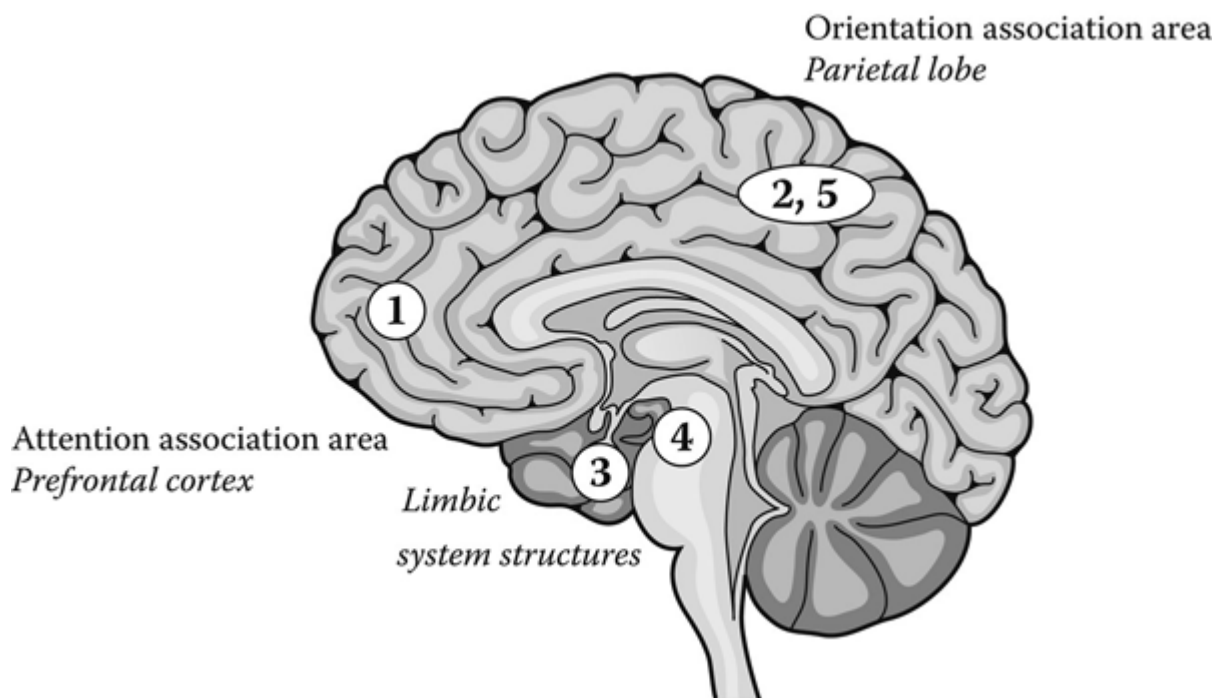


Figure 6.5 Chain of brain processes during meditative activity.

The basic biology supporting ecstatic states relies on overstimulation of the autonomic nervous system, which has two main modes of operation: sympathetic and parasympathetic. The sympathetic mode is responsible for our body's ability to become instantly alert. It produces our body's fight-or-flight reaction and the corresponding emotions of anxiety, fear, and panic. When this mode is triggered, it immediately increases heart rate and breathing, pumps adrenaline into the bloodstream, and dilates our pupils as it gets the body ready for instant action. The parasympathetic mode is our body's natural ability to relax by decreasing heart rate and breathing, lulling us into rest and sleep, and quieting us so that we can digest food or mate. When this system is operationally dominant, we tend to be emotionally peaceful.

Research is demonstrating that the induction of ecstatic states correlates with hyperstimulation of either the sympathetic or the parasympathetic mode. The parasympathetic mode can be overstimulated, even to the point of producing a total loss of bodily sensations, through intentional stillness and silence or through low-key repetitive behaviors such as chanting or drumming. The sympathetic mode can be intentionally overstimulated by engaging in deliberate trauma, excessive behaviors, and extreme activities. Such hyperstimulation has its own correlation to ecstatic states of boundless energy and flow, but when pushed to the extreme, the sympathetic mode can run on high until the body becomes exhausted and collapses. At this point, the parasympathetic system kicks in and we are back to oceanic tranquility. This is our brain on ecstasy.

In light of this brain research, it is very likely that Gnostics of all stripes were cultivating silence not to intentionally hide their mysteries from outsiders but to discover the hidden God themselves by employing rituals of extreme bodily stillness. Silence was not meant to guard their secrets but to reveal them to the Gnostic initiate in ecstasy.

The Power of Chanting

Although a culture of silence permeates Gnostic ritual, this is only half the story. The other half has to do with repetitive chanting, which, like intentional silence, likely prompted altered states of consciousness and ecstasy. So it is not surprising that Gnostic chants most often are embedded in their records of their ascent journeys, chronicled as transpiring when they are ascending into the highest levels of the transcendent realms. The Gnostics

believed that their chants not only praised the transcendent beings but also tapped into the primal Father's creative power. And this would transform their spirits and heal their bodies.

Chants abound in the Sethian literature. The Gospel of the Egyptians (NHC III.2 44.4–10) records the sounds that brought forth the primal God. According to the Sethians, the sound of God emerged out of the primal silence as the seven vowels pronounced twenty-two times each, in this sequence:

[illegible]

This pattern was used by the Sethians to invoke and praise the God Before All Gods. Similar vowels were used as invocations of the supreme God in Zostrianos. When the initiate ascends to Barbelo, he chants in her presence, “E-E-E-E-A-A-A-A-A-A-A.” A comparable vowel mantra appears later in the text, as the initiate stands among the divinities and intones, “Ê-O-O-O-O-E-A-E-O” (Zostrianos NHC VIII.1 118.21, 127.5)

The same vowel chants are found in the Hermetic Gnostic text Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth (NHC VI.6 61.10–15). When the ascending initiate sees himself as God, which he calls both Mind and Spirit, he feels moved to cry out from a hidden spot deep within himself the name of the primal God of life. His chant sounds like this:

[illegible]

Sethian prayers are riddled with vowel chants, vesting the initiate with the power of primal creation when intoned. This prayer calls upon the creative

power of the Aeon Jesus (Gospel of the Egyptians NHC III.2 66.9–23; my translation):

Jesus!
Ê-Ô-OU-Ê-Ô-Ô-U-A
Truly, Truly!
O Jesus of Nazareth!
Jesus At The Right Hand Of God!
O Living Water!
O Child Of The Child!
O Glorious Name!
Truly, Truly!
O Aeon of Being!
I-I-I-I-Ê-Ê-Ê-E-E-E-E-O-O-O-O-U-U-U-U-Ô-Ô-Ô-Ô-A-A-A-A
Truly, Truly!
Ê-I-A-A-A-Ô-Ô-Ô-Ô
O The One Who Is, Who Sees The Aeons!
Truly, Truly!
A-E-E-Ê-Ê-Ê-O-O-O-O-I-I-I-I-U-U-U-U-Ô-Ô-Ô-Ô-Ô-Ô-Ô-Ô-Ô
The One Who Is Eternally Eternal!
Truly, Truly!
IAO Forever!
Who Is In The Heart, Who Is!
Son Forever, Son Forever!
You are What You Are!
You are What You Are!

The person who chants this prayer, with its strings of vowels, claims that it elicits a vision of Jesus as the perfect God within. He says that he has come to know God internally as Absolute Permanence and has been transmuted by uniting with the immutable. He has become light itself.

The initiate continues to chant praises, giving voice to the profound knowledge of God he has just experienced (Gospel of the Egyptians NHC III.2 67.15–20; my translation):

You, Son, I see!
Forever, Forever!
O Aeon, Aeon!
O God of Silence!
I honor you completely!
You are my rest!
O Son! You Exist!
You are The Formless One Who Is Among the Formless Ones!
You are The Who Is!

After he chants this glorification, he assumes a posture of reverent silence by stretching his hands out from a folded position and circling them to his

breast. This movement, he thinks, mimes the circular shape of the many divinities of light in the transcendent realm. This brings to mind Gnostic images of the primal deity as an ouroboros, a snake encircling itself with its tail in its mouth (see Mastrocinque 2005).

Marsanes (NHC X.1 25.18–39.25), another Sethian text, has an entire section devoted to the spherical sound of different divinities, including souls. The text records different vowel patterns, including diphthongs, semivowels, and double vowels, that are associated with different beings. Consonant combinations are also referenced. Stress on different syllables, beat, and pitch all are covered in this handbook on the language of creation. These vowel and consonant combinations are the roots of all of creation, from the transcendent realm to our world. Their vocalization brings all of life into being. They must be learned carefully and used wisely because they are so creatively potent.

These vowel vocalizations were not something the Sethians made up out of thin air. For centuries, Egyptian priests had used the pronunciation of the seven vowels to guarantee heaven's harmony. One ancient text relates, "When the priests in Egypt are singing their hymns in praise of their gods, they utter the seven vowels in due succession" (Pseudo-Demetrius, *On Style* 71; see Quispel 2000, 208). This practice was very popular in antiquity, found in many magical spells from Egyptian and Greek sources. The ancient people believed that vowel chanting helped maintain order in the universe, heal their bodies, and compel powerful divinities to do their bidding (Frankfurter 1994; Dieleman 2005, 64–80).

Another type of chant that we discover in the Sethian materials is the snore, Z-A or Z-Ô or Z-Ê. This mantra is used to imitate the highest God in the pantheon of Sethian divinities, the father of life itself. In *Allogenes the Stranger* (NHC XI.3 53.33–37), it is the sound of the invisible spirit who is at rest and silent. He continually utters the sound of sleep: *zza zza zza*. As the Sethian initiate moves into the transcendent realms, he likewise makes a snoring sound, to imitate the deity. One such snoring mantra plays off the sound of the word *zoê* (life). The mantra uses a nasal Z followed by the sound of an exhale, which is made with several vowel variations (Zostrianos NHC VIII.1 127.1–3):

Light [*Phôs*]! Life [*Zoê*]!
Z-ÊOÊ Z-ÊOÊ
Z-ÔSI Z-ÔSI
Z-AÔ

Z-ÊOOO
Z-ÊSEN Z-ÊSEN

In addition to vowel chanting and snoring mantras, Gnostic liturgies frequently rely on repeated refrains in their prayers and hymns. In the Sethian liturgy known as the Three Steles of Seth, initiates repeatedly cry out such refrains as they attempt to ascend into the three main realms of the Sethian transcendent world. These appear to have served as mantras for their transcendent journey (Three Steles of Seth NHC VII.5 121.15–16, 124.10–13, 17–18, 125.24):

“You are perfect! You are perfect! You are perfect!”
“You have heard! You have heard!”
“You have saved! You have saved!”
“We give thanks! We bless you always! We glorify you!”
“We rejoice! We rejoice! We rejoice!”
“We have seen! We have seen! We have seen!”
“You are One! You are One!”

After ascending into the highest realm of the Father, the initiates and the congregation become collectively silent.

Similar mantra-like phrases are found in Hermetic hymns, in which initiates sing the refrain “We have known you!” at the beginning of each line of song (Asclepius 41 [Latin]). In other songs, the repeated refrains are “Holy is God!” and “Holy are You!” (Corpus Hermeticum 1.31).

The most extensive explanation of Gnostic chanting is known from the descriptions of the Valentinian Gnostic leader Marcus, who used specific chants in his congregation to harness the power of the transcendent divinities and bring about cosmic harmony and personal healing. We will discuss the chanting practices of his congregation more fully in [chapter 8](#).

Shared Trauma

Gnostic spirituality is a metaphysical orientation that identifies the human condition as traumatized, not as the result of traumatic events we face in our lives but because of our essential nature, which exists torn, separated from the ultimate source of reality. In this isolated state, our essential being, our deep self, experiences constant anxiety and terror right from the moment we are born.

It is nothing we have done that makes us this way. There is no sin committed that makes humanity fallen, depraved, and deserving of suffering.

There is no “bad karma” that we created for ourselves in a past life and now face. This separation anxiety, this primal trauma, is a deep part of who we are, and it connects us all like a red thread. The everyday sufferings that we face are only surface evidence of a much deeper existential problem that must be dealt with before we can live healthier lives.

The Gnostic response was to heal this problem by developing therapeutic ceremonies of religious initiation. Although from group to group there is wild divergence in the details and arrangements of these ceremonies, as we will see in the five case studies in the next chapter, the types of ceremonies performed by Gnostic groups cluster around a few primary objectives.

For instance, there are ceremonies that awaken the unconscious or sleeping spirit. These ceremonies often are performed as virtual underworld journeys. Purgation rituals, performed as celestial ascents through demonic territories, had a cathartic function, ridding a person of fears, terrors, passions, and bad intentions by forcing him or her to face them one by one. Because the newly awakened spirit was only a fledgling, a neophyte, it had to be individuated and fully matured before it could take its place among the transcendent divinities. So Gnostics developed rituals of maturation in which the ascending spirit was gradually transformed into a full divinity. These maturation ceremonies usually took place as ecstatic ascents into the transcendent realms. Gnostics also put into place rituals that integrated the fully individuated spirit with the source of ultimate reality, the primal God whose coming into being started it all.

It is unclear from the fragmented nature of the literature whether all Gnostic groups offered each of these types of rituals or if the ceremonies were progressive, so that the underworld journey was the first ceremony that the initiate underwent and the integration ceremony the last. Given what we know about the mystery religions, however, it is likely that most Gnostic groups had some version of all four ceremonies and that they performed them as a progressive, even lifelong project of therapy for the members of their groups.

In all cases, the virtual ceremonies that the Gnostics performed were believed to bring initiates into ecstasy, to alter their normal state of consciousness, to bring them into feelings of disembodiment, the loss of their souls or egos, and unification with the transcendent. Gnostics used incubatory and chanting techniques to prompt these altered states of consciousness.

Given what neuroscientists are discovering about the effect of stillness and of repetitive rituals such as chanting on the parasympathetic system, it is reasonable to think that the culture of silence and chanting that the Gnostics mastered had powerful biological effects that altered levels of serotonin and dopamine in their brains. It is no coincidence that these are the very neurotransmitters that are implicated in virtually every major neuropsychiatric disorder, including depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. Long before modern psychologists and psychiatrists, before medicines like Prozac and Zoloft, the Gnostics sought to heal through religious initiation the psychological trauma that, in their opinion, inescapably forms the basis of all human existence. Healing the physical body, they believed, had a fortunate correspondence to psychological wholeness.

Gnostics trace this psychological trauma to the moment when transcendent being differentiated and dispersed as spirit into denser realms of existence, where the alienated spirit lodged deep in the psyche suffers from a primordial case of separation anxiety. This condition plagues all humans from birth, because the spirit is the ultimate ground of the human self. The Gnostics teach that people need to become attentive to this deep, traumatized, spiritual self, to purge it of its fears, to grow its immense capacities, to love it, and to consciously integrate it into our reality. Its integration is profoundly transformative because it enables us to see one another empathetically, as infused with the divine potential and impulse yet all suffering alienation. It allows us to see how much we all are suffering and in need of compassion and love.

In the film *Altered States*, Eddie Jessup comes to face-to-face with this primal trauma of the self. Although Eddie had given up the idea of God, he did come to understand the primal terror of the deep human self coming into being. In the final scenes of Chayefsky's film, Eddie has made enough trips in his isolation tank that he regresses all the way back to the big bang, to the moment when the first thought came into existence. Inside the tank, Eddie quickly loses his physical form in a rising tide of water, morphing into a molten white creature and then exploding into space as blinding light and agonizing sound. It is a moment when Eddie begins to fall into the black void of unconsciousness and nothingness.

Emily scrambles around, terrified, as she watches her husband disintegrate. So she does the only thing she knows to do: she reaches out for

him through the whirling vortex of space and time, calling out his name. “Eddie!” she screams, pulling him back to consciousness and bodily form. She clutches him, warding off the horror of human origins.

Emily is terrified. She knows that nothing about the human condition was ever real to Eddie, especially her love for him. Reality for him consisted of what is changeless, immutable, constant, and that reality is what Eddie experienced in the tank. In the tank, he had made love to God, embraced the Absolute, been ravished by Truth. And what had it done? Nearly destroyed him.

When Eddie regains consciousness, he is as terrified as Emily. He tells her that in the tank he experienced the ultimate moment of terror that is the beginning of life and the cause of all human misery. “It’s insufferable!” he yells. “It is nothing, simple, hideous, nothing!” The truth is that nothing exists at the beginning and end of the line.

Through this traumatic experience, Eddie finally realizes the meaning of life. He comes to understand that the only thing that is real, beyond the primal terror of the self, is the love we share with each other. Eddie tells Emily that she is what saved him, what redeemed him from the pit. The only thing keeping that moment of primal terror, that original horror, from devouring him again is Emily—their shared primal trauma and their shared human love.

In the final, climactic scene, they embrace as if they were the first humans, Adam and Eve, naked body against naked body. Eddie looks at her and says what we thought he would never be able to say: “I love you, Emily.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

Hell Walks and Star Treks

James T. Kirk

The USS *Enterprise* has been hijacked by a rogue Vulcan, Sybok. His long, flowing hair and robes seduce us into thinking that Sybok is a guru with a cause. In the opening scene, we are introduced to J'Onn, who joins Sybok's cause. He is taught by Sybok about a secret power within every person that, when engaged, brings about emotional and psychological healing.

When Spock runs into Sybok we learn that Sybok is his long-lost brother, a revolutionary thinker who believes that harnessing emotions is more powerful than harnessing reason. Using an outlawed Vulcan ritual, Sybok is able to merge his mind with others and free them from their secret emotional and psychological pain.

In *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, deemed both a cult classic and the worst Star Trek movie ever made, Sybok has taken over the *Enterprise* and its crew with his mind magic. They are flying the ship through the stars to the outer border of the known galaxy, the Great Barrier, a curtain of shifting energy that no one has ever penetrated. We hold our breath, sure that the ship will be torn to pieces as it slices into the barrier.

But the *Enterprise* makes it through and we begin a journey into the realm where no one has gone before. As the ship thrusts toward a glowing white planet in this virgin realm, we learn that Sybok has been called in a vision to seek the mythical planet Sha Ka Ree. This planet is where Sybok believes the source of all existence, the great God of many names and faces, lives. Sybok claims to be seeking the ultimate knowledge that humans have sought since the beginning of time.



Figure 7.1 James T. Kirk (William Shatner) has a question in *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989).

Sybok does not use ancient Gnostic ritual to release the soul and send it on a journey through the stars and into the transcendent world beyond the borders of the cosmos. To make his Gnostic journey to the ultimate source of all being, Sybok steals Kirk's starship. The *Enterprise* breaches the barrier and whizzes toward this planet of ultimacy.

Captain James T. Kirk is the only person in the film to resist Sybok, considering him a con man (figure 7.1). As the *Enterprise* plummets toward Sha Ka Ree, we wonder whether Kirk's suspicions reflect his stubbornness and obstinacy or he is the one with true insight, the real Gnostic of the movie.

Out of the Cave

Gnostic initiatory rites are an early form of religious psychotherapy. As we saw in the last chapter, the Gnostics created four types of ceremonies in order to awaken, purge, mature, and integrate the damaged self into a stable state of primal and permanent wholeness. These rituals released the soul to journey into hell and through the stars, so that the spirit could eventually breach the cosmic barrier and, like Kirk's *Enterprise*, enter the transcendent realm of ultimate existence. It remains to be seen how individual Gnostic groups in antiquity actually managed this psychotherapy in terms of their individual catechisms and rites.

But before we catch glimpses of these distinctive Gnostic therapies, it is valuable to recognize that what the Gnostics were doing has a history far more ancient than we might imagine, that the Gnostics belong to one of the

biggest stories of our species, the story of the human quest for health and wholeness.

This is something I realized on a day that began as an ordinary day in Houston, when I ventured down to the museum district to see the touring exhibit of the Lascaux caves. What would it be like to see the most ancient artwork in the world, scenes painted on the walls of a cave approximately 16,500 years ago? Granted, the cave on tour was a reproduction of the real caves in Lascaux, but I was eager nonetheless to get a glimpse of what early human artists were up to. I imagined that the artists had been hunters with a few moments to spare as they stalked their prey, waiting for an unsuspecting animal to wander by the mouth of the cave. I imagined that, like graffiti artists, they had placed a few simple drawings of some animal herds on the wall near the cave entrance, where there might have been some light to work by.

Then I walked into the cave. A rush came over me. My breath was nearly taken away. In an instant I knew that these ancient artists had not been bored hunters scribbling on the walls. Herds of animals streamed overhead, moving along the major passageways of the cave in patterns that appeared to be like the zodiac constellations the ancient Egyptians and Greeks drew on their maps of the sky.

Then I turned and saw the northern wall. Smack-dab in the middle of it was a bird-headed man, a bird staff, and an arrow. I was face-to-face with a shaman older than I could possibly fathom. Even though none of the exhibition signs mentioned this fact, I knew I was standing in a replica of a cave that prehistoric people had created and used to initiate shamans.

What I came to find out later, as I went on to investigate the history of the Lascaux caves, was that my initial reaction to the cave was on target. The most recent research on the cave regards it as an underground Paleolithic planetarium revealing an archaic view of the skies, with particular animals representing the stars and planets ([figure 7.2](#)). The arrangement of the animals on the walls of the cave shows the night sky at around midnight on the day of the summer solstice—not 16,500 years ago, as art historians had estimated, but 14,500 years ago, as astronomical records reveal (Rappenglück 2004).



Figure 7.2 Detail of north wall of the reproduction of Lascaux cave, depicting a bird-headed shaman. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

The cave is a microcosm, an entire universe in a bottle. It was created and used by shamans for their initiation ceremonies, during which they believed they were transformed into birdlike creatures. Other shamanic rituals were performed in the cave as well. Like the initiation ceremonies, these were performed on occasions fixed by the celestial phenomena represented on the walls, on the days of the solstices and equinoxes, or at times when the constellations were aligned in particular ways. At these fixed times, these prehistoric shamans believed, paths through the stars opened up, enabling them to fly into the skies on their arrows, piercing the cosmic strata. Invading the otherworld in this manner gave them access to powerful animal spirits

and ancestors in the otherworld, beings who could help them heal people and control the chaotic world around them (Rappenglück 2004).

The Lascaux caves and their connection to prehistoric shamanic practices is uncanny, especially when we realize the longevity of this sort of religious activity. *Thousands of centuries later*, stories of early Greek shamans—like Pythagoras, who was deputized by the Mongolian shaman Abaris—place them in caves too, while also emphasizing their astute astronomical abilities.

Ancient biographies of Pythagoras tell of a man obsessed with initiation in order to learn the mysteries of every god he possibly could, gods not only from his Greek homeland but also from Egypt, Syria, and Rome. He and a fellow Greek shaman, Epimenides, are reported to have descended into the sacred Idaean cave on Crete in which Zeus had once been hidden from his cannibal father, Kronos. They received instruction in the mysteries of the gods who were worshipped there (Diogenes Laertius, *Pythagoras* 3). One of his biographers compares Pythagoras's experience in this sacred cave to his later Egyptian initiations. These took place in the holiest of crypts of the Egyptian temples as Pythagoras journeyed from one major temple complex to the next, meeting the various families of Egyptian gods in Heliopolis, Memphis, and Diospolis (Diogenes Laertius, *Pythagoras* 3; cf. Iamblichus, *Pythagoras* 4; Porphyry, *Pythagoras* 7).

Everywhere he lived after his international travels, when he could count himself initiated into the mysteries of every known god, Pythagoras resided in caves (see Ustinova 2009). On his native island, Samos, he set up his home in a cave just outside the city. He instructed his disciples in this cave, and we are told that it was while studying in this cave that he figured out the science of the stars and planets and demonstrated them mathematically (Iamblichus, *Pythagoras* 5). When Pythagoras moved to Italy, his living quarters were in an underground cavern, where he stayed in isolation for long periods of time. On one occasion when he came out of the cave, people who saw him said that he looked like a skeleton. He told them that he had just completed a journey to the underworld and had visited with the shades in Hades (Diogenes Laertius, *Pythagoras* 21).

Why was Pythagoras trotting around in caves and mapping the paths of the stars geometrically? It was all for the care of the soul, which Pythagoras taught was immortal, constantly moving between birth and death and back again, flying in and out of this world and the otherworld, descending beneath the crust of the earth, and ascending above the firmament, into the spheres of

the planets. He taught that the planets were the hounds of Hades, Persephone's avenging dogs, punishing the impious souls by keeping them imprisoned in the hellish cycle of birth and death (Porphyry, *Pythagoras* 41). The sun and the moon, he said, were the Isles of the Blessed, where the pious long to go (Iamblichus, *Pythagorean Life* 82).

His teachings are filled with information about the soul's immortality and its aerial journey along the Milky Way, during which it descends into a human body at birth and ascends to the stars after death. Pythagoras was most concerned to learn the exact route by which the soul journeyed from the skies into the body at birth and through the underworld at death. He wanted his disciples to learn, before death, the underworld and the astral journey that the pious soul would take when it was released from the cosmic cycle of reincarnation. The Greeks say it was from Pythagoras that they learned about reincarnation, how the soul was entangled within it, and how the soul, through a process of gradual purgation, might get out of the cave once and for all.

Liberation from Reincarnation

Reincarnation is one of the givens that structures many Gnostic systems and practices, particularly as Plato envisioned reincarnation. Although Pythagoras is credited with introducing reincarnation to the Greeks, it is Plato who vividly captured the idea in writing, in his famous account of the traumatic experience of a man named Er (Plato, *Republic* 10.614a–621d). According to the legend Plato knows, Er was a Greek soldier who was killed in battle and then buried in a pile of rotting corpses for days. On the twelfth day, when he was laid out on his funeral pyre and the fires were lit, Er sat up, his eyes wide open, alive as ever, with a harrowing story to tell.

Er recounted a terrifying experience that included the release of his soul from his body and a journey to a cave with four entrances. Two of the mouths yawned deep out of the earth; the other two opened into the sky as portals. In the cave, between the earth and sky portals, sat the judges of the dead. Er watches as the judges mark the deceased with their verdicts, whether their souls had been found righteous or not.

The righteous are guided into one of the sky portals, carrying their judgments on their chests. The unjust are ordered to climb down one of cavernous entrances into the earth, bearing their judgments on their backs. The portals were guarded by fierce gatekeepers who screamed horribly and

seized and flayed anyone who tried to sneak through the sky portals without serving their allotted time in the bowels of hell.

This cavernous place is an afterlife triage center, souls going up into heaven or down into hellish Tartarus according to their moral fitness. But Er soon understands that the souls don't stay put in these other realms. After the souls have been punished in Tartarus or purged in heaven for an allotted time, they journey back to triage through the other two portals. These new arrivals from Tartarus and heaven throng together and set up camp in a nearby meadow, preparing to be reincarnated.

According to Er, this part of the cycle of reincarnation begins with the journey of the purged souls to a shaft of light, a rainbowlike pillar stretching from earth to heaven. This is the Milky Way, which serves as a spindle for the orbit of the seven heavens and the realm of the fixed stars. In the ancient world the earth, not the sun, was at the center of the universe, and the planets revolved around it. The ancients listed the planets as Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Venus, the sun, and the moon. It was believed that the sun moved in the ecliptic, a path through the center of the fixed stars.

The souls ascend the Milky Way shaft and arrive at the ecliptic, where they meet the three Fates, Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos, and their mother, Anagkê, gods who control birth and death and the lot of life. At their stations along the ecliptic, the Fates throw lots before the souls. Each soul selects a lot that reflects the moral fiber of its former life. Each soul is given a guardian spirit that will guide the soul throughout its new life so that its destiny will be fulfilled. As the zodiac turns, the thread of the travelers' destinies are woven on the cosmic spindle and made irreversible, spun into the fabric of their souls, bodies, and lives. Their horoscopes are cast.

Er recalls that, after this, the souls camp by the River of Forgetting, from which they are compelled to drink, to lose their memories of their former lives. Lost in sleep, they await midnight, when they are swept up like shooting stars, up and away to their new births. Er, too, is swept up and away, only to find himself waking up on a burning funeral pyre.

The moral of Er's story? That the soul is immortal and that we must be diligent in our pursuit of justice and wisdom so that all will be well for us in this life and in the thousand-year journey ahead of us, the journey that is our afterlife. Or so Plato says.

This story captured the imagination of many ancients, infusing the ancient mind with afterlife landscapes both terrifying and beatific, landscapes that

were traversed by souls in a cycle of birth and death that repeated itself again and again like the turning of a great cosmic wheel. The soul, trapped within the turnings of the universe, could not escape the lot of life until it was properly educated and morally fit. How did one achieve this education and moral prowess? One joined a Pythagorean community or Platonic club and lived the life of a philosopher (cf. Nussbaum 1994). Or one was initiated as a Gnostic.

The Gnostics were convinced that their rites were superior to anything a philosophical club might have to offer, because their rites did not just release the psyche (soul) from entrapment in the wheel of reincarnation but also awakened the spirit housed in the soul and nurtured the divine seed to maturity. According to most Gnostics, the soul is not immortal, as Plato thought. Rather, it is mortal, just like the physical body, and will not endure. The permanent dimension of the person is the spirit. It is the maturation of the spirit that gives it the legs, so to speak, to journey out of the underworld and the wings to fly beyond the heavens and the constellations to another world, where the true God, the unoriginate Father-Mother, lives. There, the severed, dislocated spirit could cleave to its primal root, embracing wholeness and fullness again. This was not just an afterlife journey to Neverland but a shamanic quest that had to be undertaken in the present, before death.

Thus, the person inducted into the Gnostic mysteries returned from the shamanic quest a full spiritual being, a perfected human who now was empowered to heal the ill, cast out demons, control the cosmic forces, and evoke the transcendent (Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.14). The returning initiates believed that they had walked in the muck of the underworld hells, flown through the cosmic spheres and around the zodiac, and visited the transcendent realm. They had overcome all the forces and gods in the hells and cosmic realms, so that the initiates were liberated from their tyranny. They had come to know the awesome power of their own integrated selves, when their potential divinity was actualized and integrated into their humanity. Quite literally, they had become mortal gods freed from the perpetual turning of the wheel of reincarnation.

Gnostic spirituality, with its focus on psychotherapeutic initiations, emerges in a number of different guises in antiquity, depending on the constituency of the religious buffer in which the Gnostic movement formed. The possibilities of innovative and unique Gnostic movements are infinite, when we consider how the Gnostic metaphysical orientation might mix with

structural elements from various religious and philosophical systems, new interpretations of scriptures, and the personal revelation of charismatic leaders. Such unique blends provided Gnostic leaders with an opportunity to market their group as *the* group that held the exclusive on knowledge. Each group claimed to own the secret knowledge that would heal our psychological traumas by returning the spirit home (Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 1.2; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref.3–4).

The remainder of this chapter will highlight the therapeutic mysteries of five independent Gnostic groups to show the wide range of catechisms and rituals that emerged within the distinct religious buffer that each group engaged. With this, we turn to the mysteries of the Peratics, Ophians, Justinians, Naassenes, and Sethians.

Draco's Travelers

Among the oldest Gnostic Christians was a group of people who called themselves Peratics. Their Greek name is illustrative. It means "Travelers." What does this signal? They tell us that they alone know the road a person travels to get into the world and the path a person journeys to get out of it. They assert that they have an exclusive on the route through the underworld and cosmic realms. Alone, as the Travelers, they claim to have been instructed on the way to traverse mortality (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.16.1).

In their view, traversing mortality requires that the human spirit, what they call "the seed of divine potential," be roused from its dormancy and grown into its full divine form so that it can journey back to its transcendent home. But this is not an easy thing to do, because to get to the transcendent realm the spirit first has to be awakened from unconsciousness, and then it must travel through the hostile realms of the underworld, where it overpowers the dark lords of Hades.

Second, the person has to fully grasp that his or her spirit originates from the transcendent realm. With this realization, the spirit is perfected. The Peratics saw this as a fulling or bleaching process, in which the spotty or stippled spirit is whitened and cleansed of its impurities. Its true nature has to be rescued from corruption, a corruption that has kept it ignorant of its divinity. As the human spirit is perfected, it must ascend through the harrowing celestial spheres and overpower the destructive gods who have stationed themselves as rulers of the planets and stars.

We learn about these early second-century Gnostics from Hippolytus, who was writing in Rome at the beginning of the third century (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.12.1–17.13). According to his description, the Peratics envisioned ultimate reality as a fountain spewing forth or emanating three streams of existence. One stream is transcendent being, which they call the Perfect Good, the Great Father, and the Unbegotten. The second is divinity, which they understand to be the Good as it generates itself and manifests itself as divinities or gods. The third stream of existence is everything that is created, which is also good.

Each of these streams represents superjacent worlds or levels of reality. The Peratics believe that the first level of reality, the unbegotten Good, has flowed into the second level of reality, the self-generating Good. The flow continues into the third level of reality, the material cosmos and humanity, leaving humans filled with spirits, or what the Peratics call “seeds of divine potential.”

But all did not remain good. The Peratics believe that there was a primordial insurrection, when some of the good divinities who controlled the created universe revolted and became evil. Who were these rulers? In the ancient mind, the planets and constellations are the traditional gods and heroes. Zeus, for instance, is the planet Jupiter, and Kronos is Saturn. The constellations are legendary heroes like Hercules and Perseus. The realms of the underworld are the territories of Hades and Persephone. The Peratics identified these traditional divinities with the revolutionary dark lords.

Here we find ourselves in a complicated religious buffer, where popular astrological lore is blended with elements from legends about the monstrous Titans and myths of fallen angels like Lucifer and Samael. The result is a new Gnostic story about the apostasy of the traditional gods, lords who have turned to the dark side and taken control of the universe.

According to the Peratics, the consequence of this primordial insurrection is that human spirits, the seeds of divine potential, are incarcerated by the dark lords. The dark lord reigning over all creation is Kronos, the violent Titan who quakes the earth and spews the waters of Tartarus upward into the ocean. Kronos, the cannibal god who devours his own children, is identified as the craftsman, the Demiurge, who brings forth human life only to destroy it. He is the Father God who murders his children by eating them, trapping their spirits in the cosmos.

This wretched situation requires drastic intervention from the two other levels of reality. The transcendent Good and the upright divinities must do something to alter this horrible predicament and liberate the spirit. Here the Peratic story takes on a decisively Christian flare. Following the narrative arc of the fourth Gospel, the Peratics taught that Christ was sent down from the Good to save creation.

Christ was a powerful entity that embodied all three levels of reality—the transcendent, the divine, and the human. When he was crucified he joined the other celestial rulers as a god, as it is said in the fourth Gospel, when the Son of Man was lifted up like Moses lifted up the serpent. He took control of the highest and brightest constellation, becoming fixed in the skies at the top of the celestial dome as the guardian god of the luminous serpentine constellation Draco.

As such he became the good guardian of the star gate that controls the flow of existence from the transcendent sphere into the cosmos and back again. He opened the Draco portal, establishing a flow of divinity into and out of the cosmos with every rotation of the celestial sphere. This is how they understood the Christian aphorism attributed to Jesus in the fourth Gospel: “I am the door” (John 10:7).

From Hell to Virgo

How do human spirits make their way back to the transcendent realm through the Draco star gate? The Peratics claimed to know the secret, and they promised to reveal the secret to anyone initiated into their mysteries, secret ceremonies that are beyond words, simultaneously tremendous and terrifying. They maintained that their mysteries perfected the initiates, drawing them up into the transcendent world as the perfect race.

This process began with a precise journey through hell, and then a dangerous and terrifying sky trek through the heavens. The final ceremony the Peratics called the Mystery of Eden. During this ceremony, the spirits of the initiates were drawn into the transcendent Father’s world along a star river that flowed through the mouth of Draco.

We learn about the first mystery in this process, the hell walk, from one of the Peratics’ astrological books, *The Suburbs up to the Ether* (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.14.1–10). The book comprises a long hymn, which was performed during the Peratics’ first mystery rite of initiation, when initiates made their way through hell. It opens with terrifying words spoken by the

initiate who suddenly finds himself becoming conscious in the bowels of hell and confronting Kronos, the fearsome Titan, ruler of creation (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.14.1; my translation):

I am the voice of the one who has awakened from sleep in the realm of night.
Now I begin to struggle with the Power that has sprung from chaos,
The Power of the abyss of mud,
The Power that supports the clay of the boundless expanse
Swollen with water,
The utter Power of the earthquake, . . .
The ignorant call this Power "Kronos," guarded with chains,
Since he bound together tightly what is interwoven of the dense and steamy,
The dim dark Tartarus.

This hymn suggests that in the first of their mysteries the Peratics had their initiates incubate with the intent of traversing hell. Although it is difficult to determine exactly what transpired, whether an altered state of consciousness was achieved through the incubatory practice or not, the hell walk was performed so that the initiate interacted with the dark lords ritually. The incubating initiates are awakened in a place they identify as the underworld, and they rehearse a liturgy they have been taught in their catechism.

According to the rest of the hymn, they believed that they met Kronos and other dark rulers of the underworld and the atmosphere, including Persephone, Osiris, Isis, Rhea, and Nebro. The initiates had to memorize the secret names of these dark lords, because the pronunciation of their secret names had powerful magical effects that brought the dark lords under the control of the initiates. We can imagine a ritual exchange of names and thwarting prayers as the initiates met each dark lord. Successful initiates confronted all the underworld lords and powers of the air with their true names.

The initiates believed that they were being guided in their initiation to a specific gate ruled by Persephone, an underworld portal that opened up into the zodiac. The precise location of the gate in the belt of the zodiac is not recorded for us, although we know that Persephone was enthroned at its entrance, along with five other dark lords who guarded it.

Given this evidence, it is likely that the star gate is Virgo. In Greek mythology, Zeus cast Persephone into the skies as Virgo so that Demeter, her mother, will be able to see her even when Persephone must remain in the underworld as Hades's bride. The first phase of initiation, then, resulted in

the awakening of the human spirit, the seed of divine potential, and its release from Hades into the skies through the star gate Virgo.

Jesus the Star Gate

The second phase of the Peratics' mysteries involved sky trekking, when the human spirit had to make its way from Virgo all the way to the top of the celestial dome to another star gate, Draco. The Peratics believed that Draco functioned as the star portal between our cosmos and the transcendent world.

The Peratics called the movement of the human spirit up through the Draco constellation the Mystery of Eden because they identified the ribbon of stars that makes up Draco's tail with the river the Bible says flows into and out of paradise. Clearly, the Peratics think that the Garden of Eden, paradise, is the transcendent world. They have identified the river flowing out of Eden with the ribbon of stars at the top of the universe, which flows down into the celestial spheres from the transcendent world above.

But how did the initiates get up to Draco and into paradise? The initiates had to sky trek. In this second phase of initiation, the initiates believed that their spirits left their bodies. They compare this phase of their mysteries to the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt, when the Hebrews escaped from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and wandered in the wilderness for forty years before crossing the Jordan into their homeland, Canaan. In this phase of their mysteries, the initiates' spirits were believed to cross the Red Sea that flowed out of the underworld and encompassed the universe. They were delivered out of Egypt, unharmed by the waters of chaos swelling with Kronos's unbridled power.

Do we have here a reference to a water rite, when the initiates were herded down a riverbank into the water, where they waded to the other side? If so, this rite would not have been understood as a ritual of baptismal cleansing but as an escape from the realm of chaos and embodiment.

Once on the opposite bank of the Red Sea, the initiates had to journey through the wilderness, which for them was the sky. They had to make a terrifying journey through the heavens, a journey that they envisioned as a trek across a celestial wilderness populated with fiery serpents intent on biting and killing them, just as the Bible described. These serpents are the rulers of the stars and planets, the dark lords who thwart any soul that tries to escape their rule.

The Peratics notice what the Bible says about the Hebrews who were saved from the bite of the serpents. They were saved when they gazed upon the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up for all to see. Likewise, they said, the initiates' salvation comes from the serpent Christ, who is Draco, the serpentine star shining most brightly in the roof of the heavens. To safeguard their initiates from the bites of the celestial dark lords, then, the Peratics tattooed their bodies with the sign of Draco. The Peratics link this tattoo with the mark of Cain, which, according to the Bible, safeguarded Cain from homicide (Genesis 4:15). Like the mark of Cain, which protected Cain from being murdered by fellow men, so too, the Peratics claimed, did the Draco tattoo protect them from being murdered by the dark lords of the skies.

The Peratics, safeguarded by their sacred tattoos, believed that their whitened and perfected spirits were drawn into Draco's portal like iron (and nothing else) is drawn to a magnet. This is the Mystery of Eden, when their spirits leave the celestial spheres through Draco's portal, when they are spit out of Draco's mouth into the realm of the transcendent. When they are returned safely home.

Zodiac Avengers

A person is lying on the ground. The "father," likely a priest or elder, anoints the person with oil. The person responds, "I have been anointed with white oil from the tree of life." The person's soul separates from his or her body and flies up through the celestial spheres, resurrected. This is how the pagan philosopher Celsus describes a rite called the Seal, which he witnessed being performed (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.24–38).

This might sound like a typical case of the Catholic ritual known as the last rites, when a dying person is anointed with oil, which prepares the soul for death by providing the dying person with absolution for sins. But it is not. What is being described is an initiation ceremony performed by a group of Gnostics whom Celsus calls "Christians." According to Celsus' description of these people, they are Christians who need to be recognized for what they really are: fools who believe that the soul, when it separated from the body, has to journey home along a specific secret route through the planets, which they alone know.

Celsus is writing his critique of Christianity in the year 178 CE. He describes this particular group of Gnostic Christians at length in his book. As Christians, he says, they believe in Jesus, the crucified son of a carpenter,

who laid down laws that contradict the laws of the Jewish God. They call the Jewish God “Cursed” because this is the God who cursed the serpent in Eden for giving the first humans knowledge of good and evil. Instead of worshipping this cursed Creator God of Jewish scripture, these Christians worship another God, who Jesus taught them is the genuine Father God.

Celsus reports that he got to know the group’s Christian elders well enough that he was shown some of their books, in which foreign names of demons and the knowledge of portents were written. He witnessed their purification rites, heard their hymns of redemption, listened to the sounds they made when they healed their sick, and learned how they used particular vestments or costumes, numbers, stones, plants, and roots as remedies (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.40). Celsus considers all of this harmful rather than beneficial and frames it as magic meant to deceive the local yokels.

He remarks that their elders talk repeatedly about the “tree of life” and believe that resurrection *from* the flesh, rather than resurrection *of* the flesh, occurs by means of this tree. They enact this belief when they seal the body of the initiate, who is lying on the ground as if dead. They smear the flesh of the initiate with oil from the tree of life. This, they say, separates the initiate’s soul from his or her body.

How does the soul know where to go? Celsus records that this group of Christians used a particular diagram, a map of the spheres, to assist them on their soul journeys. Each planetary sphere was controlled by an archon (ruler), a dark lord of the skies, whose territory, name, and shape were marked on the map.

The initiatory ceremonies took the inductees up into the realms of the dark lords, where they overcame the rulers one by one. Each time they returned, the initiates were granted the form of whatever dark lord they had overcome. They became lions, bulls, serpents, eagles, bears, or dogs. This change of appearance may have been staged with masks or costumes.

Because their mysteries involved a gradual astrological sojourn with levels of achievement, Celsus sees them as quite similar to the mysteries of Mithras. Mithras worshippers progressively faced the rulers of the planets and came back sporting special statuses as ravens of Mercury, brides of Venus, soldiers of Mars, lions of Jupiter, Persians of the moon, sun runners of the sun, or fathers of Saturn.

We know even more about these Gnostics and their celestial initiation rite because Origen, the early Apostolic Catholic theologian and teacher from

Alexandria, writes about them in the beginning of the third century. He identifies them not as Christians but as Ophians (see Rasimus 2009). This name stems from the Greek word for snake, *ophis*, which alludes to their belief that the serpent in Eden was wise and that he spoke the truth to Eve in the garden.

Origen himself has found a copy of their initiatory map, although it does not appear to be an exact replica of the diagram that Celsus saw. Origen's map contains the names of the dark lords and the actual prayers that the initiates learned to say to each ruler they encountered in the spheres of heaven. Origen gives us enough information that we can virtually reconstruct the secret path that the Ophian Christians believed the soul took to journey through the cosmos.

A Nocturnal Sky Trek

The Ophian path was a sky trek through particular houses of the zodiac. In each house, the initiate conquered the ruling planetary dark lord by reciting a memorized prayer and displaying a secret sign or seal. The exact route of their soul journey through the zodiac houses aligns with the astrological teaching of a second-century Pythagorean philosopher, Numenius.

Numenius taught that the soul ascended through the star gate Capricorn (Porphyry, *Cave of Nymphs* 23). The ascending soul leaves the body at death by making its way around the nocturnal houses of the zodiac, from Capricorn through Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, and Gemini, exiting via Cancer. Incarnation involved descent along the other half of the zodiac, the diurnal houses, when the soul entered through Cancer's star gate and descended through Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, and Sagittarius, and finally dropped through Capricorn and was embodied.

The Ophian Christians, following this same astrological pattern, thought that when the soul leaves its body it flies through the Capricorn star gate. Capricorn is ruled by the planet Saturn, which the Ophians identified with the chief of the dark lords, the Jewish god whom they called by the secret name Ialdabaoth but who also carried the angel name Michael. This god is lion-shaped and ferocious. Standing before him, the initiate says, "Greetings, Solitary King, Bond of Blindness, Reckless Forgetting, First Power. I am guarded by the spirit of Pronoia and by Sophia. Now I am sent forth pure. I am already part of the light of the Son and the Father. May grace be with me. Yes, Father, may it be with me" (Origen, *Against Celsus* 31, my translation).

The next stop of the zodiac avenger is the star gate Aquarius, which is also ruled by Ialdabaoth. A second prayer is recited in which the avenger identifies his own nous or mind as more powerful than Ialdabaoth. The initiate considers himself a perfect product of the Son and the Father. The initiate shows Ialdabaoth a secret seal that is imprinted with the symbol of life. These actions open Ialdabaoth's cosmic gate and allow the liberated initiate to go past Ialdabaoth a second time.

The initiate continues, entering the star gate Pisces, which is ruled by Iao, lord of the planet Jupiter. "Greetings, ruler from whom the mysteries of the Son and the Father are concealed, Iao, the Second Lord Shining in the Night and the First Lord of Death," says the initiate (Origen, *Against Celsus* 31, my translation). In his avenging prayer, the initiate claims to be mature yet innocent, having overpowered the negative aspects of his self made by Iao.

Likewise, at the star gate Aries the initiate overpowers Sabaoth, also known as Raphael, the dark lord of Mars. Then, at the Taurus gate he conquers bear-headed Astaphaeus, king of Venus. At the gate of Gemini the initiate takes on dog-faced Eloaeus, ruler of the planet Mercury. Finally, Horaeus, the ass-faced ruler of the moon, is vanquished at the star gate Cancer. At each gate, the avenger stuns the rulers with names and prayers of power that defeat them.

We are fortunate to have recorded in Origen's writings all the prayers of demon defeat, along with references to various objects or signs that were displayed along the zodiac route. What is even more phenomenal is that one of the Ophians' ritual objects has survived the centuries.

In 1949, Professor Campbell Bonner published an article in which he identified an ancient green jasper gem as an Ophian amulet (Bonner 1949). On the front of the gem is carved a lion-headed god identified by the titles Ialdabaoth and Ariel, Lion of God. This gem shows us what Ialdabaoth looked like, as imagined by the Ophians. He is a manlike god with the fierce head of a lion. He is dressed in Roman garb, wielding a scepter. On the reverse side of the gem is a list of the seven Ophian planetary rulers: Ia[l]dabaoth, Iao, Sabaoth, Adonai, Eloaeus, Horaeus, and Astaphaeus. This remarkable gem was once worn by an Ophian initiate, either as a pendant or a ring of power, whose display at the zodiac gates defeated the planetary rulers and opened up passage for the ascent of the avenger's spirit ([figure 7.3](#)).

Elohim's Star Trekkers

Another Gnostic, by the name of Justin, swore to anyone who would follow him that he would give them “what no eye has seen and no ear has heard and what has not been conceived by the heart” (see Broek 2003). As their mystic leader, he would conduct them directly to the Good, the Father God. Justin claimed for himself and his followers the name Gnostics because, he said, they had exclusive knowledge about the whereabouts of the Father and had met him personally at the end of their ecstatic sky treks.

Justin penned a book about these things, which Hippolytus of Rome preserves (*Refutation* 5.26.1–27.5). Justin is operating in a religious buffer that is pregnant with Greek and Christian piety and literacy. Although the Greek world of gods and heroes is Justin's backbone, he operates from a distinctly Christian viewpoint in which history anticipates and culminates in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Justin assesses stories and characters in biblical scripture as if they were Greek gods and heroes, warp and weft of the same fabric.



Figure 7.3 Cast of an Ophian amulet originally described by Bonner (1949), catalog number D188. The whereabouts of the original jasper gem is unknown. These are new photos of the cast of the gem housed in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Published with permission.

According to Justin's *Book of Baruch*, there exist from eternity three unbegotten, primordial gods. The first is the Father, the Good. Since the Good Father is ultimately responsible for the design of everything that exists, he is known and worshipped throughout the Mediterranean world as the Greek fertility god Priapus ([figure 7.4](#)). The second is Elohim, the father of everything that is begotten. He is the Creator God YHWH in the Jewish scriptures, lord of the skies. The third is Eden, the female earth goddess, the personification of the biblical garden of paradise.

Elohim and Eden are attracted to each other and marry. They are happy newlyweds. From their erotic lovemaking are born the divinities that populate the skies and underworld. Out of their love they also create the human being, both male and female. Eden imparts to them the soul, Elohim the spirit. The first human couple follows the example of Eden and Elohim. They marry, become lovers, and bear children to populate the earth.

Problems arise in paradise when Elohim realizes that it is his nature to ascend. He is, in fact, the sky. Eden, however, cannot follow him, because she is the earth and must remain below. When Elohim ascends and reaches the summit of the heavens, he comes to a star gate whose light is brighter than anything he himself had created. He calls out, as is reflected in the Bible, "Open the gates!" From the other side of the gate a voice calls back, "This is the gate of the Lord; through this gate the righteous enter" (see Psalms 118:19–20). The star gate opens and Elohim passes through. On the other side he sees the Good Father. The Good Father enthrones Elohim next to him on his right and prevents him from ever leaving again.



Figure 7.4 First century fresco of the fertility god Priapus, from Pompeii. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Italy. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

Eden, realizing that Elohim has left her, tries to lure him back with her good looks and erotic gestures. When Elohim does not return to her, she falls into despair and grief, acting the angry abandoned spouse. Human marriages begin to fall apart, following their example. To punish Elohim, the resentful Eden declares war on the human spirit, which Elohim had given to human beings, finding all possible ways to make the spirit suffer. Because of this, the soul and spirit are locked in a perpetual battle with each other.

Ascent to the Good

On various occasions throughout history, Elohim sends his angel Baruch as a divine emissary to try to liberate his spirit from its suffering. The final occasion is Baruch's visit to Nazareth and the twelve-year-old boy Jesus. Baruch reveals the cosmic situation to Jesus and asks him to take up the mission to preach the truth to all people, to show them how to bring an end to the suffering of their spirits. Jesus must teach their spirits how to ascend to the Good Father and take their place at his right hand as Elohim had done. When Jesus was crucified by his enemies, Eden's angels, his spirit took up the charge and led the way for all other human spirits to follow. Jesus' spirit ascended to the Good Father, leaving his natural body behind in Eden's hands, since it belonged to her anyway.

Justin claims to offer initiates ascent to the Good Father along Elohim's path, which was revealed by Jesus. What was Justin doing with his initiates? Hippolytus emphasizes three things in his description of their mysteries: silence, instruction, and mimicry. Justin insisted that his initiates swear an oath of silence before he would instruct them about reality and take them on the sky trek to the Good Father. Hippolytus tells us that this oath was meant to bind the initiates to secrecy about their Gnostic catechism and experience. There is likely some truth to this, because it was commonly known that the initiated were not supposed to divulge the mysteries to the uninitiated.

But this is not the whole story. Hippolytus goes on to mention that being initiated by Justin is comparable to going on a long journey, with stops at an inn to get some sleep. It may be that Justin was training his initiates for their ecstatic sky trek by teaching them, first and foremost, bodily silence as an incubatory practice. Once they had become skilled in incubating silence, he instructed them about reality as it was revealed in the Gnostic *Book of Baruch*.

Then, mimicking Elohim, Justin guided the initiates on their sky trek to the star gate of the Lord, where they chanted the same line from Psalms: "Open the gates!" When the portal opened they passed through and were guaranteed a vision of the Good Father. As living spirits like Elohim, they were offered a drink from a fountain of bubbling life-giving water and then were told to bathe in it. The bath was magical, ending the suffering of their divorced spirits by returning them to the realm of the Good Father and securing them within his realm forever.

Hermaphrodites at Heaven's Gate

One of the most complex descriptions of a Gnostic group is Hippolytus's narrative about the Naassenes (*Refutation* 5.6.3–11.1; see Lancellotti 2000). The Naassenes called themselves Gnostics because they said that they alone had experienced the depths of knowledge. Their other name, Naassenes, is inspired by the Hebrew word for snake, *nachash*.

The Naassenes believed that the God from which everything originates is a serpent living in the moist essence of the primordial universe. In this belief, we are not far from the Egyptian Atum. In the Naassene account of reality, the primordial god is a hermaphrodite, whom the Naassenes call Adamas. Like the Egyptian All-Lord Atum, he is envisioned as a serpent coiled in water before anything existed. This Primal Man, the Father-Mother God, is the source of all life, which flows from him like a river with three currents: the noetic (mental), the psychic (soul), and the earthly (physical). This river and its currents flow from Adamas's transcendent realm down into the realm of Chaos.

The Naassenes or Snake Gnostics were ancient perennialists, people who promoted the concept that the different religions around the world all allude to the same universal God. They believed that this serpentine God Before All Gods is the reality beneath the worship of every god at the world's shrines and temples, every religious ceremony, and every mystery initiation. They believed that their ancestors had recognized an original god called Primal Man, but that the glory of Primal Man had been tarnished by trying to capture him-her in statues, temples, and myths.

In the Naassene story, Primal Man has a son known as Perfect Man and the Son of Man. He is a microcosmic version of Primal Man, containing within himself the noetic, psychic, and earthly currents of the primal river. Eventually he incarnates as Jesus, born of Mary, but first he serves as the template for the creation of Adam, the first human being, molded out of earthly clay by the fiery solar god Esaldaeus and the other lords of Chaos.

Their golem, Adam, lay inanimate on the ground as a trap for Perfect Man, which the lords of Chaos wished to possess. The generative nature of the soul that the dark lords created for Adam was so erotic, so attractive to Perfect Man, that he dropped his seed or semen into Adam (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.6.35–36). The seed of Perfect Man is the vivifying human spirit, which now must suffer because it dwells in an environment unnatural to it.

And so we have a story of a primal God whose nature is erotic and procreative. This nature is both heaven and hell, good and bad, for the God.

On the one hand, it is generative, the causative force of existence itself. On the other hand, it is corruptive and narcissistic. Perfect Man experiences eroticism's corruptive power and consequently becomes entrapped in a human psyche and body when he inseminates the golem.

Because Perfect Man strayed sexually, the Naassenes recognized his reflection in the Greek god Attis, famous because he was the husband of the great mother goddess Cybele. There are many versions of his story, but they all indicate that Attis, handsome to a fault, had an affair that broke Cybele's heart. Her wrath brought down his lover and Attis went mad, driven to castrate himself out of grief and guilt (Ovid, *Fasti* 4.222).

The Naassenes, like the priests of Cybele, value castration, although Hippolytus tells us that they do not make themselves eunuchs by cutting off their scrota. Rather, they refuse to procreate, abstaining from heterosexual intercourse. In this way, they make up for the mistake of Perfect Man, ensuring that his spirit will not continue to be passed on in the semen that would seed a new child (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.38–41).

Awakening the Child

The spirit can only be rescued from its entrapment gradually, as a person is initiated into the Naassene mysteries. The Naassenes thought that their mysteries were revealed to them by Jesus, who came down from the transcendent world, bringing with him secret knowledge of the holy way back to the realm of Primal Man (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.10.1). They called the initiate a *teleios* (perfect), a person perfecting his or her spirit (5.7.16–17, 5.8.28–29).

Before the initiation, the initiate had to take a vow of abstinence from heterosexual relations. This stemmed future incarnations of Perfect Man's spirit while also destroying the gendered body. The Naassenes thought that abstinence was a practice that made them hermaphrodites, new creatures that no longer played separate male and female roles. By refusing to participate in heterosexual sex, they became male-female creatures like Primal Man. Because of this teaching, they were accused by their opponents of being homosexual (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.14–15; cf. Galatians 3:28; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:15, 4:24; Colossians 3:9–10).

Initiation itself comprises three stages: defeating mortality, ascending through the spheres, and rejoining Adamas in the house of God (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.8.4). As fledgling hermaphrodites, initiates embark on the

initiatory journey as a *paidos* (child). At the second level, they advance as an *ephêbos* (youth). The mysteries are completed at the third level, where the youth has grown into an *anêr* (adult) (5.8.19).

The level of the child is the level of awakening, when the infant spirit comes to consciousness in the pit of Hades. Ritually, initiates are baptized in flowing water. This is meant to mimic their origin in the primal waters (5.7.19, 5.9.21–22). Hippolytus compares this level of initiation to the Greek Lesser Mysteries of Persephone celebrated at Eleusis; the Naassene initiate journeys to the underworld along a pathway described as jagged, cavernous, and muddy (5.8.42–43). The leader of this level of the Naassene initiation journey is Hermes, the Olympian god who is known in Greek mythology as a psychopomp, an escort who helps the dead find their way to the underworld. He is one of the only gods who can journey back and forth between the realm of the dead and our world.

Hermes carries a caduceus, a special staff around which are entwined two snakes. In the Naassene mysteries, this staff is identified as the golden rod mentioned by Homer in the *Odyssey* (24.2–4), which soothes men's eyes and wakes them from their sleep. It also is the shepherd's rod of iron mentioned in Psalms 2:9. Hermes uses this staff to awaken and direct souls to become suitors of Adamas, bridegrooms of the Son of Man (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.30–32; cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 24.1–2). Hermes is understood to be Christ, who, according to Ephesians 5:14, awakens those who sleep and gives them light (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.33). In the Naassene mythology, Hermes is the Christ, harrowing hell.

The language here suggests that the Naassenes, like other Gnostic groups that staged hell walks, were practicing incubation as part of their journey. The first-level Naassene initiates are understood to be among the sleeping souls in the realm of the dead. A priest or elder probably stood in for Hermes, who swings the staff he carries, selecting particular souls for initiation by smacking them awake. A number of awakened souls press close around Hermes, crying out. The screaming souls follow Hermes closely as they make their way along the arduous path out of the rodent-infested cave of the dead (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.34; cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 24.5–8). Hermes's job is to lead initiates along the rotting paths of hell into the eternal realms where there is no evil.

Along the way, the initiates display the secret seals revealed to them by Jesus, and use a secret password, "*saulasau*," to defeat the dark lords of the

underworld that they meet (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.10.1, 5.8.4). This secret password is a Hebrew phrase that the Naassenes derived from Isaiah 28:13, where it is written that the “word of the Lord will be to them precept upon precept [*sau la sau*].” In this case, the Naassenes understood that the dark lords of the underworld would be thwarted by the word of the Lord, *saulasau*. It was the magic word that held the power to get the person out of the realm of the dead.

With this, the initiate is resurrected from the grave. Through this experience, the initiate’s infant spirit becomes a *paidos* (child), seven years of age (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.20). The initiate’s new status may have been displayed communally in a robing ceremony in which the seven robes of Isis were given to the initiate, as was done in Isis’ mysteries. According to the Naassenes, these are the seven ethereal robes of the planets (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.6.22–24). They represented for the Naassenes the resurrected soul released from the body.

Up to Venus and the House of God

The second phase of initiation, which the Naassenes thought was comparable to the first of the Greater Mysteries of Eleusis, is when the child becomes an *ephêbos* (youth), fourteen years old. The initiation is conducted when the moon is in its crescent phase.

To start things off, a drinking ritual is performed, when water that has been turned into wine is drunk from the cup of Anacreon, a famous Greek poet known for his drinking songs. Yet this phase of initiation is characterized by hymns of silence and no speech, suggesting once again the use of incubatory practices to still the body and prompt ecstatic states of consciousness. Hippolytus records the words said over the cup, which suggest that the induction of an altered state of consciousness had something to do with chemicals, too (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.8.6–7):

Bring water, boy, bring wine,
Make me drunken, make me sleepy;
For my drinking-cup informs me
Of the kind of man I must be,
Speaking without speech in silence.

This phase included a sky trek along the cosmic pole, the Milky Way river of stars that flows through the heavens. This river streams downward from Primal Man into Chaos, the generative ocean from which the human

originates. Its upward flow reverses the process, turning humans into gods. Joining its upward current means that the initiates have left behind Egypt, which symbolized for them heterosexual intercourse. As newly born hermaphrodites, the initiates cross the Red Sea and enter the Jordan River in order to return home to heavenly Jerusalem as the kingless generation (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.37–41).

Where are they headed? Up to a star gate they call the Gate of Heaven, a portal that will lead them out of the cosmos. This is identified by the Naassenes as “the third gate,” a star gate that they believed Jacob saw when he dreamed of a ladder set up on earth, the top of which reached heaven (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.20; cf. Genesis 28:17). It is also the true gate spoken of by Jesus in John 10:9: “I am the true gate” (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.7.20). Unless the initiates go through this gate, their spirits will remain confined to the realm of temporality and suffering.

Which star gate are they talking about? The ancient people had a shorthand way of referring to the planets based on their proximity to the earth, and Venus is the third in that arrangement. The Naassenes identify Venus as the planetary power that controls the generation of souls. So the gateway for souls ascending out of the underworld is likely the nocturnal house of Taurus, the ascent star gate that Venus rules.

At Venus’s gate, the initiates chant a prayer of demonic defeat they have learned from Psalms 24:7–9: “Your leaders, lift up the gates! Ancient doors be lifted up! That the King of Glory may come in!” Who is the King of Glory? It is the initiate who has been mighty in battle, contesting successfully with the heterosexual body as a young hermaphrodite. The initiate shouts out the secret password “zeesar,” a reference to the Hebrew phrase “ze’êr sham,” which, like “saulasau,” the Naassenes had lifted from Isaiah 28:13 (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.8.4). With these words of power, the star gate opens to them. As a communal display of their new status as *ephēbos* (youth), the initiates’ bodies are anointed with a very special oil from the horn of David (5.9.21–22).

At the third level, the initiate’s spirit becomes an adult man equal to Perfect Man. In the previous stages of initiation, the body had been stripped from the soul, and the soul had been stripped from the spirit. Now the naked spirits, as bridegrooms, walk through Venus’s star gate and stand at the edge of the universe. They wish to enter the transcendent realm, the house of God

(5.8.44–45). They now call out a third password, also derived from Isaiah 28:13: “*kaulakau*” (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.8.4).

When the Son of Man who guards the house of God hears this, he greets them as his own. As a communal display of their new status as Adamas’s bridegrooms who have returned to the realm of the Unoriginate, they are fed milk and honey. Its taste is transformative (5.8.30). The initiates become the hermaphrodite God himself. The initiates have risen from the dead, ascended through the spheres, and entered God’s home through heaven’s gate (5.7.24).

Standing Sethians

The Sethians, the biblical Gnostics we met in [chapter 3](#), had many names for themselves, including the Kingless Race, the Children of Seth, and the Immobiles or Standers (see Williams 1985). They were the first people to have blended Gnostic spirituality with the Bible, in a context before Christianity. So they have a fairly long history, going back to at least the beginning of the first century CE, when the Jewish philosopher Philo was active in Alexandria and combating the Gnostic interpretation of the Bible with his own commentaries.

But the Sethians did not remain Gnostic Jews interpreting the Bible. Their transgressive move to identify YHWH with demonic figures like Samael, Nebruel, and Saklas left them vulnerable and unwelcome within typical Jewish circles. This may be why the movement rapidly took on a Christian identity, so that almost all of our Sethian texts now are framed with Christian narrative and references.

Some Sethian communities, like the one that produced the infamous Gospel of Judas, actually identified themselves as Christians—and as the only true Christians, at that. They saw all other Christians as Jews living under the deceitful rule of YHWH, who the Sethians call Ialdabaoth. They thought it tragic that the false Christians centered their worship around the actions of the demon Judas, who had been responsible for the sacrifice of Jesus to YHWH, just as the New Testament Gospel stories record. As my previous work on the Gospel of Judas (2009) supports they thought that Judas’s evil deed had become the focus of a new sacrificial cult that empowered Ialdabaoth. Because this cult centered its worship on YHWH as Ialdabaoth, the Sethians considered it a false Christian cult that was actually Jewish. As we will see in [chapter 10](#), the Sethians argue that the false Christians

followed Judas as the leader of their new kingdom, which was a new tribe of Israel, the thirteenth.

This understanding of Christianity is implicit in the Sethian book the *Apocalypse of Adam*, which contains a very old hymn about the descent of a redeemer angel to thirteen kingdoms (NHC V.5 77.27–82.20). In the Jewish tradition, the angel Wisdom descends to earth and looks among the nations for a place to lodge. Similarly, in this text a transcendent divinity descends to thirteen kingdoms—the twelve tribes of Israel plus Christianity, the thirteenth kingdom or New Israel—looking to select one kingdom as his own. But he finds all of them inadequate. This powerful divinity is born in each kingdom and brings with him water baptism for their redemption, but none of the kingdoms responds.

Because of their unresponsiveness, the divinity elects another people as his own: the kingless generation. These are the sons of Seth who accept baptism from the great Sethian angels Micheu, Michar, and Mnesinous in the name of the redeemer, Jesus of Nazareth, who is also known as Jesus on the Right Hand. The Sethians who wrote this apocalypse clearly believed themselves to be the only true followers of Jesus, far superior to the old twelve tribes of Israel and the new thirteenth tribe of false Christians.

The forging of Sethian identity went in other directions as well. There is a heap of evidence from the third century that some Sethians began shaping a more philosophical identity as the best-ever Platonic community. They wrote their famous trilogy, *Allogenes the Stranger*, *Marsanes*, and *Zostrianos*, which has survived in fragmented form among the Nag Hammadi texts. At least *Allogenes* and *Zostrianos* (and perhaps *Marsanes*, too) were known to the third-century philosopher Plotinus, who operated a Platonic academy in Rome. Some Sethians, whom Plotinus calls Gnostics and “friends,” attended his seminary and gave the poor man fits because of their insistence that the God who created our world is evil and has bad intentions for us.

The Five Seals

Given these diverse Sethian identities as Gnostic Jews, as the only true Christians, as the best-ever Platonic philosophers, what can be said about their initiatory practices? Here we find remarkable stability in terms of water practices and performances of bodily stillness. Throughout the wide range of Sethian materials there is agreement that the Five Seals is a Sethian water rite (Pearson 2011; Turner 2013). The Sethians used combinations of

baptism, anointing, and investiture as initiates traversed the underworld, celestial, and transcendent realms. These rites were used to mark the transformation of the spirit or self as it journeyed from the lowest to the highest of these realms.

Like other Gnostic mysteries, Sethian initiation begins with the awakening of the spirit in the underworld, when the initiate undergoes the ceremony of the Five Seals, an underworld water ritual described in our earliest Sethian sources. In the previous chapter we looked at the liturgy as it is preserved in the last section of the long version of the Apocryphon of John (NHC II.1 30.33–31.25), in which the divinity Forethought descends bodily into Hades and awakens the initiate from deep sleep. After a liturgical exchange, she seals him five times in a special luminous water to redeem him from death. These five seals ritually defeat the five underworld lords referenced earlier in the work (11.6–7).

This same type of liturgy is preserved in another old Sethian document, the Trimorphic Protennoia. In this rendition of the Five Seals ritual, Forethought descends into the underworld to awaken the initiates. She claims that her life spirit dwells even in the souls incarcerated in Tartarus, the deepest pit of hell. Her job is to awaken these souls and grant them gnosis. She is the voice crying out to everyone in Hades, awakening them to the knowledge of the spiritual seed that indwells within them.

The inner spirit is then baptized in the water of life (Trimorphic Protennoia NHC XIII.1 35.1–37.3; cf. 40.30–41.25). This baptism at the hand of the baptizing angels Micheu, Michar, and Mnesinous strips the spirit of its physical and psychic accouterments. Naked, the spirit is presented with a new robe of light, given by the angels of investiture, Yammon, Elasso, and Amenai (48.6–20).

According to the Trimorphic Protennoia (40.30–41.30, 49.20–38), the Five Seals is associated with Forethought's gift of gnosis. It is the ritual that strips the body and soul from the spirit and re-dresses the spirit with a garment of light. The spirit becomes so empowered by its awakening and transformation that the dark lords of the underworld, the demons of Chaos, can no longer stop its ascent into the transcendent overworld. The five seals have defeated their tyranny and provide the spirit with access to the realms beyond the cosmos.

In the Trimorphic Protennoia (45.12–34), the divinity Forethought, whose spirit indwells in the human soul, now invites the faithful into her

transcendent realm of light. In this realm, the initiate's spirit is progressively transformed from one type of divinity to the next, each level marked by more baptisms and more investitures of robes, each robe more glorious and luminous than the last. There also is mention of enthronements and glorifications in the transcendent realms, when the spirit has achieved a divine status so elevated that it itself becomes the object of angelic praise (48.21–35).

Platonic Transcendence

The more Platonic Sethian texts—Marsanes, Allogenes the Stranger, and Zostrianos—describe ecstatic ascents of initiates into the transcendent world (Turner 2001; Burns 2014). The narrative of Zostrianos shows that baptismal rites were being performed to mark the initiate's ascent, and intentional stillness in a standing prayer posture was cultivated, too. At the beginning of the composition, Zostrianos, an ideal initiate, discovers his inner spirit, realizing that it is separate from his material body and psyche. He works on cultivating his spirit and tries to find a place for his spirit to rest.

Even though he learns a Gnostic catechism, he is unsuccessful in his endeavors to free his spirit from its earthly trappings. In a moment of suicidal despair, a great angel comes to his rescue (Zostrianos NHC VIII.1 1.10–4.20). This moment represents the beginning of his initiation, his ecstatic journey to God. The text describes his journey in progressive stages. The journey must have been performed in gradual ceremonies in which the Sethian community initiated its members after the example of Zostrianos.

First, the initiate's spirit separates from the body and is rescued from the cosmos—all thirteen realms and their rulers. These realms include the five realms of the underworld and the seven celestial spheres. In the realm of darkness, likely Hades, the initiate is baptized and transformed into a being of light. This enables him to ascend through the seven celestial spheres, where he is baptized again, once in each realm. The initiate journeys to the realm of sojourning souls, the place where souls live between reincarnations. The initiate is baptized there. He goes on to the realm of repenting souls and is baptized four more times (4.24–5.29).

At this point, the initiate enters the lowest level of the transcendent world, where he is baptized and sealed by the great baptizing angels. He is transformed into an angel of this first level and stands there as a member of the Immovable Race, glorifying the divinities who live there. This same

procedure takes place in subsequent levels of the transcendent world until the initiate has advanced through all the levels that make up the realms of the Sethian trinity: the realms of the self-generated Son, of Barbelo the Mother, and of the preexistent Father.

The higher he advances, the more the initiate withdraws into silence. In total, he braves twenty-two baptisms. At the pinnacle of the ascent, the initiate undergoes anointing and coronation as he is transformed into a god worthy of praise and meets the primordial God he has been seeking throughout (Zostrianos NHC VIII.1 63.20–22, 129.2–6; cf. 57.4–59.7; Allogenes the Stranger NHC XI.3 52.13–33).

The Three Steles of Seth, also a later Sethian composition, evinces flights into transcendence as well, but not as narrative reports. The Three Steles of Seth is a triple liturgy comprising communal hymns and recitations that were used to ascend through the three realms of the transcendent world, the realms where the Father, the Mother, and the Son dwell. These liturgies demonstrate that Sethian initiations had communal settings and were preoccupied with achieving ecstasy. They combined repetitive chants such as “We bless you! We bless you! We bless you!,” “You are perfect! You are perfect! You are perfect!,” “You have heard us! You have heard us! You have heard us!,” and “We have seen you! We have seen you! We have seen you!” with strengthening prayers and lengthy periods of rapturous silence.

If God Were an Archon

A shuttle rockets Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Sybok to the surface of the mythical planet Sha Ka Ree, where Sybok believes that the transcendent God, the primordial source of existence, lives. When they land and begin trekking across the dusty surface of the planet, they begin to wonder if this is all there is. Sybok is clearly disappointed. We think that perhaps the point of the film is to show that God does not exist.

But then huge towers of rock erupt from the planet’s surface and create a Stonehenge-like cathedral. Just as suddenly, a powerful beam of light shoots upward from below the planet’s crust, into the sky. It is raw beauty and power, dazzling our heroes. As the beam pulsates with life, a voice comes forth from the light: “Brave souls, welcome!”

McCoy and Sybok want to know if this is God speaking. In response, the beam of light begins to transform into a multitude of faces that we recognize as the images that people have used to depict God throughout the ages. The

polymorphic deity settles on the image of YHWH, the bearded Ancient of Days described in the Bible, because it is the image that is most familiar to the *Enterprise* team—and, I might add, to the film's audience. We recognize him immediately as the biblical God from the book of Daniel.

Sybok asks the image of God, "Is it you?" The image replies, "It is I." This too is a play on the biblical name of God: I Am. The deity's identity is certain. The *Enterprise* has brought them through the stars to the planet where the polymorphic God who reveals himself as YHWH lives.

Sybok announces that they have had a long journey on a starship to reach his planet, even breaching the galactic barrier. God is impressed and wants to know if the starship would be able to carry his wisdom back through the barrier. Sybok insists that the starship will be God's chariot.

While Sybok warms up to God, Kirk has a question. "What does *God* need with a starship?" he asks.

When God asks Kirk who he is, Kirk quips, "Who am I? Don't you know? Aren't you God?"

Kirk demands proof from God that they all aren't being tricked. Maybe this deity is not the God who is the ultimate source of all reality. Maybe this deity who represents all the gods of conventional religions isn't the primordial God that Sybok seeks. Because of Kirk's doubt and arrogance, the deity, like the punitive biblical YHWH, zaps him with a beam of fire that nearly kills him.

At this point, all hell breaks loose. Our heroes realize that they have been tricked by a deity who is wicked, a deity who is the polymorph behind all the gods of conventional religions. This deity is not Sybok's primal God. This deity wants to take control of their ship, which he sees as the only way for him to escape the isolation of his star, where he has been imprisoned for eternity. Because the ship breached the Great Barrier on the way to his planet, surely it can breach it on its way out. The god threatens to kill Sybok's puny friends if Sybok doesn't deliver the ship to him.

Sybok sees the pain that the deity suffers and immediately reaches out to help him. Using the outlawed Vulcan ritual to meld the god's emotions with his own, Sybok takes on the god's pain. It is too much to bear. Sybok is consumed with the god's emotional and psychological agony and dies on the spot.

Quite suddenly the other three grasp the Gnostic's greatest insight and worst nightmare: the God behind all the world's religions is a wicked archon

bent on destroying them. They run like mad. Sulu and the Klingon Klaa in their starships beam them to safety and loft torpedoes into the god's cathedral. As they fly away, Kirk declares that the God they were looking for is not out there in the universe somewhere. Rather, he says, God is "right here . . . in the human heart."



CHAPTER EIGHT

Spiritual Avatars

Jake Sully

Jake Sully lives on a dead world: Earth, one hundred years from now. Death is not Gnostic hyperbole in his story. It is reality. The planet's population has skyrocketed. Humans are drowning in their own toxic waste. Poverty and starvation are rampant. Natural resources have been depleted. Lucrative off-world mining has become the sole objective of big corporations, and science is riding uneasily on their coattails.

The first time we see Jake ([figure 8.1](#)), the hero of James Cameron's cinematic masterpiece *Avatar*, he is waking up in a cryogenic pod. He has been in hibernation for six years on a ship flying to Pandora, a new world that humans are colonizing to strip it of a precious natural resource. This resource is a superconductor mineral called, tongue in cheek, unobtainium, a mineral that will save Earth from its energy crisis.

We know immediately that the message of this movie is an environmental appeal to save the earth, to use our natural resources more responsibly, to protect all living things from extinction. We also surmise that the message will be driven home with a "Go native!" refrain, like a sci-firedo of the 1990 epic *Dances with Wolves*. This message and its refrain are obvious and conventional. But they only represent the surface of this movie. Below the surface beats a Gnostic subtext, with its message of the irresistible journey of our spirits to find wholeness, to become integrated with a being that transcends us all.



Figure 8.1 Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) in *Avatar* (2011), seeing his twin avatar for the first time.

This journey starts for Jake in the hours before he wakes from cryogenic sleep, when he begins having dreams of flying over the vast forests of Pandora. We hear him whisper, “I am free.” His whisper becomes even more meaningful later, when we learn that Jake is an ex-marine confined to a wheelchair because he cannot afford surgery to repair his injured spine.

As his eyes flutter open, he makes the observation, “In cryo, you don’t dream at all.” So we know, right from the start of this film, that Jake is different. Even in cryogenic sleep his spirit has linked into the living forest that covers this strange moon. Pandora has invaded his unconsciousness and awakened and liberated a part of him that had been dormant. In a dream world deeper than cryogenic suspension, Jake has linked into the vast mind of Pandora’s God Mother, the great spirit Eywa.

Jake is off-world, working for a mining company that is trying to persuade the local population to relocate so that a large deposit of unobtainium beneath their village can be mined without bloodshed. The company’s method is unorthodox. They mean to introduce into the native population of Pandora remotely controlled bodies that have been genetically engineered to resemble the giant Na’vi, the native people. These giant, cyan bodies are linked into the neural networks of the human drivers who control them from a distance. The human minds are able to link into the Na’vi bodies because the bodies

have been created by blending Na'vi DNA with human DNA, at an exorbitant cost. This means that each Na'vi body is specific to the human driver.

Jake is on Pandora to become a driver of one of these native bodies. He is the genetic human replacement for his twin brother, Tommy, who was killed before he could be linked to his Na'vi body.

When Jake first sees Tommy's Na'vi body, he is stunned speechless. The humanoid body is huge, more than nine feet long. It looks like a majestic angel, a mythical creature sleeping in a womb of primal water. It is gestating in an amino tank of brilliant blue liquid, an umbilical cord floating up from his naval. It is ready to be born.

Jake is mesmerized by the sleeping face. He observes with surprise, "It looks like him." A fellow driver, Norm, corrects Jake. "No, it looks like you. This is your avatar now, Jake." Jake is face-to-face with his colossal double.

Thus begins Jake's journey of psychological and spiritual integration with his avatar, what will become, in this movie, Jake's true self, his blue angel. This story of the integration of the human self with an angelic double summons us toward a second-century Gnostic named Valentinus, who made integration with the divine twin a distinctive feature of the story of our irresistible attraction to divine wholeness.

Valentinus the Almost-Pope

In the early part of the second century, Valentinus, a man born in the Nile delta and living in Alexandria, had a vision that changed his life (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.42.2). He saw an infant boy, newly born. "Who are you?" Valentinus asked the apparition. Miraculously, the infant opened his mouth and announced, like Hermes in the Hermetic books, "I am Reason."

According to Valentinus, their conversation continued. Again like the superhero Hermes in the Hermetic revelations, the infant outlined for Valentinus the metaphysics of human existence. But he did so within the framework of a tragic love story about an original, primordial, divine couple—the unknowable Father and the silent Mother—who, from their lovemaking, birthed divinities that populated a transcendent realm.

All was well until Sophia, one of the divinities, was born. Because Sophia is the goddess of wisdom, she did what came naturally to her: she tried to know the Father. But this was impossible, given that the nature of the Father is unknowable and that he is embraced by the silent Mother.

So Sophia found herself in a quandary. She couldn't know the Father but, because she is Wisdom, she couldn't stop trying. So she suffered horribly, constantly yearning for what she could not have. Anxiety plagued her. Tears of terror and repentance erupted. Her love for the Father spilled forth.

According to the Valentinian understanding of this story, Sophia's plight is comparable to that of the woman with the flow of blood in the Gospel story. The woman represents the hemorrhaging of the divine spirit. Sophia's outpouring emotions—passion, desire, fear, anxiety, remorse—became the building blocks of the psychic and material dimensions of the universe. Her love for God became the human spirit trapped in the human psyche and body.

The tragedy of this story is not the fall and mixture of the spirit into the psychic and material dimensions of reality, as we might expect. The tragedy is the *inevitability* of all this, of a ruptured God whose unknowable nature leads to unstoppable existential damage. We are the way we are, broken, not because we have done awful things but because God is the way God is: broken.

In a moment of epiphany, Valentinus realized an existential conundrum that traditional philosophy and religion had not been able to address. If our brokenness and pain is this basic to who we are and to the world we inhabit, how can we ever find healing? How can we ever get beyond the anxiety and terror that structures the very foundation of our being and our world?

We do not know how long Valentinus pondered this conundrum, but at some point he met Theudas, a Christian teacher who claimed to have been Paul's pupil. It was in Valentinus's personal study of Paul that he found the answer to this existential impasse. He became the first to express what, centuries later, would become the rallying cry of Protestant Christians: if our brokenness and pain are so basic to who we are, then healing is not going to happen by our singular efforts to be pious, good, or passionless—or anything else, for that matter. Our redemption requires God's grace, and God's grace alone (Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 51.4–5; Interpretation of Knowledge NHC XI.1 12.25–30, 15.24–16.26). God must visit the human heart (Valentinus, frag. 2, in Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 2.114.3–6).

Valentinus may have written the Gospel of Truth, a book preserved in the Nag Hammadi collection (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.11.9; Pseudo-Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 4.6). It opens with these words: "The gospel of truth is joy for those who have received from the Father of truth the grace of knowing him" (Gospel of Truth NHC I.3 16.31–34). For

Valentinus this led to a tremendous irony: when God, who by his nature is good and gracious, reaches out from his goodness and grace to save us, God ends up saving himself (Gospel of Truth NHC I.3 35.15–24).

Valentinus was quickly recognized as a brilliant theologian and drew outstanding pupils to his school, first in Alexandria and then a decade later in Rome, after he moved there in around 140 CE (Thomassen 2006; Dunderberg 2008). In Rome he became involved in church affairs and became famous for his intellectual talent and ability to interpret scriptures. He was so successful as a theologian that he fully expected to be elected the next bishop of Rome. Instead, another man, Pius, was elected pope, and Valentinus took the defeat as a referendum against his vision of a grace-based Christianity. So Valentinus and his students pulled away from nascent Apostolic Catholic Christianity and reorganized as a Christian protest movement with Gnostic spirituality at its center.

A Dual Church

Valentinus, the almost-pope, became the patriarch of Gnostic Christianity, growing it by educating extraordinary theologians who set up congregations that both mimicked the Catholic churches and subversively transcended them. They did this by adopting Catholic scripture, prayers, and rituals but interpreting and transforming them to meet their Gnostic spiritual agenda (cf. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.15.2; Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 1). It was not always obvious that a church was Valentinian, at least on the face of things. The church service would have included the regularly performed Catholic rituals, prayers, and confessions. Because of this, they attracted Apostolic Catholics from other local churches.

These parishioners may not have known that their church was a Gnostic church until they showed interest in being initiated into the higher spiritual matters of the church, in knowing the mysteries of the kingdom of God, which the leader of the church had promised to reveal. Only then would they assemble privately to be initiated into the unspeakable mystery of God, first learning a catechism about the nature of the transcendent God and the transcendent realm called Wholeness, and then undergoing a second baptism, called Redemption (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.15.2; Origen, *Commentary on John* 6.26; see Thomassen 2011).

Although there were as many variations of this ritual as there were Valentinian leaders, it remained an ecstatic experience that involved rites of

water and oil. Unlike the baptism that psychic (soulish) Christians used to purify the soul when first converting to Christianity, this second baptism was an advanced rite that fully and immediately redeemed the spirit, making the initiates pneumatic (spiritual) Christians. The first baptism is identified with John the Baptist's activities in the Jordan; the latter is identified with Jesus' baptism by fire. Jesus' baptism, the Valentinians thought, brings initiates into the heavens to sit at God's right and left hands, just as the sons of Zebedee had desired, though they were unable to undergo it (Luke 12:50 and Mark 10:38, quoted in Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.21.2; see also Valentinian Fragments NHC XI.2 41.10–11, 21–23).

As part of this rite, the initiate's spirit ascends through the spheres into the transcendent realm. This was the shamanic journey that matured the spirit, growing it from a seed into an angel (Valentinian Fragments NHC XI.2 42.28–30). The ascent culminates in the experience of sacred union with God, a union that is envisioned as the spirit's betrothal to its angelic mate. This was a regenerative journey for the spirit, when it entered into the transcendent power beyond all (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.21.2, 3.15.2; Gospel of Philip NHC II.3 69.7–8, 70.2–10).

Paul's ascent, recorded in his second letter to the Corinthians (12:2–4), both inspired and buttressed these rites, as the Valentinian Apocalypse of Paul (NHC V.2 18.3–24.7) demonstrates. In this text, Paul ascends gradually through the various levels of heaven, encountering the rulers in each of the realms. In the fourth heaven, he witnesses a soul dragged before the dark lord of judgment, who has the soul whipped for the sins it had committed. Afterwards, the soul is cast down into a body prepared for it. In the fifth heaven, Paul witnesses a gang of armed angels with iron rods and whips in their hands, goading souls on to judgment. He passes on to the sixth heaven, where he stands before its dark guardian. Paul demands that the gate to the next level be opened, and it is.

In the seventh heaven, Paul meets the conventional God of the Jews and Christians, the Ancient of Days as pictured in the book of Daniel, who is seated on a throne shining brighter than the sun (Daniel 7:9). After a ritual exchange of words and the display of a powerful sign, the biblical Lord turns his face down to look at his creation and his minions, whom Paul has escaped. Because he cannot hold on to Paul, either, the gate into the Ogdoadic region, the divine world, opens and Paul joins the spirits who dwell there. It is something of a referendum on Apostolic Catholicism that

the twelve apostles remain with the biblical Lord in his realm while Paul escapes to the supreme God.

How was this initiation ceremony of redemption actually performed? According to the scattered references to the rite, it began with incubation, when initiates reclined on a special couch called a “bridal bed” (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.21.3). How long they lay there in silence we do not know. But as the person incubated, words of union were recited by the congregation leader: “In the name of the unknown Father of the universe, in Truth the Mother of everything, in he who descended into Jesus, (may you go) into union, redemption, and companionship with the Powers” (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.21.3; my translation).

The initiates were smeared with a mixture of water and oil, “the anointment of mercy” (Gospel of Truth NHC I.3 36.14–20), while the leader recited a second prayer in Hebrew. Although the words are garbled in Irenaeus’s account, we can make out that the prayer summoned the invisible Spirit, asking for protection from YHWH, the God of judgment, and his militia. The prayer is invoked in the hidden name of Jesus (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.21.3).

With this, the initiates embark on an ecstatic journey through the celestial realms, flying past YHWH’s seat of judgment. The initiates’ spirits, wearing the invisibility helmet of Hades, are invisible to YHWH and his soldiers (1.13.6). The initiates are snatched up by Sophia and are conducted into the transcendent realm, where they unite with God and become whole.

In one Valentinian text, the rite of redemption is described as a gradual ascent by degrees into God’s wholeness, an entrance into silence, where voice, knowledge, thinking, and enlightenment are unnecessary because everything is already light (Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 124.14–25). Some Valentinian groups performed Redemption again at death as a last rites ceremony. They reserved for the end of life the ultimate words that would defeat YHWH, whispering them into the ear of the dying person as his soul faced judgment.

Within the Valentinian community, the new initiates would have entered the ranks of the spiritual Christians or pneumatics, leaving behind their former Catholic status as psychic (soulish) Christians. The pneumatics thought that they were the real Christians and the psychics were yet Hebrews, still clinging to the God of the Jews. The psychics were viewed as potential converts, not yet redeemed (Gospel of Philip NHC II.3 51.29–31, 52.21–25).

When the converted pneumatics prayed in church “in the name of the Father and the Son,” they understood that this prayer referred to the transcendent Father and the Son, not to YHWH and his son, as their fellow soulish Christians thought when they said the same prayer. Prayers, scriptures, and rituals took on a double meaning for the spiritual Christians. For the pneumatics, secret spiritual meaning replaced the common psychic meaning (53.24–54.5).

This dual message is discussed in the Gospel of Philip (53.24–35), where it is taught that names are deceptive because they can hide the truth of the matter. When psychics hear the word *God* they are deceived with regard to its true reference, thinking it refers to the biblical God when in fact it refers to the transcendent God. The same goes for the words *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit*, and *life*, *resurrection*, and *church*. Congregants do not perceive the correct referents for these words until they have come to know what is correct.

For decades, the Valentinian churches operated with these dual levels. They offered religious guidance to soulish Christians they had co-opted from the Apostolic Catholic churches, alongside spiritual Christians they had initiated into their mysteries. Their intent was to convert as many of the psychic members of their congregations to pneumatics as possible so that as many spirits could be redeemed as possible.

The Valentinians saw their system as more advanced than the Catholic one, which operated to save only the soul. Besides, there were concrete advantages to being initiated into the higher order—like sex, which the psychics could not have and the pneumatics could.

Lovers' Lane

Valentinus was a lover. This made him unique among Christians of his era, who for the most part lived in chaste marriages or as single celibates. The early Christians were suspicious of eroticism and sex because of its powerful draw toward sin. If it was not well managed, they thought that desire and lust could take over and draw them into adulterous relationships and other sexual catastrophes. Added to this suspicion was the very real possibility that the world would be ending any day. Such apocalyptic fever played havoc with marriages, the abrupt end of which was certain. With the advanced age of the world, procreation—and marriage along with it—was deemed unnecessary by many Christians.

Valentinus did not buy into this Christian rhetoric; he was certain that marriage is what grounds us and makes us whole. It is primordial and eternal, because marriage is not just a human institution but a sacred mystery, an existential relationship in which God exists along with us. The Valentinian God is a *syzygos* (permanent couple), a husband and wife pair of gods, a dyad that is a monad. They are yoked together in an erotic and procreative relationship that is responsible for the creation and maintenance of the transcendent and cosmic realms.

Their origin story starts with the Father, the Depth, who mates with the Mother Silence. The consummation of their marriage results in the birth of twin gods, the male Mind and the female Truth, another husband and wife *syzygos*. The mating of the divine couples continues until there are born thirty divinities or aeons in total. From the Valentinian perspective, sacred marriage, with its erotic and procreative dimensions, is the source of all existence on earth and in heaven. There is no greater mystery than this.

The fault line, however, is also sacred marriage. When sacred marriage is breached, when Sophia is unable to maintain her own spousal relationship because of her obsession with the Father, all hell breaks loose. God is fractured by spousal separation and God's severe emotional response is inscribed in our hearts. The traumatized Sophia is cast out of paradise, and her raw emotions—desire, anxiety, fear, ignorance, repentance—are separated from the transcendent world. They become the stuff from which the physical world, including the human psyche, is built.

Our spirits are born out of Sophia's love for God, mismanaged as it is. Also born from this love are a host of guardian angels, the twin counterparts of our spirits. Because Sophia's love is not conjugal, the human spirits exist singly, separated from their avatars, isolated from their divine male fiancés, the guardian angels. In this fractured condition, our spirits suffer violence, plagued by demons who corrupt our souls and lull us to sleep.

The story of Adam and Eve says it all. We feel naked and afraid because we have been separated from our angelic twins, our male counterparts. Like Eve, we have been cut out of Adam's side. We are two longing to be one.

The answer to this horrifying dilemma involves correcting marriage on all levels of existence, from the human to the transcendent. In the wake of Sophia's trauma, the divinities in the transcendent realm renew their spousal relationships with each other. In celebration of their renewed vows, they

collaborate, generating collectively a new divinity that reflects the very best of God. This new divinity is the male God Jesus.

Jesus' mission is to descend into the lower realms and find the fallen Sophia. She is to become his fiancée. At the end of time, he is the delegate who will escort her back into the transcendent realm as his bride. Likewise, the redeemed spirits will unite with their angel bridegrooms, their divine avatars, who are waiting for them in the transcendent world.

The Valentinian teacher Theodotus envisioned this grand finale event, complete with a wedding banquet. After the banquet, the bride and groom undress and, naked, join each other in the bridal bed. They become one *syzygos*, embracing each other in an eternal moment of consummation (Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpts of Theodotus* 63.1–65.2).

Human marriage mirrors this sacred story of mishap and reconciliation. According to the Valentinians, the marriage that degrades sex to hedonism results in separation and corruption. Hedonistic sex only leads to trouble, especially because conceiving a child is always a possibility, if not a probability. The ancient people did not have any reliable form of birth control beyond abstinence and abortion. So sex meant conception. And conception, they believed, was tied intimately to the thoughts and feelings of the parents while they were engaged in the sex act. Because the parents' thoughts and feelings affected the actual formation of the fetus's body and soul, ancient people felt that lustful desires could cause severe damage to the child.

To solve this problem, the Valentinians proposed that the pneumatic Christians engage in a form of "sacred" or "pure" marriage. There were parameters to this type of marriage. To start with, it was heterosexual and monogamous. Liaisons outside of the marriage were strictly forbidden. Sacred marriage meant that sex was performed intentionally between spouses as an act of love. The sex act was a sacred moment when the couple would raise their thoughts in prayer to the transcendent God.

This intentional orientation toward the sacred made the moment transcendent. It was believed that the lovers' angelic avatars would be drawn down from the transcendent realm into the erotic embrace. Human joins human as light and spirit mingle. The babies conceived within this holy embrace of spirits and angels were sure to be born with strong spirits ready to receive the Gnostic message (Gospel of Philip NHC II.3 78.12–79.14).

Because the psychic Christians had not been initiated into this truth about marriage, the Valentinians felt that it was better for the soulish Christians to abstain from sex altogether, living in completely celibate marriages or as single people. This was considered by some psychic Christians, such as Irenaeus of Lyons, a double standard, and it was not particularly liked.

The pneumatic Christians, however, insisted that these standards, double or not, be maintained, because the consequences of sex are too vast. Sex is existential, its creative power underscoring all of existence. When sex goes out of bounds, when intentions are misdirected or desire is misplaced, marriage is severed and the creative act goes awry.

It is the job of the pneumatic Christians to manage their marriages as a sacrament and sex as a holy procreative activity. Only their erotic lovemaking could repair the existential damage, through the conception and birth of children with strong spirits. The birth of these special children is what brought the spirit into play. Hidden within the child's psyche, the spirit could be awakened and redeemed, ritually transformed from tiny seeds into full-fledged divinities.

At the end of time, these full-fledged spirits, along with Sophia, would be escorted by their angel fiancés into the transcendent realm, the world of Wholeness, which would open up to the newlyweds like a giant bridal chamber. Salvation, then, is all about the restoration of God through marriage, about journeying down (or should we say "up") lovers' lane.

Ptolemy Writes Flora

After Valentinus's death, around 162 CE, his brilliant student Ptolemy rose to prominence in Rome (see Rasimus 2010, 145–72). Although we do not know much about Ptolemy as a person, we do know that he led a Valentinian Christian congregation that sought to initiate psychic Christians into the spiritual mysteries of God. We know this because Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, in the fourth century, records a letter that Ptolemy wrote to a wealthy Christian woman, Flora. In it, he addresses questions that she had about the biblical God and encourages her initiation into the pneumatic ranks, which Ptolemy says would plant her spiritual seed in fertile soil (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.3.1–7.10).

The question that most divided the soulish Christians from the spiritual Christians was about the identity and nature of the biblical God, the God of creation. The psychic Christians in the Valentinian churches, like their

Apostolic Catholic brothers and sisters, identified the supreme God of worship with the biblical God YHWH, the creator and ruler of the universe. They believed that he had given certain commandments to humans for the purpose of ensuring righteousness and that he expected humans to observe them. These laws were written in the five books of Moses, the Torah.

The worship of YHWH and the observance of his commandments maintained Christianity's connection with Judaism. This connection was valued because Christians had been arguing for decades that the Jewish scriptures had prophesied Jesus' advent. This connection gave their religion at least the facade of a natural history, and with it, a tradition that could boast some authority.

But Gnostic Christians like Ptolemy found the issue much more complex than did the Apostolic Catholics. As avid readers of the fourth Gospel, the Valentinians questioned whether the Father that Jesus revealed in the Christian scriptures, the God of grace and goodness, could really be the cruel and arrogant God they saw when they read the Jewish scripture. They came to distinguish YHWH from Jesus' Father. They saw this as a spiritual truth that trumps all others.

So the beginning of the pneumatic catechism was the disclosure that the supreme God of worship transcends YHWH. This supreme God is the one and only good God (Matthew 19:17), whom Jesus called his Father, and he is not the biblical Creator God (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.7.5). He is the unbegotten Father whose existence and form are impossible to conceive. Speech cannot convey him, eye cannot see him, bodies cannot grasp him because of his inscrutable greatness, incomprehensible depth, immeasurable height, and illimitable will. He transcends all wisdom, intellect, glory, beauty, sweetness, and greatness. He is simply unknowable by anything except himself (Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 54.13–26). Although male pronouns are used to identify him, he transcends gender. He is really a he-she, the Father-Mother God.

The Shocking Truth

For the convert, such a teaching would have come as a shock, initially, because it contradicted everything the convert had known as true up to that point. Ptolemy's handling of Flora's questions reveals her conflict about this teaching. She is unsettled about this new view of reality.

If true, what would it mean for the Bible and the commandments she had been taught to follow as a Christian? She feels that the scripture has added value to her life, particularly the Ten Commandments, which Christians like herself had salvaged as the moral core of the Torah while discarding the rest of the laws. In light of this new orientation, she is struggling to understand where the Torah really came from and what its purpose really is.

Ptolemy is nuanced in his response, careful. He does not want to scare Flora away from initiation, so he does not want to make YHWH out to be the devil, as he knows other Gnostic teachers are doing. Instead of highlighting YHWH's arrogance and cruelty, his irrationality and arbitrariness, Ptolemy focuses on YHWH's righteousness. He softens YHWH's rough edges by telling Flora that YHWH is a God who operates by enforcing laws that he instituted to govern his creation. Although he is a lesser God, he is a fair ruler. He is the God of justice, whose nature is somewhere between the good nature of the transcendent Father and the evil nature of the devil (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.7.2–5).

From this stance, Ptolemy is able to reason thoughtfully through Flora's concerns about the Torah, knowing full well that the Ten Commandments in the Jewish scriptures have been foundational to Flora's faith. He asks Flora to leave behind biblical literalism and weigh the options for authorship, given that some laws have more moral value than others. Although the Ten Commandments are good laws, other scriptural laws aren't so good, particularly when they require retribution that contradicts the Ten Commandments. When we are commanded in Exodus 20:13 not to kill, for instance, we should not be handling homicide by killing the murderer, as Leviticus 24:17 mandates. There was no allowance for the death penalty, in Ptolemy's opinion.

This inconsistency in the laws found in the five books of Moses, Ptolemy says, suggests that the commandments were not put on the books by the same legislator. Because YHWH is a just God, he is responsible for some of the better content of the law. But everything else, which is most of the law, was written by men.

Here he points his finger at Moses and the Jewish elders, whose legislation, in Ptolemy's eyes, often contradicted YHWH's better intentions. To make his point, he refers to the famous story about Jesus' discussion of divorce (Matthew 19:6–8). Jesus says that it was Moses who made the law

allowing for divorce, whereas YHWH had never intended this (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.4.1–10).

Ptolemy knows all of this is disturbing news for Flora, whose entire metaphysical orientation has just been turned upside down. It is not what Flora the psychic Christian expected when she decided to pursue God's spiritual mysteries with Ptolemy.

Ptolemy asks Flora to settle down and to try to take it in. Once she can accept that YHWH is a lesser God than the perfect Father, he promises to reveal the next teaching in the catechism, which focuses on the unfolding of the Father into the spiritual, psychic, and material dimensions of existence. But he reassures her that this revelation can wait until she is ready.

The Great Chain of Being

The Valentinians were very clear that our world is made up of three dimensions and that each dimension is the result of the emotional rupture that occurred when the Father unfolded into a great chain of being. All of the negative emotions that Sophia felt as she individuated from the Father became the material from which the physical world and our bodies are built. This is referred to as the “earthy” stuff. It is matter. The soulish stuff comes from Sophia's feelings of remorse, when she repents for her disruptive behavior. It forms the human psyche and is the stuff from which YHWH and his kind are generated. Sophia's love for God and the joy she feels when she sees Jesus, her bridegroom, for the first time is the stuff of the spirit, the third dimension.

These three dimensions reflect existence on all levels imaginable. In terms of the cosmos, there is a material realm. It is the earth. The realm of the soul is the heavens or celestial spheres. The transcendent realm belongs to the spirit. These three dimensions, however, interpenetrate each other: the spirit has ruptured into the celestial and earthly realms; psychic stuff has been embodied in matter.

At the personal level, the human being becomes the natural locus of all three dimensions. The spirit is the deep, intuitive self, unconscious and unaware until it is awakened. The soul is the deluded ego with its rational, moral, and emotional aspects. Finally, there is the matter of the physical body, which is, well, material.

The human being's religious response is defined by these three dimensions as well. Here we find ourselves on the social level. The Gnostic response

makes the person a pneumatic (spiritual) Christian. The Apostolic Catholic response makes the person a psychic (soulish) Christian. Rejection of Christianity casts one into the *hylic* (material) category.

The Valentinians matched each of these social categories with one of Adam's sons from the Genesis account. Seth, the faultless child, symbolized the pneumatics. Abel, the morally upright son, represented the psychics. Cain, the immoral one, signified the *hylics* (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.7.5).

Given this typology, it is not difficult to predict that the Valentinians would begin thinking about whether the nature of individual humans was predetermined, whether certain people were fashioned from the get-go in such a way that their social category was foreordained. The Valentinians operated from the assumption that all humans comprise all three aspects naturally, but that the condition of the soul would determine the person's social classification. If the person was morally substantive and converted to Apostolic Catholic Christianity, the psychic category fit. If the person became a Gnostic or advanced Christian, the pneumatic category fit. If the person was immoral and rejected the Christian message, the *hylic* category fit.

Heracleon and the Samaritan Woman at the Well

So the question was not whether certain people had spirits and other people only had souls. This would have been absurd to the Valentinians. The question was whether a person's soul could be born in such a corrupted state that it could do nothing but be immoral and unresponsive and reject Jesus. And the flip side of the question was whether a person's soul could be born in such a pure state that it could do nothing but be morally upright and responsive and accept Jesus.

The Valentinian who discusses this the most is Heracleon, another brilliant student of Valentinus (see Thomassen 2010). Like Ptolemy, Heracleon was operating in Rome immediately after Valentinus's death. History has preserved for us portions of one, if not two, of his writings.

The first are extracts of his famous commentary on the fourth Gospel, quoted at length by the Apostolic Catholic church leader Origen of Alexandria. The second is a lengthy, untitled, and anonymous writing discovered among the Nag Hammadi books. We call it the Tripartite Tractate because it is divided into three main segments or acts. The contents of this

writing have enough bold affinities with Heracleon's commentary on John to make his authorship of the Tripartite Tractate probable.

In his commentary on the fourth Gospel, Heracleon understands the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5–42) to be an exemplar of direct conversion to the Valentinian faith. This tale is quite famous among Gospel stories, featuring a Samaritan woman who speaks with Jesus at a well. As they talk, Jesus tells her about living water that is God's gift to those who ask for it. She immediately accepts his offer, desiring to put an end to her constant thirst.

They go on to speak about her serial marriages, her faulty understanding of God, and her improper manner of worship. All of this changes for her when she accepts Jesus' gift of grace, the waters of eternal life. In John 4:21–24, the Samaritan woman immediately comes to know that the real Father is a God of the spirit who is not worshipped as a stone or wood idol or identified with the God of the Jews and his Temple (Origen, *Commentary on John* 13.97, 102, 104, 117–118). The true God of worship is pure and invisible. This God should be worshipped by the human spirit, rather than through material objects or in specific physical locations (13.147–148).

It is clear to Heracleon that, at the well, the Samaritan woman became a pneumatic or spiritual person. By this he is referring to the social category of the pneumatic, which he defines in his commentary and in the Tripartite Tractate as the type of person who immediately, without hesitation, becomes an advanced Gnostic Christian when she hears the voice of Jesus. She does not become an Apostolic Catholic first (Origen, *Commentary on John* 13.57–66; Tripartite Tractate NHC I.5 118.29–35). The Samaritan woman's conversion means that she leaves behind the water in the old well, which is the old world of temporality and lack. She abandons the fountain that sustains Jacob's animals. Her old life of depravity and passion falls away as she accepts the water of life and glory, the gift of grace, measured out into her bucket by Jesus the Savior (Origen, *Commentary on John* 13.57–60, 149, 187–191).

According to Heracleon, once the woman accepts this truth, she is told to go and call her husband—referring not to a human husband, which she did not have, but to her angel bridegroom dwelling in the world of transcendent wholeness. With this, Jesus leads her into union with her divine avatar and she is redeemed (13.67–72). Her job now is to become a spokesperson for

the pneumatics and to reach out to convert as many as possible to the advanced Gnostic faith.

Catholics in the Middle

The conversion to Apostolic Catholic Christianity is illustrated, according to Heracleon, in the story of the royal official whose dying son is healed from a distance by Jesus, as related in John 4:46–54 (Origen, *Commentary on John* 13.416–426). Heracleon understands the story's royal official, the *basilikos* (petty king), to be YHWH, the creator and king of the world and Father of human souls. YHWH's "diseased son" represents the soul of an unconverted person.

The soul is gravely ill because it has been ensnared deeply in "Capernaum," which Heracleon understands to be matter, ignorance, and sin. Jesus came into the world to heal the official's son and to give him life. In Heracleon's mind, this means that the boy converts to Apostolic Catholic Christianity.

Heracleon does not think that the convert's soul will become immortal because of its Christian conversion. In fact, according to Heracleon, the soul is mortal, and at the end of time it will remain in the darkness outside the divine wholeness. In this type of conversion, Jesus heals the soul of its sins and forgives it. This means that the soul is cleansed when it converts to Apostolic Catholic Christianity. The soul will not become immortal, but in its cleansed state it has the chance of awakening the immortal spirit so that one day the person might be baptized a second time in the Valentinian ceremony of redemption. This is when death swallows up the mortal soul and immortality is put on. Heracleon notes that the conversion process, involving first Apostolic Catholic conversion and then pneumatic conversion, is slow and requires signs, wonders, and a lot of persuasion.

Pagan Devils

The final type of response noted by Heracleon is utter rejection of Jesus. Here we are talking about non-Christians, the pagans and Jews who refuse to convert. These people Heracleon labels earthy or material. He finds references to them in a literal reading of John 8:44, a verse we discussed at length in [chapter 5](#), when we learned about the Gnostic predisposition of the Gospel of John (Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.168–170, 211–219).

In the original Greek of John 8:44, the Johannine author refers to Jewish nonbelievers: “You are from the father of the devil.” According to Heracleon, the reference to the devil’s father is a reference to YHWH, the world creator and world ruler. Heracleon thinks that this verse proves that some humans were created by YHWH from the same cloth, the same material substance, that YHWH used to create the devil. This makes them actual biological kin with the devil.

In this reading of the verse, Heracleon is trying to come to terms with the people who Christians identified as apostates (traitors). These were people who did not just refuse conversion but committed mutiny, who were in the Christian ranks at one time but rebelled and left.

What about those people who weren’t apostates yet still didn’t want to become Christian, who wished to maintain their pagan and Jewish connections? Heracleon points to the second half of the same verse: “You want to carry out the desires of your father.” Heracleon thinks this part of the verse refers to those who choose not to convert, who have aligned their intentions and actions with wickedness. They have allowed their souls to become substantially similar to the devil, who is a liar like his father. They are considered the devil’s adopted children because their souls engage in debauchery and wantonness, intentional actions that make their future conversion doubtful.

The Valentinians were not the staunch determinists that some of the Apostolic Catholic Christians, such as Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, considered them to be. As we have seen, in the Valentinian scheme of things the majority of the human population fell into three social categories, which reflected their response to Jesus’ message. The Gnostic response made them pneumatics. Apostolic Catholic conversion made them psychics. Refusal to convert made them hylics. People who had “extreme” status, either as a prophetic teacher like Jesus or as a rebellious traitor like Judas, were exceptions to this rule. Their creation was extraordinary, either from divine cloth or from demonic cloth, which made them substantially the same as God or as the devil and his father.

The Sights and Sounds of Truth

Marcus the Valentinian is one of the most colorful characters among the early Christians (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.13–20; see Förster 1999). He was active following Valentinus’s death, particularly in Asia Minor, along

the coast of modern-day Turkey. By 180 CE, Marcus had settled near Bishop Irenaeus in the Rhône valley just north of Italy, likely because Gaul was a flourishing new center for Christian conversion.

Marcus built his church on a psychological principle that contemporary megachurch leaders have only lately rediscovered: when it comes to church, forget the creeds. People want drama and emotion. They want their brokenness to be acknowledged. They want to be healed. They want to be swept up in the promise of something better. And Marcus gave it all to them, and more.

Like Valentinus, Marcus's mission started with his own vision, a mystical moment when Silence, the primal Mother God, took form and descended to Marcus (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.13–20). Because her male form was unbearable, Silence stood before Marcus as a beautiful female angel. Her dual gender reflects the fact that Marcus perceives the primal deity in terms of the unfolding of a series of divine hermaphrodites who are gender shape-shifters.

Silence reveals to Marcus how she came into being when the primal God first uttered thirty separate letters. These thirty separate letters become the thirty divinities that the Valentinians believe populate the transcendent realm of Wholeness, called in Greek the Pleroma. These divinities know only the sound of their own letters and can utter only their own sound. They are incapable of uttering the whole, which means that they can never truly comprehend the primal God, who is the sound of the whole.

Silence's mission in her descent to Marcus was to reveal to Marcus the truth about the transcendent God. The truth turns out to be Truth, a second angel, also a beautiful female. Rather than representing a separate part of the primal God, as the thirty divinities do, Truth embodies the whole primal God in one human-shaped divinity called Anthropos (Man).

What utterance produced this awesome divinity, Man? According to the angel Truth, the utterance was God's name: I-Ê-S-O-U-S, or Jesus. The angel Truth explains that the name Jesus is a stand-in for God's secret name, the twenty-four-letter Greek alphabet that actually structures Man's body.

With this vision, Marcus believed that the powerful secret sounds of creation had been revealed to him. Long before the medieval Jewish kabbalists taught that creation occurred when God pronounced his ineffable name, YHWH, Marcus taught that creation occurred when the true name,

Jesus, was vocalized from the mouth of Silence, the primal God Before All Gods.

The Intonation of God

Marcus went on to develop a complex system of mystical practices based on the numerology of the divine thirty and the vocalization of the twenty-four letters of the alphabet. These practices were meant to harness the power of the thirty transcendent divinities.

For example, the intonation of the nine mute letters (P-K-T-B-G-D-PH-CH-TH) was believed to harness the powers of the Father and Truth, whereas the pronunciation of the eight semivowels (L-M-N-R-S-DZ-KS-PS) were thought to channel the powers of Word and Life. The seven vowels (A-E-Ê-I-O-U-Ô) were understood to draw out the powers of Man and Church (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.14.5).

When congregants intoned the seven vowels consecutively (AAA-EEE-ÊÊÊ-III-OOO-UUU-ÔÔÔ), they believed that the chaotic seven heavens, which YHWH and his militia ruled, were brought into harmony. Because the original utterance of each vowel had generated the seven heavens in primordial time, its ritual intonation now controlled the spheres in the present.

But that is not all. The ritual intonation of the seven vowels was thought to float up as praise to the transcendent world, honoring the divinities Anthropos and Church, who were originally given form when God uttered these vowels.

As discussed in [chapter 6](#), these vowel vocalizations were not something Marcus conjured up himself. Pronunciation of the vowels had been used for centuries by Egyptian priests to ensure heaven's harmony. The practice was surprisingly common among the ancient people, revealed in many magical spells from Egyptian and Greek sources as well as in the liturgies of the Hermetics and other groups in antiquity that used vowel chanting to maintain order in the universe, to heal their bodies, and to compel powerful divinities to do their bidding (Frankfurter 1994; Dieleman 2005, 64–80). Marcus simply shifted the practice to accommodate the transcendent world known to the Gnostics.

By imitating the sounds of creation, Marcus's congregants were convinced that they were tapping into the primal power of the divine world and harnessing it to heal their world and themselves. In fact, Marcus was known

for his therapeutic ceremonies. He taught that the unison pronunciation of the prayer “AMEN” has restorative properties because it harnesses the mighty powers of the thirty separate divinities as if they were one.

In order to relieve his congregants’ personal difficulties and stresses, Marcus guided the members of his congregation in the ritual intonation of the long vowel *Ô*. They believed that *Ô* is a universal letter of healing, because babies cry out this vowel whenever they are suffering or in need. According to Marcus, when the distressed soul calls out this vowel, the soul’s avatar angel hears it and sends relief down from the transcendent world (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.14.7–8).

There Is Something in the Wine

Marcus came to be known by the Apostolic Catholics as “the Magician,” not only because he led his congregation in the invocation of words of power for healing but also because he created theatrical rituals for his church. The standard Apostolic Catholic mass did not deliver the kind of emotional enthusiasm that he wanted his congregation to experience. He believed that the presence of God had to be experienced in his congregation, not just invoked by the leader over the elements in the Eucharist meal. So he replaced the standard Eucharist with an ecstatic Eucharist reminiscent of the drinking ceremonies used to induce ecstasy in initiates being inducted into the Greek mysteries (Förster 2014).

The ceremony involved a number of cups filled with a light-colored wine beverage. Marcus begins the ceremony with a prayer to draw God’s grace into their midst: “May the unknowable and ineffable grace that is before all things fill your inner self. May she multiple her knowledge in you, sowing the grain of mustard seed in good soil” (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.13.2; my translation). He then invites the congregants forward to each take a cup. As they do so, the wine in one of the cups turns blood red, as if the blood of the divinity Grace has flowed into it, raining down from the transcendent world above. The person who holds that cup has been especially elected by Grace that day. That person, whether man or woman, takes on the role of congregational leader, consecrating and then sharing the bloodred wine with all the others, so that God’s grace flows among them all.

After all the congregants have sipped from the cup, Marcus holds up a big, empty chalice. He asks the leader of the day to pour the remainder of the

bloodred wine into the chalice while he prays especially for this elected person (Irenaeus, 1.13.3; my translation):

My wish is for you to share in the grace that I have. The Father of all is constantly looking upon your angel who is in his presence. But the place of the mighty (angel) is in us. We must be restored to one. First, from me and through me, receive grace. Prepare yourself as a bride awaiting her bridegroom, so that you may be what I am and I may be what you are. Consecrate the seed of light in your bridal chamber. From me, receive (your) bridegroom. Hold him and be held by him. Behold grace has descended upon you. Open your mouth and prophesy.

At this moment, the chalice bubbles up and overflows. Marcus quickly offers the chalice to the elected person. She is pleased to drink the divine liquid, unite with her divine avatar, and become the community's prophet of the day, too. It is reported that within seconds of drinking, the person's heart rate increased and body perspired (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.39–41). The person became visibly enthused. As the person's soul reached the pinnacle of ecstasy, he or she prophesied with intense urgency and boldness before the congregation.

What was going on with Marcus's Eucharist? Was there something in the wine? Hippolytus of Rome is certain that drugs are involved in Marcus's ecstatic Eucharist. Given the testimony about the physical alteration of the color of the wine, the effervescence of the wine in the chalice, and the physiological and mental changes of the chosen one, Hippolytus must be right.

A special plant compound must have been mixed into the wine of one of the Eucharistic cups, though not in the others. The chemical reaction would have altered its color, so that it became the color of blood when it was held in the hand of the hopeful congregant. How thrilled the person must have been when the wine changed color right before her eyes and she was selected by Grace to be the congregational leader and prophet for the day.

Likewise, the effervescence of the wine in the chalice must have been produced by a compound smeared on the inside of the chalice, so that a bubbling reaction resulted when the "blood wine" was poured in and mixed with it. Whatever the nature of the compound, it stimulated the prophet's body almost instantly when ingested. It put the prophet's autonomic nervous system into immediate overdrive and sent the person straight into psychedelic ecstasy. Although the festivals of Dionysus relied on the sacramental inebriation of wine for their religious enthusiasm, and the mysteries of Demeter used a special barley brew called *kykeon*, Marcus mixed a drug in a wine beverage. With this remodeled Eucharist, Marcus made sure that all of

his congregants left the church service on an emotional, if not a psychedelic high.

The Spiritual Gnostic Church

Marcus had taken the conventional Apostolic Catholic service and turned it on its head. His Eucharist was still about communing with God, but the communion was on a level of enthusiasm unparalleled in other Apostolic Catholic or even Valentinian churches. Although he and his congregation still prayed to God the Father, they included in their prayers therapeutic chanting to the Mother Silence. His church still concluded their prayers with the traditional “Amen,” but they did so to harness the entire power of the divine world. So, unlike the other Valentinian leaders, Marcus did not have a dual-level church with rituals and creeds that catered to the Apostolic Catholics. The people who came into his church came to join the Gnostic initiated. They were seeking Gnostic redemption from the start.

Marcus was the first to build a pneumatic (spiritual) Gnostic church. Those who joined his church did so not through psychic baptism but through Gnostic initiation, when they ascended to the transcendent world and united with their avatar angels, when they were perfected.

As might be imagined, Marcus was extremely popular with women because his random selection of service leaders made it equally likely for women or men to be leaders and prophets in his church. This was not the case in the Apostolic Catholic churches, where leadership had been restricted to men, in a very limited hierarchal structure. So it is not surprising that Bishop Irenaeus complains that a number of leading women withdrew their membership from the Apostolic Catholic church and joined Marcus’s congregation.

One particular situation seems to have been the tipping point for Irenaeus. One of Irenaeus’s deacons had Marcus over for dinner. It wasn’t long after this that the deacon’s wife left the Apostolic Catholic church for Marcus’s. She eventually became so involved in the ministry of Marcus’s church that she traveled on missions with him. The situation became so tense that a committee of elders from Irenaeus’s church went after her, persuading her “with no small difficulty” to return to the Catholic church and to make a public confession about how she had been sexually seduced and then abused by Marcus. Why else would a fine Apostolic Catholic woman have joined Marcus’s church and traveled around with him (Irenaeus, 1.13.4–5)?

It was his frustration with Marcus's charisma and success as a church leader that prompted Irenaeus to set the record straight and damn the Gnostic Christians by writing his book *Against the Heresies*. The irony is that Irenaeus's intent to destroy Marcus and his friends resulted in the preservation of information about them, ensuring the survival of Gnostic spirituality over the centuries, even when the books of the Gnostics themselves were banned and burned.

Gnostic Tombstones

In the southeast quarter of the suburbs of second-century Rome, a group of Valentinians congregated. They have left behind physical evidence of their presence in the form of two remarkable tombstones, our earliest archaeological evidence of Gnostics, let alone Christians. Stones like these tell stories, often uncensored. These particular stones tell us about the death and redemption of two Valentinians.

One of the tombstones is fragmented, so we do not know the name of the deceased. This tombstone is called NCE 156 and is housed in the Capitoline Museums in Rome (see Synder 2011). The baptism of the deceased is described in terms of a wedding banquet attended by brothers, the groomsmen of the bridal chamber. The person is transported to the bridal chamber where the Father and the Son are praised, where Silence and Truth flow. Without doubt, the Valentinian redemptive rite of second baptism is being described here (my reconstruction and translation):

For my baths, the brothers of the bridal chamber bear the torches.
In our chambers, they hunger for banquets.
They praise the Father and glorify the Son.
There is [a flow] of solitary [Silence] and Truth in that place.

The second person we know by name. She is Flavia Sophe, whose husband, also a Valentinian, immortalized her faith in stone (see McKechnie 2001; Synder 2014). This tombstone (CIG 4:9595a) is housed in the National Museum of Rome, near the Diocletian Baths ([figure 8.2](#)). On the front side (epigraph 1), her tombstone reads (my translation):

Sophe, my dear sister and bride, you yearn for the light of the Father.
You have been anointed with immortal holy oil in the baths of Christ.
You have sought eagerly to gaze upon the divine faces of the aeons,
Upon the great angel of the great counsel, the true Son.
You have gone to the bridal chamber and ascended to the house of the Father.

Her husband considers Sophe his sister and bride in Christ. They are companions in faith and sacred marriage. Her Valentinian initiation, when she sought out the aeons, the Son, and the Father's light, prepared her for the death march of her soul. Because she has received the second baptism of redemption, when holy oil was smeared on her body, her spirit is now able to make the journey into the house of the Father and enter God's wholeness, which is described by the Valentinians as a bridal chamber.



Figure 8.2 Flavia Sophe's tombstone from the second century CE, found in Via Latina catacomb. National Museum of Rome, Diocletian Baths. Photos courtesy of April D. DeConick.

This side of the tombstone inscription corresponds meaningfully with an oft-overlooked comment made by the Christian theologian Tertullian of Carthage in his book *The Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting* (10.1). At the end of the second century, Tertullian notes that Valentinus himself taught about angelic bridegrooms who await the spirit of the deceased. After a harrowing ascent through the seven heavens and past the dark lords, who are thwarted with spells and secret passwords, the spirit of the deceased comes face-to-face with her "true man." This is a divinity dwelling among the *Immobiles*, the angels who stand in God's presence. He is an avatar who cannot be manipulated with magic spells. He is her beloved bridegroom angel.

On the back side of Sophe's gravestone (epigraph 2) is a second inscription (my translation):

This deceased woman did not have a typical end to her life.
She died, yet she lives, and sees a truly immortal light.
She really is living among the living, and is dead to the dead.
Earth, why are you astonished by this dead body?
Are you terrified?

Here, Sophe's redemption is highlighted as atypical for the time. She was not a mortal dying, turning to dust in the earth, but an immortal rising to the light of the transcendent sphere. She is a god living among the gods, not a corpse interned among the dead. Such a death must be terrifying to the cosmic powers, who do not have the authority to detain her in the shadow world or to force her into another body.

The Terror of Bold Speech

Why were the cosmic powers so afraid of Sophe? There is a letter written by Valentinus, which provides an answer (Valentinus, frag. 1, in Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 2.36.2–4). In this letter, Valentinus describes the creation of Adam, when the lords of creation stand around him in awe of his beauty. They had created Adam in the image of the transcendent Man, and so he was much more lovely than they. There was something different about him, too, something powerful that was a part of him but not part of them.

Unknown to them, Adam had been endowed with a seed of the divine spirit. Because the spirit is literally truth, this means that Adam had the ability to speak the truth, what the ancient Greeks called *parrhesia* (bold speech) (see Valentinus, frag. 2, in Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 2.114.3–6; Dunderberg 2008, 46–59). And his truth-telling struck terror into his creators, who realized that Adam was on to them and their lies. They did everything they could think of to stop him from spreading the truth.

Parrhesia was considered a fundamental duty of Greek citizens in the Athenian democracy. They understood that freedom of speech and frank criticism is necessary for a democracy to be successful. It is the obligation of the citizen to maintain the welfare of the city-state by speaking the truth, even when the majority of the population may not agree. In the Hellenistic period, when kings rather than citizens ruled, *parrhesia* became the job of the king's advisors, who were supposed to help him make sound decisions and prevent him from abusing his power.

Such truth-telling is terrifying for those in power, whose positions and plans are often threatened. The risk is very real, as Socrates discovered

when he was executed for his bold vision. The same might be said about John the Baptist's criticism of Herod. Criticizing Herod's relationship with his brother's wife was risky business that ended badly for John, with his head on a platter.

What is so remarkable about Valentinus is his insistence that it is the innate duty of the Gnostic to speak out and tell the truth, which is always transgressive, always challenging to the status quo. This makes transgression the heart of being Gnostic. The Gnostic, because the spirit has been awakened, must tell others what they are terrified to hear.

Imagine Valentinus's converts going around and saying that the real God is not YHWH but a transcendent being whom Jesus revealed. Imagine people's response when they learned that humans have been enslaved to false gods since the dawn of the world and have been deceived by these gods to live a lie. Such transgressive speech would strike terror into all those who heard it, including the gods, who want nothing more than to shut off the speech so that their lie can continue.

Sophe's gravestone shows the terror that Gnostic truth incites, with its recognition that we live in two worlds but are only aware of one—and that one is a lie. Sophe is among the redeemed because she stopped buying into the lies of the creator god. She came to believe that she was more than her corporeal body and mortal psyche. She came to understand that reality runs deeper than the physical and mental realms. The real Sophe, spirit from spirit, transcends this cosmos and its gods. She returns to the transcendent world, a glorified immortal. She races into the arms of her lover, the angel who has been waiting for her since the beginning of time. Embracing her spiritual avatar, Sophe is liberated from the lie.

The Well of Souls

Eywa, the divine God Mother, is portrayed in Cameron's *Avatar* as the divine mind with a physical neural network. This physical network is a kind of biological internet of nature, which links all species into Eywa's mind through the vast underground root system of the planet's ancient willow-like trees.

As Jake learns about the Na'vi forest from his native lover, Neytiri, he comes to know this deep connection that the people have with the forest. They are linked together by a network of energy that flows through all living beings. At various sacred sites across Pandora, the Na'vi are able to directly

link into the network by plugging their “queue”—a neural braid at the end of their hair—into the dendrites of a special tree.

Like the ancient Valentinians who used various rituals to link up with their angel avatars and link into the great chain of being, Jake links into his Na’vi body by lying down in a coffin-like bed, where he puts himself into a sleep state. The imagery of incubation and death is intentional. This coffin bed and his incubation allow Jake’s mind to link into the Na’vi brain and transfer his self to the Na’vi body. When he does so, the Na’vi body comes alive.

The link is only temporary, although Jake links so often and for so long that he begins to lose track of what is real and what is not. At one point, he records in his video log, “I barely remember my old life. I don’t remember who I am anymore.” His experiences of linking into an individual Na’vi mind and into Eywa’s neural network push him to the edge of his humanity.

As Jake’s human commanders become more and more monstrous, destroying the Hometree where Neytiri and her tribe live, Jake realizes that the humans have become his enemies. Jake, linked into Eywa, is able to muster all the animals of the forest and air to his cause. The animal warriors are able to push back the human invasion and save Pandora.

In the final scene, Jake has decided to take the ultimate plunge. His human body cannot be sustained, torn as it is between his humanity and his Na’vity. He must return to being Jake Sully the marine and go home or he must permanently merge with his Na’vi body and take up life among the natives. He decides to give himself over to Eywa, who will determine whether to permanently transfer his human mind to his Na’vi body or let Jake die.

The transfer is to take place at the Well of Souls, the greatest of all the sacred tree sites. Mounds of roots form the ground. Neytiri’s entire clan sits on the roots, linked in, encircling the vast tree. They are chanting a prayer to Eywa the Mother. Although we can’t understand the words, we have seen this ceremony before, when another transfer failed and the human Grace died. “Take this spirit into you,” they chanted about Grace, “and breathe her back to us. Let her walk among us as one of the People.”

Now the human Jake lies head-to-head with the Na’vi Jake. Their bodies are covered with tendrils of roots that have sprouted from the tree. Neytiri removes the breathing mask that covers Jake’s human face. She gently closes his eyes as the human Jake dies. She bends over and kisses him. It is all up to Eywa now.

The camera zooms in on Jake's Na'vi face, and quite suddenly his eyes open. In his death, Eywa has chosen to permanently unite Jake with his avatar. He has been born again, a blue angel.



CHAPTER NINE

The Pi of Politics

Maximillian “Max” Cohen

Darren Aranofsky, the famous producer of unorthodox films such as *Requiem for a Dream* and *Black Swan*, began his career in 1998 with a bizarre esoteric film, π (*Pi*), about a bizarre Gnostic Jew. The low-budget, grainy black-and-white film features Maximillian “Max” Cohen ([figure 9.1](#)), a recently graduated PhD mathematician who lives alone in an apartment that he has turned into a giant computer. He has named the computer after the ancient Greek father of geometry, Euclid. Max literally lives inside of Euclid—its screens, motherboards, wires, and keyboards are mounted on the walls and affixed to every surface of his apartment. Max believes that mathematics is the language of the universe and that there is a numerical pattern, a number, that explains everything about us and our world. He is intent on finding it.

The opening screen is nothing but raw white light, blinding. In this first scene, Max reveals that he had a terrifying experience when he was six years old and stared directly into the sun. At first, he says, the light was so bright that he was overwhelmed. Then his pupils shrank to nothing. It was then that he had an epiphany. He saw clearly. He understood everything. Afterward, the doctors didn’t know if Max would ever see again. They wrapped his face in bandages.

As we watch the adult Max wake up after suffering a cluster migraine, he tells us in an overdub that his childhood epiphany had changed something inside of him. The day he woke up and took the bandages off was the day he had his first migraine. Now, as an adult, he suffers horribly, with almost constant, intense head pain.



Figure 9.1 Max Cohen (Sean Gullette) in π (*Pi*) (1998).

In the moments when he is lucid, Max is obsessed with his search for absolute truth, for the mathematical number that turns out also to be God's forgotten name. His mentor, Sol, whose own name refers to Sol the Roman sun god, tells him that his quest is doomed. Max is like Icarus, who flies too high. He will be burned by the sun's rays. Sol tells Max that his obsession with discovering the 216-digit number of absolute truth is religious hogwash and insanity not fit for a scientist. Max insists that it is genius and pushes on.

When Max finally becomes consciously aware of the 216-digit number and figures out that it has been lodged in his brain since he was six and first looked at the sun, his brain anatomy visibly alters. As his migraines and visions spin out of control, he takes up scissors and frantically cuts away the hair from the portion of his scalp where the pain is most intense. As he stares into the mirror and chops off his hair, we begin to really wonder about his sanity. Does he plan to scalp himself to deal with the relentless pain? Or is he a mental case who is hallucinating?

As he removes his hair, we see on his scalp something new emerging, a bulging artery in the shape of the tip of an arrow. The arterial pathways of his brain appear to be changing their configuration, surfacing above his ear in this odd pointed formation. We now wonder whether Max really has

stumbled across the secret of the universe and it is rewiring his brain into something new.

In Aranofsky's film, all such musings about Max are true. He is the boy who was transformed by the vision of the sun, whose mind cannot handle the absolute knowledge it received. Throughout his life he is plagued by horribly debilitating migraines and visions, as his brain tries to contain the information and keep it unconscious. But after Max consciously recalls the magic 216-digit number, his brain structures visibly morph and everything goes to hell. Max becomes the stereotypical crazed Gnostic, the dangerous heretic who wants to wield the power of absolute truth for himself.

Madness for Sure

Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons is frustrated with Marcus and all the rest of the Gnostics. He is tired of it all. The craziness. The lies. The blasphemy. Something has to be done to stop the insubordination, to control the situation. Things have gotten out of hand. Marcus's church has appeal; this can't be denied. He is crafty with his theatrics and emotional antics, attracting unsuspecting Christians into his fold at an alarming rate. But oh, the agony of it all! The man is out of his mind. People are being deceived, dragged into the very depth of his madness, crossing the line of sanity and truth.

Irenaeus takes up his pen. He feels that he needs to draw the lines, to explain to other Christians how the "so-called" Gnostics have cut across the borders, how they have transgressed the good faith, the Christian truth.

What are the lines that define the faith, that hedge in the truth? According to Irenaeus, the truth is delineated by one fact and one fact alone: that the God the Christians worship is YHWH, the biblical Creator. The Gnostic teaching that the biblical Creator is an ignorant and evil deity is nothing less than blasphemy. There is no Good God, no Father of Jesus beyond YHWH. Such an opinion is not Christian but anti-Christian. These Gnostic blasphemers drag people into an abyss of madness with their violation of the faith. At all costs, they must be stopped (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.pref.1).

The portrayal of the Gnostics as schismatics, magicians, and heretics has become iconic in Western society. Because the Gnostics' teachings and practices deviated from the beliefs and behaviors of the Apostolic Catholics in ways that the early Apostolic church considered threatening, Gnostics of all stripes were labeled with derogatory tags that seared them with shame

like a scarlet *A*. This worked to force them into submission and to reinforce the rightness of the Apostolic Catholic position (DeConick 2013b).

The difference of opinion is viewed by the Apostolic Catholics as crazy and mad and is attributed to demonic possession and satanic agency (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.13.1, 3, 1.15.6, 1.16.3, 1.25.3–4, 5.26.2). Gnostics are considered nothing more than apostates who, like the rebel angel Satan, refuse to submit to the rule of YHWH (1.10.1, 2.28.7). To justify violence against them, Gnostics are dehumanized to the level of wild beasts, compared to hyenas that must be flayed and slayed (1.31.4) or to wolves in sheep's clothing who need to be exposed (1.pref.2, 3.16.8). Worse, they are like Hydra, a mythic monster that must be exterminated (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.11.1).

What do we do with this? Do we accept this deeply antagonistic position as reflecting the truth about the Gnostics? Do we accept that the ancient Gnostics were perverts who corrupted a good thing, *the church*, which Irenaeus and his Apostolic Catholic compatriots saved? This is a powerful view, which many people have held over the centuries, and still do.

Or do we take a more critical stance, as recent studies of Gnosticism suggest—that the portrayal of the Gnostics as deviants does not reflect reality but is propaganda, constructed as the Catholics fought to win the battle of faith in the ancient media? In this view, the Gnostics weren't deviants but alternative Christians whose opinions were just as customary as the Catholics' (Pagels 1979). This view can lead to the idea that Gnostics and Gnosticism are obsolete and dispensable because they categorically reflect this ancient propaganda (King 2003; Williams 1996).

As we have seen throughout this book, neither of these positions fully explains the historical evidence. The ancient Gnostics really did exist in antiquity, and the groups and religions they formed developed out of a new metaphysical orientation, an emergent Gnostic spirituality that arose at the beginning of the first century CE. There was no common Gnostic religion in antiquity, but there were Gnostics—religious people who adopted a Gnostic metaphysical orientation that inverted the way they “did” religion.

This new orientation valued the human being as something more than a mortal creature fashioned by God to do his bidding. The human being is understood to be substantially connected to a divine source that transcends creation. Because of this, the human being is perceived to be bigger and more powerful than the conventional gods who oversee creation. Knowledge of

this divine source, gnosis, depends on a direct link with the transcendent God, along with the inspired rereading of religious scriptures and a pluralistic quest in which truth is built from a wide variety of religious traditions, philosophical wisdom, and scientific understanding.

At the heart of this new orientation, then, is transgression. It is a countercultural worldview that flips the conventional upside down. The true human is not mortal but immortal. The true God is not to be found among the Gods we worship in synagogues, churches, and temples. The true God can't be known by reason or thought but must be experienced directly. Scriptures contain meaning beyond the traditional—even meaning *antagonistic* to the traditional.

This transgression, which is the heart of Gnostic spirituality, is not explained by dubbing it a perversion or a fabrication. Transgression is far more complex than either of these alternatives allow. Transgression is about crossing boundaries and shifting territories. It is about limits that are ever on the move. We only really know that transgression has happened by observing the reactions people have to it. Transgression becomes transgression when “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” “rightness” and “wrongness” become fixed, when certain values get attached to certain differences, and with them the scarlet *A*.

Breaching Norms

Back in the day, I remember being impressed by a simple demonstration mentioned by my college sociology professor. Sociologists call the demonstration “breaching,” because the aim is to examine people's reactions to breaches or violations of behavior that we generally accept as common or normal, behaviors we perform every day without giving much thought to them. The idea behind these demonstrations is to try to upset our assumptions in order to reveal how they shape society.

My professor explained the paradox of the experiment: if we want to study the norms we all take for granted, we have to break the norms first. This rupture enables us to see what norms are at play and to locate their boundaries.

The professor's illustration of this had to do with elevator etiquette. Walk into an elevator, but don't turn around to face the door. Instead, stand so that you directly face the other people riding the elevator. You will immediately notice how uncomfortable the other people become. Why? Because you have

violated elevator etiquette, which demands that all riders face the door. Breaking norms lets us see the norms.

But there is more to it, my professor told us. If you push this demonstration further and, say, begin to talk aloud to yourself while standing backwards in the elevator, the discomfort level of the other passengers will rise. They will think you are mentally ill or deranged. You are identified as a suspicious person, not to be trusted. They will move away from you and try to exit the elevator. In other words, infractions and violations of the unstated norm are often viewed by others as a sign of untrustworthiness and mental instability.

Why is this the case? It is all about transgression—how we define it, recognize it, and react to it. Sociologists who study transgression describe it as a violation of a norm, a departure from accepted practices. Such violations or fractures often will draw disapproval and negative sanctions from the larger society because the transgression is perceived to be socially threatening. Depending on the threat level, the dominant group will pressure transgressors to conform to the norms, will remove them from society, or will label them mad (Clinard and Meier 2008, 4–6, 79–80).

A person or group becomes deviant through a social process that identifies certain behaviors as a departure from the norm. Deviance is defined by the reaction of others to the behavior. It is not the deviant but others who mark the behavior as annoying, disturbing, or even threatening (Franzese 2009, 7). Because transgression rests on whether a particular action is noticed and marked by others as deviant, the deviant's intentionality remains an open question (Cresswell 1996, 23; Jenks 2003, 8). The transgressor may not consider his or her beliefs or actions deviant.

If we were to look at the Gnostics from this perspective of transgression, what would we find? What were identified as violations of commonly accepted practices and taken-for-granted assumptions, and who made these observations? Although we have very little evidence of criticism among Gnostic groups or of Gnostic groups lofting volleys at the Apostolic Catholics, we have a hoard of material written by Apostolic Catholics who identify Gnostic crimes in the areas of theology, human nature, interpretation of scripture, and ritual practices.

Crimes Against God

Apostolic Catholic authors are very consistent in their assertion that the Gnostic Christians breach theology in two ways. In their eyes, the most

egregious aspect of Gnostic teaching is the Gnostics' insistence that the God of worship is not YHWH, creator and ruler of universe (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.pref.1). Their teaching that the biblical God is not and cannot be the supreme God allows them to turn against the biblical Creator and to speak of him as an adversary (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 2.9.2, 2.13.3, 2.26.1, 4.pref.4; Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 3.1–2). This also allows Gnostics to go on to say that the Creator was produced by a defect or came into his own by leading a revolt. This makes the biblical God flawed, deceitful, and rebellious (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.16.3). This teaching is identified by the Apostolic Catholic leaders as blasphemy against God, making Gnostics far worse than pagans (2.9.2, 2.26.1, 2.28.7, 4.pref.3–4). It even gives Hippolytus of Rome reason to call them atheists (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref.1).

The Gnostics' second theological violation is their inverted view of YHWH, their teaching that they know about a God besides the Creator and that they know about him because they have direct experience of him. He is a God who is more excellent and sublime than anything that exists (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.pref.1, 1.16.3). They claim that this advanced knowledge relies on initiation, when they encounter this supreme God face-to-face (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.4.3, 1.21.3–4; Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 1.1–4; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.1.4, 5.23.2–3). The existence of this supreme God is proven by scripture, too, when it is read correctly (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.pref.1, 1.19.1–2). Who is this superior God? He is a previously hidden, unknown God who, in the Gospels of Matthew and John, was proclaimed by Jesus to be the true Father God (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.20.3, 2.26.1, 4.1.2, 4.20.5; Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 3.1–2).

The Apostolic Catholic leaders express deep concern about this teaching. Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons understands this teaching to be so transgressive that it changes the very subject matter of the Christian faith (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.10.3). He identifies the search for a God other than YHWH, “who really exists,” as the greatest of impieties (2.28.2).

What theological assumption of the Apostolic Catholic community came into such sharp focus when it was violated by Gnostic communities? What aspect of God had a large number of Apostolic Catholic Christians been taking for granted by the time Irenaeus wrote his refutations against the Gnostics? The Christians in Apostolic Catholic congregations had been

assuming that there is only one God, the Creator YHWH (1.20.3, 2.pref.1). Or, put another way, they had taken it for granted that the biblical God is the supreme God (2.13.3).

After the Gnostics say otherwise, the Apostolic Catholics rally around this assumption as the first and most important truth of Christian teaching (2.1.1). They view it as blasphemy to conjure into existence a God who they do not think exists, or to even try to figure out if there is a God above God (2.9.2, 4.26.2). To wrench themselves from the manifest biblical God, to worship a hidden God, is to offend their faith on its very threshold (Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 3.3).

Titanic Hubris

The Apostolic Catholics remark that this view of God led Gnostics to think about human nature in an unusual way. Gnostics think that they are substantially linked to the supreme God. Because their true selves are dispersed pieces of God, the very essence of human nature is not god *like* but *God*. They claim to be spiritual humans because they think that a particle of the Father has been deposited in their souls (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 2.19.3). This spiritual seed is formless, shapeless, and imperfect until it is placed in the human soul. As the soul descends into the human body, this transcendent particle takes on form, magnitude, and smartness (2.19.2–4).

This spiritual aspect is the true man, the intellectual organ of perception, the only aspect of the human that will ascend to the perfect Father (5.19.2). It is the distinct intellectual organ capable of discerning the truth through insight, intuition, and imagination, the aspect of the human being that can perceive what is bigger than us. It makes it possible for us to become aware of what is beyond our day-to-day, mundane identities, to perceive what is universal about our existence, what is God. Because of its transcendent nature, it links humans to the supreme God. According to the Apostolic Catholics, in the Gnostic scheme of things, the spirit is the only innate aspect of the human that tunes us into revelation and religious experience (Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 4.4).

This innate spiritual link with the transcendent God is what the Gnostic Christians thought made them superior to YHWH. After they were initiated into the mysteries, they believed they had supremacy over the biblical God (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 2.26.3; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref.2–3). In fact, Irenaeus notes that they take Jesus' aphorism "Seek and you shall

find” as an invitation to discover that they themselves are superior to the biblical Creator God. They think that they are greater and better than YHWH, calling themselves “spiritual” and the Creator “soulish.” Because they are spiritual, they think that they fly above the soulish YHWH to the divine world (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 2.30.2). They think that they have surpassed YHWH and that they are exalted above him (4.19.1). Their spiritual connection with the supreme God, they say, provides them with an immensity of knowledge, exceeding that of others, particularly of those Christians who continue to serve YHWH (1.13.6).

The fallout from this radical perspective of the human being is immense. Gnostics perceive themselves to have an exclusive on knowledge. They alone possess the greatness of the knowledge of the ineffable power, which they attain through an initiation that includes ascension to the height of existence. Because of their substantive superiority over YHWH, Gnostics have nothing to fear from YHWH. His slavish laws are rubbish, and his imperial powers are useless when pitted against the strength and natural supremacy of the human spirit. This leads them to conclude that humans are not bound by the laws of YHWH. Humans are not his servants but are free to act without fear of YHWH’s retribution (1.6.3, 1.13.6, 1.25.4–5).

Irenaeus says that their belief in the “nobility” of their breeding allows them to engage in forbidden acts (2.14.5). What are these acts? They eat meat sacrificed to idols, imagining that they cannot contract defilement (1.6.3, 1.28.2). They are the first to assemble at heathen festivals celebrating the idols. They attend gladiator games (1.6.3). They love extreme sexual practices, either engaging in erotic marital sex, which they consider sacred, or abstaining from sex and marriage, which they consider abhorrent (1.6.3, 1.13.3, 5, 1.28.1–2). Irenaeus is horrified that Gnostics who engage in these behaviors do so because they do not fear YHWH, as he and the other Apostolic Catholic Christians do (1.6.3).

These teachings lead the Apostolic Catholics to view Gnostics as arrogant, blasphemous, and mad (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.31.3, 2.30.1; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref.2–3). Irenaeus (*Against the Heresies* 2.26.3) is downright shocked that Gnostics do not think that they are inferior to God in any way. This concept of the human being is so monstrous that it will invoke divine retribution. The Gnostics are like the Titans who are struck with thunder when they are inflated by their vanity and hubris (2.30.1). Irenaeus marks this position as unnatural because it goes against “the law of

the human race” to think that there is “no real distinction between the uncreated God and the human”—who, Irenaeus reminds us, is a created entity (4.38.4).

Clearly, before the Gnostics began talking about the divine human, the Apostolic Catholics had been assuming that humans are inferior to YHWH, not his superiors (2.26.3). They had taken it for granted that YHWH cannot be surpassed by humans because YHWH, the immortal, uncreated God, is wholly Other than the human being, who is a mortal creature (2.25.4).

Irenaeus wrestles with this assumption when he asks, “How shall he be God who has not as yet been made human? Or how can he be perfect who was but lately created? How can he be immortal who in his mortal nature did not obey his creator? For it must be that you, from the outset, should hold the rank of human. And then afterwards partake of the glory of God. For you did not make God, but God made you” (4.39.2; cf. 4.38.4).

Consequently, the Apostolic Catholic community had taken it for granted that they are YHWH’s servants and must obey his laws as set forth in the Ten Commandments. They had assumed that salvation is based on their piety and righteousness as YHWH’s subordinates (2.29.1).

When the King Becomes a Dog

Apostolic Catholic leaders consider the Gnostic interface with scripture criminal. What makes their interpretations criminal? In the first place, Gnostics understand certain biblical passages to reveal the existence of the supreme God. The Gnostic Christians are charged with falsely perceiving ambiguities in the scripture, disjuncture and fault lines, which they then press into service, understanding them to reveal the hidden supreme God beneath the surface of the text.

Irenaeus says the particular testimonies they point out are very convincing to people who have little previous knowledge of how scripture is supposed to be read. So Gnostics are able to use these scriptures effectively to lead gullible people away from the truth that the biblical God is the one almighty Father and Creator (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.3.6, 1.6.1, 1.19.1–2, 1.20.2, 3.6.5, 3.7.1–2).

Second, Gnostics adapt and accommodate from biblical texts anything they can use as evidence of their own complex, underlying scriptural systems (1.1.3, 1.3.6, 1.20.2). This goes for the Gospels and the letters of Paul as well as the Law and the Prophets (1.3.6, 1.8.1; see Pagels 1975). Gnostic

readers are known to provide elaborate allegorical interpretations of Jesus' parables that coincide with their own idiosyncratic mythologies and religious narratives, explaining that the scriptures point to the wonderful, unspeakable mysteries of the Gnostics (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.1.3). Gnostic readers also tend to disregard the sequence of passages, rearranging verses to suit their version of truth. Irenaeus compares this interpretative practice to a person who takes a portrait of a king and breaks it into pieces. The person rearranges the pieces into a picture of a dog, and then says that this was the original intention of the artist. When they do this, they deceive many people who have no prior knowledge of the king's portrait (1.6.1).

Irenaeus maintains that Gnostics do not read scripture as the original authors intended it, and he is particularly worried about this in terms of the Gospel of John, which seems to be on the chopping block (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.11.1; 4.41.1–3). Irenaeus insists that the original author proclaims that there is only one God, the Almighty, and one Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten, by whom all things were made. Gnostics such as Cerinthus and the Valentinians transgress the text, reading it as if it pointed to a Father beyond YHWH and to multiple sons of God (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.9.1).

Because of Gnostics' high regard for ongoing revelation, the Apostolic Catholics report that Gnostic leaders author their own transgressive scriptures for their own communities. These writings contain fables about Jesus. They are completely different from the scriptures that the Apostolic Catholic Christians believe were handed down to them from the apostles. The Valentinians even have a text called the Gospel of Truth, as if indeed they knew the truth (1.20.1, 3.11.9).

The Apostolic Catholic writers criticize the Gnostics for their expansive pluralism, remarking that they use any authority they can to validate their systems. They use Homer's texts authoritatively (1.9.4). They also rely on the opinions of the heroes of Greek philosophy, astrologers who study the stars, and physicians who autopsy bodies and teach about human physiology (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.52.1–2). Gnostics take great satisfaction in adapting medical knowledge of the brain to their understanding of human nature and mind, as if the brain's anatomy proved the veracity of their claims about the spirit (4.51.10–14, 5.9.14–20).

The Apostolic Catholics consider the Gnostic use of biblical scripture and other authorities to be perverse, wicked, and blasphemous (Irenaeus, *Against*

the Heresies 1.3.6, 1.9.4). Irenaeus characterizes their interpretation as deceitful because it twists and mutilates scripture, altering it from its natural shape into something perverse and unnatural. Even their use of Homer is demonstrative of their transgressive style, he thinks. Homer's original meaning is twisted and reframed to reflect Gnostic interests. With this trick of interpretation, Gnostics convince people who do not know Homer's work into thinking that the Gnostic interpretation is actually what Homer meant (1.9.4).

Apostolic Catholic leaders identified Gnostic interpretation of scripture as transgressive because they thought it reversed the meaning of words that otherwise have straightforward meaning. Although the Gnostics recognize the words, they dismantle the texts through a reverse interpretation that transgresses the limits of previous interpretations. The cultural rules and cues in the text are inverted by the Gnostic and the dissonant oscillations within the text are engaged. Such transgressive reading crosses the line of authority that had given the text its governed identity up until then, what the Apostolic Catholics insist is the original intent of the author. The heart of Gnostic interpretation is the transgression of meaning that makes possible the impossible, which they see signaled in the ambiguities of the text. The result is that the received truth of the text becomes nonsensical, linking the world of meaning to the world of nonmeaning. As Irenaeus remarks, they turn the king into a dog.

The Apostolic Catholic community had assumed that their way of reading the scripture is the natural one. They had taken it for granted, that their interpretation of the scripture reflects a straightforward, literal meaning and that this reading was the author's intent (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.9.4). Because of these assumptions, they had consequently taken it for granted that this meaning is authoritative (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.52.1–2).

Naughtiness Behind Closed Doors

Apostolic Catholic leaders spend an inordinate amount of time describing a wide variety of variant Gnostic rituals and identifying them as worthless and crazy. For the Apostolic Catholics, Gnostic transgression of ritual involves two crimes. First, their ritual practices are done in secret rather than in public. The Apostolic Catholics suggest that the public face of the Gnostic movements look very similar to that of the Apostolic Catholic church. But behind closed doors, something else—something naughty—is going on when

the Gnostic leaders privately divulge their mysteries to their followers during secret initiation ceremonies (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.15.2).

Their activities are compared to the Eleusinian mysteries and are described as initiations conducted in private by a teacher and paid for by the initiate (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.4.3, 1.21.3–4; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref.2–5). Irenaeus remarks that initiation among the Valentinians is so costly that “people spend all they possess to learn about the tears of Sophia” (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.4.3). There is a long initiation process before the initiate can enroll as a member of the group. People are tested before the first secrets are revealed to them. According to Hippolytus before the ceremonies begin, the Gnostic leaders bind the person with an oath of secrecy, swearing them to never divulge the mysteries or talk to anyone about them unless that person, too, is initiated (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref.3–4).

During the process, the initiate is exposed to tormenting conditions as well as greater and greater mysteries, making the process emotionally suspenseful. Tertullian remarks that it takes five years of instruction to become a “perfect” Valentinian, when the deity is revealed at last to the fully initiated. The anticipation of this final revelation makes initiation really attractive. Tertullian says that people crave it (Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 1.2).

Hippolytus comments on the attractiveness of reserving the final revelation of secret knowledge for a future date, even until death itself, when the highest mystery is whispered into the ear of the dying person during a last rites ceremony. This type of secrecy keeps people committed to the movement (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.41.2–5).

The second violation of ritual is that Gnostic Christians market their rituals as advanced ceremonies for advanced Christians. Sometimes these rituals reflect idiosyncratic activities, such as the Ophian Christian ascent ceremony of the Seal (Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.27) or the popular last rites of the Marcosians (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.21.5). But what really worries the Catholic leaders is how frequently Gnostic rituals are specialized versions of rituals that the Apostolic Catholic Christians are doing, making them difficult to distinguish from each other.

For instance, Irenaeus is thoroughly frustrated with the Valentinians, who, like Apostolic Catholics, openly confess the creed “There is one God the Father and everything comes from him, and one Lord Jesus Christ.” But in

their hearts, Irenaeus knows, they have transgressed the liturgy by cueing the meaning of the liturgy with their own secret codes. In their twisted minds, the “one God the Father” is not the Creator YHWH but their hidden supreme God, and the “one Jesus” is not a single entity but a multitude of entities that merge to form Jesus in Valentinian mythology (4.33.3).

Although the Apostolic Catholic leaders cannot find a common practice among Gnostics—indeed, they remark that every Gnostic leader relies upon his own variety of rituals—they do consider Gnostic rites to be divergent from what is done in the Apostolic Catholic church. To safeguard their own rituals and liturgies, they remark that Apostolic Catholic rites impart grace because they were transmitted from the apostles to their successors, who are now the leaders and guardians of the Apostolic Catholic church (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref.6).

The Apostolic Catholics had assumed that Christian rituals were public affairs, open to all and free to all. There were no expectations on their part that baptism or the Eucharist needed ritual augmentation to be effective, or that advanced learning was necessary to reap the benefits of salvation. Once people were baptized and reoriented their lives as obedient servants of YHWH, they belonged to the church community, the body of Christ that was saved.

How Are Differences Valued?

Transgression works to define our differences. When it comes to transgression, there is a general rule of thumb: the more difference there is in a society, the more transgression there is. The more diverse the society, the more transgression comes into play (Meier 1989).

Transgression only exists in societies where there are differences, because we place value on differences. Some differences we come to value more than others. If a society values education, then it disvalues under-education. If a society values occupations with high prestige, it disvalues occupations with little or no prestige.

When people act transgressively, we are forced to place value on our differences and to create shared standards about them (Durkheim [1895] 1982; Jenks 2003, 16–32). Difference, then, promotes the creation and maintenance of norms and the attachment of the moral qualities “good” or “bad” to behaviors that ought to be adopted or avoided. This is how judgments about “better” and “worse” begin to influence the definition of

transgression in societies, and its negative classifications. However, societies do not fix these judgments in stone; they are relative because they are dependent upon dynamic standards. As the standards shift or the group changes, so too do the ways people are transgressive and the amount of disapproval their transgression arouses (Clinard and Meier 2008, 11).

These insights have led sociologists to conclude that nothing is inherently deviant. Rather, transgression requires a judgment, which must refer to a norm (16). Transgression is not transgression unless it is marked as such by the surrounding group. What is transgressive to one group may not be marked as transgressive by another group. This makes it a relative notion, dependent on the ways that the group maps its standards (8).

Who Is in the Know?

When we interrogate the early Apostolic Catholic testimonies, we discover what the Apostolic Catholics living in the Roman society valued. In this highly structured and stratified society, certain differences were valued more than others. These value markers helped to frame the beliefs and behaviors of the Gnostic Christians as less valuable, as things that ought to be avoided. This judgment of value is what set in place the negative classifications that made up the structure of transgression in their society and then placed the Gnostic squarely within that structure.

The conflict between the Gnostic Christians and the Apostolic Catholics is a fight over knowledge—what and whose knowledge is the most valuable. Gnostics claim superior knowledge that is at once mystical and revelatory. Gnostics think that truth is not really delivered by means of a written document, or even an established religious tradition (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.2.2). Rather, the essence of truth is imparted by the “living voice” (3.2.1). Because of this, they were occupied with questions that others were not asking, and they believed that they were able to discover answers to these questions even though other people could not (2.26.3).

The Gnostics’ most prized knowledge is direct experience of God as revealed through shamanic initiations (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.6.1; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.1–4, 5.23.2–3). It is viewed by them as a kind of omniscience, as perfect knowledge of everything (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 2.9.2). This is the most valuable knowledge, and it draws people away from the Creator YHWH (1.pref.1). Because they so highly value their extreme religious experience of the transcendent God, they imagine that, on

their own, they have discovered more than the apostles of the church. In fact, given what they know about God, they are convinced that the apostles must have preached the Gospel while still under the influence of Jewish opinions (4.26.2).

This type of mystical knowledge, then, is not so much acquired through book learning as it is attained through ecstatic religious experience. Its accomplishment is perceived by Gnostics to be the achievement of perfection, literally raising them above everyone else (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.8.1; Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 2.1). They are convinced that their discovery of knowledge is the discovery of unadulterated truth that leaves them wiser than the elders of the Apostolic Catholic church and even the apostles themselves (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.1.1, 3.2.2, 3.12.7).

This stratification structured their world into two levels. They were the knowledge holders, the spiritual people, whereas everybody else was ignorant and soulless. The Apostolic Catholics were tagged as people of faith and works rather than people of knowledge (2.26.3).

Irenaeus, on the other hand, discounts revelatory knowledge in favor of publicly shared knowledge learned from old, reliable sources, such as scriptures, officially sanctioned teachers, and long-standing religious tradition. He considers the mystical quest for God to be the greatest of impieties (2.28.2). He considers people who highly value revelatory knowledge to be insane, foolish, and thunderstruck for their arrogance (2.26.3). Mystical knowledge is a pretense—and it is dangerous. Because it has no external controls, no prescribed restraints, the devil is free to inspire, which he does. In the judgment of Irenaeus, mystical knowledge such as Gnostics prescribe is evil knowledge from the devil, making Gnostics apostates and blasphemers against YHWH (4.pref.4).

The Apostolic Catholic leaders value knowledge that they consider old or traditional, including scriptures such as the Law, the Prophets, the Gospels, and Paul's letters and the doctrine that the bishops in their churches have been teaching for decades. They consider the inspired writings of Gnostics to be forged documents that contain a hodgepodge of sullied information (2.14.2). These newfangled Gnostic writings are not real scriptures and they do not contain real knowledge. True knowledge, in their minds, is the long-standing doctrine of the apostles and the universal church, known to its bishops, who represent the body of Christ (4.33.8).

Private or Public?

The second judgment that is being made has to do with the *appearance* of religion, whether public (exoteric) or private (esoteric) religion is better or worse. The Gnostic Christians place high value on private, esoteric religion, which appears to be similar to Greco-Roman and Egyptian mystery religions. They consider truth to consist of secrets and mysteries that are progressively revealed to members of their groups, as the members individually advance in their ecstatic initiation journeys and reap personal therapeutic benefits. Instruction and rites are private and can be expensive to undergo, but the secrecy, exclusivity, and cost make membership in the group all the more valuable to them.

The opposite is the case for the Apostolic Catholic leaders, who place extreme value on public religion with open access, religion that looks like the civic religion performed in Roman circles or in Jewish synagogues. They view private religion very negatively, characterizing it as clandestine, fixed on debauchery and orgies. The secrecy that characterizes Gnostic movements brings with it accusations of magic and trickery (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.pref., 6.41.2–5). It also brings with it accusations of elitism, superiority, and snobbery.

Whose Reading Is Right?

The interpretation of scripture was the battleground, with the Gnostics valuing an inverse reading of scripture that focuses on understanding the fault lines and dissonances among the texts. They look for different oscillations of meaning, for ruptures. They revel in reverse meanings, as if they have exposed a secret, a hidden truth that no one saw previously. They also read analogically and allegorically to reveal the secret spiritual level of the text. They value this esoteric inverse interpretation more highly than the plain reading of the words.

The Apostolic Catholic leaders value a different hermeneutic. Set aside obscure interpretations, they say (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 2.27.2). Proper hermeneutics reflects what they call a straightforward or natural reading of scripture. Christians, Irenaeus believes, should make a “plain reading” of the scripture based on “simple reading” and “daily study” that reflects the clear and unambiguous observation of what the words say. A

reading is “correct” when many people read a text and agree that this is what it says (2.27.1).

Here he is not referring to popularity or majority rule. Rather, he means that if one were to distribute a text to a number of people separately and then ask them what it means, most would report back a similar answer, and this reflects a literal reading of the words. This is the reading that the Apostolic Catholics understand to be the natural reading, to reflect the author’s original intent, and this is worth more than the interpretations of subsequent readers, which are secondary and concocted to reflect later interests.

The right reading is also the harmonious reading, the one that perceives the scripture as a whole. At the heart of this hermeneutic is the assumption that the Prophets and the Gospels are congruent and have a unified message that everyone can see. They proclaim one God who created, through the Word, one being who made and governs the world. So in the end, according to Irenaeus, the right interpretation agrees with the Apostolic Catholic doctrines and the creedal rule of faith (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 2.27.1–2, 5.18.2).

Jew or Christian?

The relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism is highly contested. Most of the discussions among scholars focus on dependence issues, on whether Gnosticism originated from within Judaism, on whether reference to Jewish scriptures is indicative of Jewish origins (see Smith 2004; Lahe 2012). I prefer to move the discussion beyond this impasse to a more complex question: specifically, what kind of religious movements and postures toward Judaism develop when Gnostic spirituality engages the Jewish scripture in multiple contexts?

In the confrontation between Apostolic Catholic and Gnostic Christian, the value of Christianity’s connection to Judaism is undoubtedly on the line. The Gnostic Christians do not place a high value on maintaining this connection, but some Gnostics devalue this connection more than others, and there are moves in Gnostic circles to devalue and transgress Judaism in ways that we today would identify as anti-Jewish. To be sure, YHWH is perceived to be a defective, rebellious, ignorant, arrogant God at odds with the transcendent supreme God. In some cases, YHWH is considered to be demonic. Irenaeus remarks that Gnostics are against the laws of Moses and the rest of the Jewish scriptures because they have judged it to be dissimilar and contrary

to the Gospel. The prophets were inspired by YHWH or his commanders, not by the supreme God. The Lord Jesus came from another Father and preached a different message from the one found in Jewish scriptures (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4.34.5, 4.35.1).

That being said, even the Christian scriptures do not reflect the entirety of truth, in the minds of the Gnostic Christians, because, these Gnostics thought, at least some of the apostles who preached the Gospel were still under the influence of Judaism. The Gnostics, who are privy to revealed knowledge, think of themselves as more pure and more intelligent than these apostles still under the influence of Judaism (3.12.12).

How do Gnostic circles characterize Christianity's connection to Judaism? They judge Catholics to be phony Christians who never gave up Judaism, and thus Gnostics perceive them to still be Hebrews (Gospel of Philip NHC II.3 51.29–32). The Catholics, they thought, maintain certain questionable connections with Judaism, including their belief that the Jewish God YHWH is the supreme God. They continue to worship YHWH as his slaves, perpetually sacrificing Jesus to YHWH whenever the Eucharist is performed in their churches, even though the Good God would never demand bloody sacrifices.

The Apostolic Catholics did not see things from this angle. The Apostolic Catholic leaders, while recognizing the subordination of Judaism to Christianity in terms that we today would consider equally anti-Jewish terms, place high value on maintaining a connection to Jewish scriptures and the Jewish God. They maintained this connection by devaluing Judaism as a slavish religion that needed to be replaced by something better. They pictured the Jews as disobedient followers of YHWH. Irenaeus assumes that the imposition of the law on the Jews was a course of servile discipline. YHWH instituted the laws of Moses so that the Jews would learn to fear God and serve him correctly (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4.14.3).

But, according to Irenaeus, the Jews never got it quite right (4.15.1). For instance, they never got sacrifice right. He considers the bloody animal sacrifices of the “slavish” Jews to be substandard fare, whereas the Eucharist sacrifices made by the freed church were pure. Although he asserts that YHWH, whom both Jews and Christians serve, is one and the same God, Irenaeus values differently the offerings that each of these communities makes to YHWH. The Jewish sacrifice is viewed as servile, whereas the Christian is viewed as liberating (4.18.4).

Irenaeus insists that the church single-mindedly offers her gift as a pure sacrifice to God, as thanksgiving to the Creator. The offering is made without hypocrisy, with a pure mind, in faith, in hope, in fervent love (4.18.4). Although it is true that Christians inherited bondage to YHWH when the disobedience of the first parents, Adam and Eve, made humans mortal, the “filth of Zion” was washed away and humans were rendered clean by means of the New Man, Jesus (4.22.1).

In this way, Irenaeus values his church’s connection with Judaism and their mutual God YHWH while at the same time debasing the Jewish cult. In the Apostolic Catholics’ opinion, God had supplanted Judaism with Apostolic Catholicism. They saw themselves as the only obedient followers of YHWH. This opinion enabled the Apostolic Catholics to supplant Judaism while also using Judaism to link Apostolic Catholicism into an ancestral religious past going all the way back to ancient Israel.

Subordination or Insubordination?

The real maelstrom of difference in the Gnostic–Catholic debate centers on the nature of humanity, because at the foundation of this debate is transgression itself, whether to be subordinate or insubordinate. The Gnostic Christians value the superiority and natural divinity of humans. They prioritize human need over the needs of the conventional gods and their worldly representatives. They understand the human predicament to be forced enslavement to the powers that control this world, both cosmic denizens and human authorities.

Resolving the human plight, according to Gnostics, involves resistance to authorities and rulers by overturning the cosmic order and overpowering the demons on a personal level. They believe in the power of the free human to transform ourselves and our world. They refuse to remain slaves to religions that demand appeasement, obedience, and fearful submission to ruling deities and their kings. Although insubordination to cosmic and human authorities is discussed, however, political coups were not encouraged. The fight was on a personal and cosmic level, to control the cosmic rulers through personal warfare that conquered the demons in charge of the world and empowered the Gnostics as the new gods, superior to the old order.

Not so with the Apostolic Catholics, who value human subordination and citizenship in a community with laws and regulations, which are imposed to control our disobedient human nature. Even so, Irenaeus tries to convince us

that Christians are not slaves to the biblical God, like the Jews, but are really free. He says that the biblical God had laws in place for the benefit of his people. YHWH restrained his people so that they might obtain the gift of salvation through obedience to the Ten Commandments. His restraints and laws should not now push us to rebel against him as apostates. Despite the fact that YHWH has limited humans with laws so that he has a basis for fair judgment and can honor the obedient with immortality, he has always preserved freedom and the power of self-government (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4.16.5).

The most prized mode of human existence, what Irenaeus calls the “glory of the human,” is to remain permanently and obediently in YHWH’s service. He reasons that God created the human being and this fact alone makes us his servants. Although it is true that God put into effect certain laws, including the requirement to offer him sacrifices, this does not mean that God wants or needs anything from us in the form of offerings (4.14.1). To the contrary, he did this for the benefit of human beings who were blind and needed to see what true sacrifice is. It was necessary for us to make offerings to God so that, through our obedience, we might receive life from YHWH (4.17.1–4).

Christians do this by participating in the Eucharist ceremony performed in the Apostolic Catholic churches. It functions as a first-fruits offering of thanksgiving that sanctifies creation (4.18.6). God does not need our offerings, but he wants to teach humans that they must be grateful for creation (4.17.5). The Lord Jesus gave instructions about how to offer this sacrifice to God. It is a pure sacrifice, and the only one that is acceptable to YHWH. Just as we bring gifts to our kings to show our honor and affection, so too we bring our gifts and offer them to YHWH. By showing our obedience and gratitude, we receive respect and salvation from him (4.18.1).

Culture and Counterculture in Rome

To appreciate the countercultural program of the Gnostics, it is helpful to recognize what the Romans valued. First and foremost, they prized longstanding tradition, “the way of the elders.” The old ways of their ancestors were the good ways. The ancestors had taught people virtue, fidelity, and respectfulness as the foundation of Roman civilization ([figure 9.2](#)). These values maintained the highly structured Roman society, with its strict hierarchies built on patron–client relationships and status. Romans who embodied these traditional values earned status in society (Martin 2012, 22).



Figure 9.2 Early fourth-century fresco of Rome personified, standing on the foundation of virtue, honor, and government, holding victory in her hand. National Museum of Rome. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

Romans prized public religion and considered it their civic duty to support the official set of sacrifices, prayers, and rituals that the state sanctioned in the cities' temples. Ancestral religion was valued most highly, out of fear that altering the customary honors paid to the gods might offend the deities and provoke their anger. Honoring the gods with customary gifts and prayers of gratitude upheld the human–god relationship. This sanctioned cultic behavior guaranteed that the gods would protect the city and care for its populace.

In this relationship, humans were viewed as inferior clients whose patrons and guardians were the superior gods. Showing respect to the gods as their superiors, honoring the authority of the ancestors, and fulfilling their moral obligations to one another were extremely important values that regulated their families and social lives and staved off disaster (Martin 2012, 34–40).

To the Romans, “new” signified “suspect” and “dangerous.” In fact, new things meant revolution, because the Romans feared that new things had the potential to be destructive, to lead to social disorder (22). This resulted in an uneasiness, even xenophobia, when it came to the worship of imported or “foreign” gods. The Romans made a distinction between authentic state religion and “superstition,” which was anything that deviated from the traditional cult taught by their ancestors. Particularly suspect were ecstatic practices such as prophecy, direct contact with the gods, and other unmediated and unregulated activities (Turcan 1996, 10–12). These were countercultural practices that messed up the fine-tuned traditional relationship between the gods and the Romans in ways that could be revolutionary and disastrous.

Given these values, the Romans suspected that the early Christians in general were deviants, and they criticized the Christians’ religion as “new” and “superstitious.” This depiction was costly for Christian groups generally, something that the emerging Catholics recognized and decided to remedy. By the early second century, the Apostolic Catholic leaders intentionally began to create a better interface between their religion and the traditional values of Rome. Even though the Catholics rejected aspects of Roman society as decadent and heathen, they began to settle in and accommodate their new religion to Rome, to promote it as a “public” religion that claimed old ancestral customs linked to Judaism. The Catholics began writing treatises to assure the Roman rulers that they were good, “moral” citizens.

For the most part, this domestication did not happen among the Gnostic Christian groups, who prized the new, the revelatory, the unmediated experiences of the God beyond the gods of civic duty and the patron–client relationship. The Gnostic Christians made little claim to an ancestral past, preferring to sever the tie with Judaism and market their Gnostic communities by promoting a new, previously unknown God who wanted nothing whatsoever to do with traditional sacrifices and other public ceremonies. For Gnostics, the practice of religion was not about civic duty and moral obligation but about personal therapy and triumph. The human

being and its needs surpassed the old god; indeed, it overturned them and their earthly representatives. This transtheistic perspective not only cut across Judaism but also laid waste to the Roman cult.

Gnostic groups emerge on the margins of religion, within social and political landscapes that have been unkind to the people who join their communities (see Rudolph 1983, 282–92; Grant 1966, 33–37, 118; Dahl 1981, 689–712; Smith 2004; Segal 1977, 262–65; Yamauchi 1978; Wilson 1995, 206; Pearson 1997, 120; Green 1985). In the case of the ancient world, Roman colonization laid waste to native populations and native religions, creating social, political, and religious landscapes of severe marginalization. These landscapes were fertile ground for Gnostic countercultural movements.

The American historian Theodore Roszak, who coined the term *counterculture*, thought that countercultures emerge when people can no longer align their moral compass and ideal visions with society and become alienated within a society's institutions (Roszak 1968, 95–96). Roszak defines the essence of the counterculture, in psychological terms, as an assault on the reality of the ego. The counterculture instead “transcends the consciousness of the dominant culture and runs the risk of appearing to be a brazen exercise in perverse nonsense” (55). It is like the invasion of the centaurs that Apollo must drive back (although sometimes Apollo does not win). It gains its vision and power from that moral and imaginative level of human personality that lies deeper than our ego or intellectual consciousness. Although Roszak resists naming it anything but “non-intellective consciousness,” he thinks this deep aspect of human personality provides our guiding vision and ultimately determines for us what we regard as sanity.

Roszak argues that the counterculture is reflected in any figure or movement that privileges non-intellective knowledge and personal visions of truth over cultural constructions of knowledge. In this way, Roszak was able to take the question of counterculture, relative to the hippie generation he was studying, and suspend it phenomenologically to embrace what, for him, is at stake: the spirit of humanity that underlies social systems and ideologies and must serve as the ultimate point of moral reference (62). Basilides, Valentinus, and their gnostic friends would have exclaimed, “Amen!”

Sociological studies of countercultural movements show that, for some people, transgression can become a flagship, a way to mobilize and revolutionize an environment that has left them powerless. These types of

movements can lead to political coups and violence (Franzese 2009, 30–31; Wolfreys 2008, 4; Cresswell 1996, 163–76). But this did not happen with the Gnostics, who must have known that taking up arms against Rome was futile. Instead, the Gnostics turned their transgression into a celestial coup to overthrow the demonic horde that controls our world and puts our kings and princes in power. They felt that if they could gain control of the terror at its roots by disarming the rulers of the heavens, then the heavenly rulers' human representatives, the kings, would be sure to fall.

Even more countercultural was the Gnostic belief that the human displaced the gods. The human had crossed over the boundary that had so long separated the gods from the human. Now the human was out of place, a divine being no longer afraid of the gods, the ancestors, or the obligations of traditional rank. Gnostics were free of the social and political restraints that their gods and ancestors had imposed upon them for centuries. The Romans were right. This was revolutionary and dangerous.

Gnostic Strategies

When we look at the ancient religious landscape, it is clear that it was a highly competitive marketplace (Sanders 2000; Lieu 2002, 69–79; Brakke 2006). The testimonies of the Apostolic Catholic leaders reveal fierce competition between Gnostic Christian communities and Catholic churches. On the most basic level, the fight was over parishioners—who had them, who could keep them, and who could take them away. Gnostics of different stripes were accused of successfully persuading many Apostolic Catholics to join their communities (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.16.3, 3.15.2). Specific charismatics are identified as most successful, such as Marcus, who drew away members from other churches in Gaul (1.13.1).

What strategies did Gnostics rely on to bring in and keep new parishioners? Although one of the primary factors in conversion was one's social networks and affiliations to family, friends, and patrons already inside the group (Eshleman 2011), different groups appealed cognitively and emotionally to different individuals, and the groups used differentiated marketing strategies to recruit and maintain members. Some Gnostic groups, for instance, took a more liberal stance on women's roles within their communities, opening up leadership opportunities that had been closed to women attending Apostolic Catholic congregations. Marcus was particularly successful in this effort, winning over wealthy women who found positions

of power as prophets in his Gnostic church (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.13.3).

Gnostic groups also had more extreme views of marriage. Some, such as the Valentinians, saw marriage as sacred, and erotic intercourse with one's spouse as redemptive. This was attractive to some Christians who found themselves among Catholics advocating chaste sex as a procreative necessity. Other Gnostic groups appeared to be the philosophical champions of the passion-free life, attracting Christians who did not want to be bothered with marriage and the family at all (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.25.3).

Gnostics also relied on eloquence and superior philosophical knowledge to persuade people to join their groups. Irenaeus remarks that people were persuaded to convert by the excellent speeches delivered by Gnostic leaders (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.25.3). Because their interpretations relied on ancient philosophy, these leaders impressed others as being highly intellectual. They marketed their ideas as novelties to people who did not know the difference, or did not care (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.6.1–2).

Tertullian (*Against the Valentinians* 4.1–4) remarks that Valentinus was so eloquent, so downright genius, that he expected to be appointed the next bishop of Rome. When that did not happen, Valentinus left the Apostolic Catholic church and, as discussed in [chapter 8](#), opened his own doors, taking with him as students a number of equally talented people. They promoted their brand of knowledge as intellectually superior, running down the Apostolic Catholics for their ignorance (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.6.4).

Gnostic groups also were keenly aware that unique and secretive practices are a powerful draw. Once inducted into their groups, people tended to stay, feeling that they possessed something of great value that others did not. In Gnostic groups that charged for initiation, the members were financially committed as well. In most if not all Gnostic groups, members were promised more and more perfect knowledge with each passing year. In some really shrewd groups, this promise continued to unfold until the deathbed, when the last words of hidden wisdom were whispered into the ears of the dying person.

One of the strategies that most bothered Irenaeus was the willingness of some Gnostic groups to appear to be Apostolic Catholic by using the same liturgies in their rituals and catechisms. Converts were confused; they wanted to know why the Apostolic Catholics shunned other groups that promoted

stuff that looked the same (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.15.2). The Roman philosopher Celsus actually interacted with the Ophians, who told him they were Christians. Celsus accepts this at face value and Origen, the Apostolic Catholic teacher from Alexandria, has to turn himself inside out to convince us otherwise.

Tough Competition

So, with all of these successful marketing techniques, why did the competition play into the hands of Apostolic Catholics? Here we come to the crux of the problem. To understand transgression is to understand whose norms are being violated and which behaviors the violated group defines as transgressive. Transgression is always about power and its inequalities. By virtue of their influence, certain people in societies have more power. People who access and control political, economic, or social resources such as the media are more successful at defining what is normal and what is abnormal than those who are less influential in these arenas. And it is most often the case that those with power will find those with less power to be abnormal and will demand harsh sanctions against their transgressive actions (Clinard and Meier 2008, 11–12, 76–83; Franzese 2009, 88–101). Systems of social control that aggressively sanction and punish transgression tend to identify an act against the interests of the people in power as a transgression. Transgression *becomes* transgression because the behavior violates the standards of the powerful in society, who are able to enforce negative sanctions that discourage future violations.

When transgression is linked to negative sanctions and punishments, those in power must persuade the public of the legitimacy of their standards and sanctions (Clinard and Meier 2008, 16–17, 28–29). This is done by associating their standards with morality, ethics, or some other benefit, such as economic benefit. This type of persuasion is most effective when it is promoted through publication and campaign (19). Thus, people with access to and control of a society's media resources are much more likely to secure legitimacy for their standards and to successfully promote them in the larger society.

Heresiologists portray Gnostics as grassroots organizations, run by various charismatic teachers scattered throughout the Roman Empire. When the different teachers published their books, they did so for their own communities. Their esoteric publications were insulated, never enjoying

widespread distribution, respected within their own groups but rarely embraced outside the walled gardens of Gnostics. Gnostic secrecy, one of the main attractions of Gnostic groups, was also its greatest weakness.

In the second century, there was no agreement among Gnostic leaders, no formal ties or connections, and no official mode to transmit leadership from one generation to the next within groups (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 5.20.1). Tertullian says that each teacher put forward his own opinions or interpretations of scriptures, with none of them agreeing on anything. Some teachers would say, “This is not so”; others would remark, “I take this in a different sense” or “I don’t admit that” (Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 4.4). This contentious diversity and intergenerational leadership vacuum resulted in decentralized power structures that were unable to sustain their communities intergenerationally.

As we will see in the next chapter, it was not until the third century that the Gnostic Mani understood and addressed this problem. He was the first to establish a centralized Gnostic church, which was so attractive and powerful that it became the first world religion, the only Gnostic church that was able to compete successfully with Catholic churches and remain powerful and vibrant over the centuries.

However, the Apostolic Catholics realized the importance of intergenerational institutionalization long before Mani organized his church. He was not the innovator but the imitator on this front. By the middle of the second century the Apostolic Catholics had started to build a network of churches across the Mediterranean, connecting their congregations to one another in terms of leadership, doctrine, and ritual (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.10.2–3). They even began centralizing control around the Roman see, which traced its authority back to the teachings of both Peter and Paul (3.3.1–3). This was really genius.

They understood their beliefs and procedures to have a history, a tradition that connected them directly to Jesus and the apostles. In their publications, they began promoting their tradition as “apostolic” and “scriptural,” and they distributed these writings publicly, to Roman politicians as well as fellow Christians. In their widely distributed print media, they grounded themselves in a Jewish past of piety and scripture, giving their *new* religion an aura of ancestry and merit along with a built-in set of assumptions about YHWH and the human being. As we saw earlier in this chapter, this helped to ease the Roman suspicion that Christianity was an exotic new superstition.

Internally, the Apostolic Catholics developed and distributed to their network of churches short confessions of belief, or creeds, which parishioners memorized and repeatedly performed. They referred to this as the “rule of faith” or “standard of truth” and promoted it as “apostolic” (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.9.5, 1.10.1, 2.9.1, 3.3.1). Irenaeus’s version (1.31.1) runs:

For the Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the Apostles and their disciples this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the incarnate ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things, and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord and God and Savior and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess him, and that he should execute just judgment towards all.

This creed provided a simple mental frame for the group’s beliefs, easily internalized by congregants and recognized as legitimate. This worked to solidify the group’s mentality and identity as uniform and positional, as normal and natural. Across this vast network emerged norms of belief and behavior, which the leaders and parishioners took for granted and assumed were markers of Christian identity worldwide. Likewise, they began identifying themselves as the worldwide church, calling themselves *the Catholic* (universal) church (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.10.2–3, 4.33.8).

Finally, there was shame and punishment, deterrents that Catholics used to avoid loss of members from their congregations. Irenaeus accuses former parishioners of transgression when they cross over and join Gnostic communities, leaving behind their previous belief in YHWH. They are labeled sinners of the worst kind (4.27.3). Those who come back into the Apostolic Catholic fold are subjected to public confession and humiliation in front of the congregation. Irenaeus understands this movement of congregants back and forth to be a pervasive problem. He states that there were frequent readmissions to the Apostolic Catholic church. To be readmitted, the reconverted Christians were required to publicly confess that they had been shamed and corrupted within the Gnostic churches they had been attending (see Eshleman 2011, 193, 211–12).

The success of the Apostolic Catholics in wielding power to socially enforce negative sanctions against beliefs and behaviors they identified as deviant worked to reinforce the normalcy and rightness of their opinions. The more their creeds were collectively chanted, the more the borders of transgression were imprinted. The more people were humiliated and shamed in public confessions, the more future transgression was avoided. This was the stuff of social power. And ultimately it was the stuff that defined the boundaries of right and wrong, of orthodoxy and heresy.

The Orthodox Prescription

Transgression is the act of breaching a norm that has become recognized by a powerful group as a prescription, law, or custom. It is the act of crossing a line, stepping over a boundary, moving beyond convention, straying from the straight and narrow, overstepping a limit. It has to do with a passage of some kind, an infringement that moves a person from one place to another. The passage is not neutral. It represents going from what is standard and authorized to what is illicit and outlawed (Wolfreys 2008, 3).

Transgression first requires some sort of standard or custom by which a powerful group in society asserts, defines, and qualifies its identity and borders (Wolfreys 2008, 4). The tagging of the transgression is evidence that an assumed “normal,” although this is not yet necessarily orthodoxy, or the prescribed “right way.” Instead, the act of breaching the norm creates the orthodoxy, the prescription of the right way. The transgressive act creates the opportunity for those in power to clarify the previously commonplace categories and to produce official categories with official boundaries and official sanctions (Cresswell 1996, 20).

How does this work? Reactions to certain behaviors as transgressive reveal what was previously considered natural or was taken for granted. Often, people are not even aware of this existing geography of the normal. The act of transgression raises awareness and suddenly orients people to the normative landscape. It is the moment when the lines are drawn, when what was taken for granted becomes the right way, orthodox, and the transgression becomes “the wrong way,” or heretical. When the different values of groups clash, the normal is defined by those who have the power to do so. This constant process of reaction to transgression and redefinition creates the official orthodoxy in societies, the judgment about the rightness or wrongness of certain behaviors (Cresswell, 1996, 10).

It is important to keep in mind that the marking and maintenance of the official orthodoxy is not something that a dominant group simply imposes. Others must be convinced that the ideas of the dominant group are beneficial. So domination largely occurs by appealing to what is taken for granted, to what is considered natural or reasonable, to common sense (Bourdieu 1977, 164; 1984, 468). The dominant group must take what was previously unquestioned and defend it as the order of things against those who would say otherwise (Cresswell 1996, 21). The group must naturalize its own arbitrariness to be successful in this endeavor (Bourdieu 1977, 164). For these reasons, transgressions appear to be against nature, disrupting the patterns we associate with normalcy and offending the invisible myths of consensus in any given society (Cresswell 1996, 26).

Although transgressions can be confusing and disorienting, they also reveal the way things are. We need transgression before we can see the center or even realize that a boundary exists. By studying people on the margins, we learn where the center is, how the core of what a society considers proper and right is aligned (Cresswell 1996, 9–27).

Catholic Alignment

In the case of second-century Christianity, Gnostic transgressions showed up the assumptions of the more centrally organized Apostolic Catholics. As we have seen, these Christians were positioned to exploit social power more advantageously than the less centralized, esoteric Gnostic groups. What the Apostolic Catholics had to do now was convince other people, both Christian and non-Christian, that their assumptions and norms were natural, reasonable, and commonsense. They had to defend their order of things against Gnostics who said otherwise. Because the values of the Apostolic Catholics were more aligned with the norms of the Roman society, whereas the values of Gnostics were countercultural, convincing people of the rightness and naturalness of the Apostolic Catholic positions was made that much easier.

With protracted reasoning, supported by constant reference to scriptural passages and their “natural” interpretation, the Apostolic Catholics set out to prove the rightness of their assumptions and the wrongness of Gnostic beliefs and behaviors, and to publish them widely. The foundation of this enterprise is grounded in their constant appeal to the historical continuity between Judaism and Christianity. By maintaining this Jewish connection, Christians

like Irenaeus made reasonable the claim that the Christian scriptures are harmonious with the Jewish scriptures, that the one ought to support rather than oppose the other. It was self-evident, then, that the Christian scriptures, like the Jewish scriptures, must be acknowledging one God, the world creator, rather than two oppositional deities (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.1.1–2).

Their high regard for their connection with Judaism and its super-session by Christianity also enabled the Apostolic Catholics to establish certain conventional Jewish assumptions as “the way things are.” This began with the institutionalization of the worship of YHWH, the God of the Jews. The connection with Judaism enabled them to establish as common sense the belief that YHWH the Creator is the supreme God of Christian worship, that he is neither a defective creature nor an apostate (2.pref.1, 2.2.5).

Similarly, they were able to naturalize for Christians the traditional Jewish assumption that because humans were created by YHWH, they are lesser in status than YHWH and are his servile people (2.22–28, 2.26.1, 2.30.2, 4.38.1, 3). Likewise, the Jewish assumption that salvation was dependent on the observance of YHWH’s rules, on righteousness and piety, was established as a self-evident Christian norm, although the rules that applied to them were reduced to the Ten Commandments (2.29.1). Resurrection of the body also appears to have been a Jewish assumption that is validated as natural for Christians to believe (2.29.2, 4.pref.4).

Validating Jewish assumptions, however, was dicey business for these Christians, because the Catholics also had to build for their own scriptures, beliefs, and practices a natural platform that superseded Judaism while not replacing the law and the prophets outright. They did this by designating as “apostolic” the Christian scriptures and traditions on which their churches relied (3.1.1). This helped them persuade others that their churches did not use “forged” scriptures and newfangled traditions but relied on scriptures and traditions that legitimately continued YHWH’s revelation through his son, Jesus, and the first apostles (4.33.8).

In the end, Christian orthodoxy was aligned with the naturalized assumptions of the Apostolic Catholic rule of faith because of powerful sociological forces in play in Roman society. The correlation between Roman values and the values of the Apostolic Catholics helped to legitimate and naturalize their so-called ancestral positions over and against those of innovative Gnostic groups. Orthodoxy came to mean obedience to the way of

the elders of the Apostolic Catholic churches, leaders who were known to be the successors of the apostles. The elders were the ones who possessed the “gift of truth,” which they passed on to their successors in the Apostolic Catholic churches. They were to be obeyed.

Christians were warned to be suspicious of any group that did not belong to this succession of bishops, or of any congregation that assembled in places not sanctioned by these bishops. Such divergent and innovative people can only be revolutionaries, they thought. They can only be threatening transgressors who will be incinerated by the fire of God’s judgment (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4.26.2).

Gnostic Insanity

The transgressive truth the Gnostic possesses pushes the Gnostic to the brink of insanity in Aronofsky’s film. To know God’s secrets is to play with fire. As Sol tells Max in *Pi*, “This knowledge is death.” This is part of the message of Aronofsky’s cult classic.

The other part has to do with human nature. Max is like so many of us. He is curious and he is hubristic. He wants the knowledge of God and he doesn’t care what it will cost him. “I want to understand!” he shouts at Sol.

When he later talks to a Hasidic rabbi, Max realizes that the revelation of the 216-digit number means that he has seen God. The rabbi confirms Sol’s warning, telling Max that this divine knowledge is killing Max. Absolute truth cannot be safely contained by the human brain, especially by a person not prepared to receive it in the first place.

But Max revels in the fact that the knowledge of everything has been given to him and to him alone. He has been chosen. He recognizes that God is inside of him now and that this presence is changing him. He is proud of it.

But eventually the change becomes too much for Max to handle. He is completely debilitated by migraines as his brain continues to be physically altered by the divine knowledge he possesses. His suffering is palpable on the screen.

At the end of the film, we are again confronted with the image of Max standing in front of his bathroom mirror. But this time we do not see Max lift scissors to his head. Instead, we see him lift a power drill and point it at the bulging artery above his ear. We are horrified, sure now of his insanity, as Max levers the spinning drill into his skull and destroys his God center (figure 9.3).



Figure 9.3 Max Cohen (Sean Gullette) performs a lobotomy in π (*Pi*).

The film quickly moves to the final scene, where we see Max at peace for the first time in the movie, sitting quietly on a park bench. He is docile, rehabilitated, the dangerous knowledge of God drilled out of his head.

Although Aranofsky's film was marketed as an avant-garde occult film, what we are left with after viewing the film is something very conventional. It is a film that reinforces the orthodox stereotype of the hubristic, dangerous Gnostic who lives on the border of insanity and schizophrenia. Destruction of gnosis is what leads to peace.



CHAPTER TEN

Pleasantville Religions

Betty Parker

Betty Parker lives in black-and-white, a standard suburban mom starring in the rerun of the 1950s *Pleasantville* series (figure 10.1). She moves from room to room in her black-and-white house, her face smiling, and her voice calling her children to the table with promises of hot breakfasts—blueberry pancakes “just the way you like them.” Betty’s banal husband, George, comes home from work every night announcing, “Honey, I’m home. Where’s my dinner?” And they pleasantly sit down to their family meal together.

David, a teenager living in 1996, is enthralled with *Pleasantville*. His own life is chaotic, his mother and sister attentive to their new boyfriends, leaving him alone and isolated. To deal with the chaos and isolation, David has withdrawn into himself and into the TV world of *Pleasantville*. He eats Doritos curled up on the couch and watches the show again and again.

It isn’t long into Gary Ross’s film *Pleasantville* that an unannounced TV repairman shows up at David’s home and gives David and his sister, Jennifer, an alien remote control. It operates by sucking the two of them into the TV, and into the world of Pleasantville.

On the surface, *Pleasantville* is a classic plot about David and Jennifer growing up, becoming responsible adults, learning to negotiate the adult world and their place in it. But beneath the surface runs another plot, the awakening of the Gnostic to the reality and the power of the self to alter, revolutionize, and transform. This Gnostic undercurrent frames David and Jennifer as emissaries from the “real” world who come into Pleasantville with a subversive message that awakens the characters in the show and turns them from black-and-white to color.



Figure 10.1 Betty Parker (Joan Allen) covering up her “color” with gray cosmetics in *Pleasantville* (1998).

Their awakening is depicted along traditional lines, as eating from the tree of knowledge. Yet this act is not depicted as sinful. It is glorious. It is a Gnostic awakening that conveys the characters from death to life, from black-and-white to color. Throughout the film, character after character turns to color when they realize that their lives have been shams of obedience to convention. They live with no real choices. Once they begin thinking for themselves, however, they become conscious of their personal desires and choices. They begin doing things that transgress their conventional society, a pleasant paradisiacal world that has been put in place to pacify the men, who want their dinners on time.

The show’s mom, Betty, begins to awaken from the sham when Jennifer, who is her Pleasantville daughter, tells her about sex. Betty becomes colored when she begins to think for herself, when she realizes that she has been living in a sham that has suppressed her true nature, her true self.

Mr. Johnson, the owner of the local soda shop, begins to think about the phoniness of his life wiping counters and flipping burgers. What really brings him joy is painting his shopwindows with holiday scenes. He wants to be an artist. So he turns colored as he takes up some brushes and begins to paint oversized nudes of Betty in cubist style on his windows.

Betty and Mr. Johnson have responded to the subversive Gnostic message: think for yourself; act willfully. They have become gods. And with this, chaos erupts in Pleasantville. Violence bursts into the streets as the coloreds and the black-and-whites riot over their town and their future.

A Dead Man's Religion

The Apostolic Catholic church began to dominate the Christian religious landscape in the late second and early third centuries due to their more centralized organization, their accommodation to Jewish and Roman norms, and their successful exploitation of public media. The less accommodating grassroots Gnostic communities, on the other hand, faced escalating hostility, refutation, and rejection.

Like the violence that erupts in Pleasantville when the Gnostic characters challenge the conventions, some ancient Gnostic texts intimate that their communities were not just rebuffed but also were persecuted and suffered physical violence for their beliefs and practices (see Authoritative Teaching NHC VI.3 26.20–26; 1 Apocalypse of James, Tchacos Codex [TC] 1 25.9–14; Second Treatise of the Great Seth NHC VII.2 59.22–29). These attacks were not merely violence at the hands of Romans persecuting Christians; they also included violence at the hands of Apostolic Catholics. “We were hated and persecuted,” one Gnostic remarks, “not only by those who are ignorant but also by those who think they are advancing the name of Christ, since they were unknowingly empty, not knowing who they are, like dumb animals” (Second Treatise of the Great Seth NHC VII.2 59.22–62.26).

This Gnostic author goes on to explain that the Apostolic Catholics he knows are absurdly ridiculous because their religion is based on a silly doctrine about a dead man, his body sacrificed for sin. Their church is an inadequate imitation of the true Christianity that the Gnostic advocates. While pretending to offer Christians freedom through Jesus' death, the Apostolic Catholic church actually delivers them into slavery. Such ludicrous doctrines, he says, are tragic jokes promulgating fear. They are doctrines that enslave unknowing Christians to the archons who rule the world. The Apostolic Catholics hate and persecute those who fully know Christ, the Gnostics, while they themselves are deficient. They serve YHWH while abandoning the worship of the true God who transcends all.

With a play on the word *universal*, this Gnostic author suggests that the Apostolic Catholics aren't really universalists, as their name, Catholic,

means. Their doctrines only divide people and create open hostility, he says. The Gnostics are the ones who know the universal God and preach perfect love, friendship, and harmony. The Gnostics are the ones who know what freedom really is (Second Treatise of the Great Seth NHC VII.2 59.30–62.26).

The Gnostic author of the Apocalypse of Peter (NHC VII.3 74.1–75.7) has a similar perspective. He thinks that the Apostolic Catholics have become slaves to the rulers of this world because they cleave to the name of a dead man, believing in their hearts that the sacrifice of his body will make them pure. This is blasphemy and evil teaching. Nothing good can come of it.

He warns that the Apostolic Catholics are in peril until they realize that the soul is mortal, until they discover that the spirit is the true immortal self. They oppose the truth and continue to preach error. They set up laws contrary to Jesus' wishes (75.7–77.22). Their religion is bad residue, a meager imitation in the name of a dead man.

They suffer us, the Gnostic author says, assaulting us with their constant barrage that salvation comes only through Jesus' death. Little do they know that they are prisoners who will be cast into outer darkness one day. Their leaders, those they have named "bishops" and "deacons," act as if they have received their authority from God, and the Apostolic Catholic laypeople bend themselves foolishly to their judgment. In reality, their leaders are nothing but "dry canals" (78.1–79.31). They are deaf and blind (76.21–23).

Rediscovering the Gospel of Judas

The Gnostics' perspective that the Apostolic Catholics are naive and gullible, that the Apostolic Catholics are a joke because they worship the wrong God and base salvation on the death of Jesus, really came alive for me in 2006, when the ancient Gnostic book known as the Gospel of Judas was discovered and published for the first time since antiquity ([figure 10.2](#)). It is an old book, one that Bishop Irenaeus refers to in his writings against the Gnostics. He says that this Gospel featured Judas, the traitor, as the disciple who knew the truth about cosmic matters, which enabled him to carry out "the mystery of the betrayal" (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.31.1). In this passage, Irenaeus also implies that Judas was a Gnostic hero in the Gospel, that the Gnostics recognized horrible sinners as their saints.



Figure 10.2 The author with a leaf of the Gospel of Judas at the Martin Bodmer Foundation, Geneva, 2014. Photo courtesy of April D. DeConick.

But now that we can read the Gospel of Judas for ourselves, it is clear that we have been misled by Irenaeus's testimony. Although many scholars initially misread the text and suggested that Judas is a hero in it, just as Irenaeus claimed, my own translation and work on this Gospel has challenged and upended this opinion (DeConick 2009). The Gospel of Judas is a surprise because Judas is no hero in it but a demon—even worse than the possessed traitor described in the Gospels of Luke (22:3) and John (6:70–71, 13:2, 14:27, 30–31). This Gospel is literally Jesus' *apophasis* (meaning

indictment, from the Greek *apophainô*) of Judas for his demonic activity (Gospel of Judas TC 33.1–33.6).

In the Gospel of Judas, Jesus calls Judas the “thirteenth demon.” This is the designation for the dark lord Ialdabaoth in other Sethian literature, where he is known as the ruler of the thirteen realms (Gospel of the Egyptians NHC III.2 63.19). In Sethian cosmology, the world is divided into five abysses and seven heavens ruled by demonic archons. Above this is the thirteenth realm of the fixed stars, and Ialdabaoth, the greatest of all demons, rules it (Gospel of Judas TC 51.12–15). In this Gospel, Judas is associated with the thirteenth realm and its star, indicating that Judas is in league with the dark lord who rules the cosmos from the sphere of the fixed stars (55.10–11; cf. 46.19–24). Given this demonic association, Judas is told that he himself can expect to one day become the dark lord of the thirteenth realm and rule over the other twelve dark lords (46.5–7).

If we keep in mind that Ialdabaoth is the Gnostic name for the Jewish biblical God YHWH, then what we have going on here is very interesting indeed. Judas, rather than Jesus, is identified as YHWH. This association isn’t so far-fetched, given the Sethians’ belief. If YHWH is a demon, not the good Father God, then Jesus couldn’t be YHWH, as the Apostolic Catholics believed. Instead, Judas had to be!

You’re a Gem

What is so remarkable is that this association of Judas with Ialdabaoth was known in antiquity, outside the Gospel of Judas. This came to my attention in 2008 when a student of mine at the time, Grant Adamson, brought a photo of an amulet to my office. When he showed me the photo, I nearly fell off my chair. I was staring at a Gnostic secret that had been locked in a museum drawer for the last three hundred years.



Figure 10.3 Green jasper amulet, first or second century CE, at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, inventory no. 2169. Photo used with permission.

Grant had been poring over gem catalogs for his own research when he noticed a green jasper amulet, first described by Molinet (1692, 127) and then later by Delatte and Derchain (1964, 225–26), in the catalog of gems housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris ([figure 10.3](#)). Careful study of the artwork style and craftsmanship suggest that the gem was created during the first or second centuries by an artisan in a Greco-Egyptian workshop. The letter formation on the front and the back suggest that both sides of the gem were carved by the same artisan at the same time.

The front of this gem depicts the now familiar lion-headed god we already saw on the Ophian gem. He is ferocious, wearing Roman military garb. On this gem, he holds in his hands a sword and the severed head of Medusa. This suggests that the gem was being used to repel evil and thwart demons.

The front of the gem also contains a palindrome, a magical spell read forward and backward. This spell contains the names Michael and Elieli, both derived from the Bible. Michael is the famous archangel, whom many Gnostics identified with Ialdabaoth. On this gem, his name appears as an anagram that must be decoded to be read, suggesting that the owner of this piece of jewelry wanted the name to be hidden in plain sight.

Elieli is from the Hebrew expression in Psalms 22:1, “Eli, Eli,” which means “My God, my God.” Instead of using the name YHWH, which was God’s unpronounceable name, petitioners instead would call out, “Eli, Eli!” So this expression is a substitute for the name YHWH. This divinity turns up in magical literature as an angel who knows people’s destinies. Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis tells us that some Gnostics called Ialdabaoth Elilai, which is the Greek spelling of the Hebrew Elieli. On this gem, Elieli must be read in reverse to make it out, again suggesting that the owner wanted the name of the god to be secreted away.

This gem was considered powerful for the person who wore it because, as on the Ophian gem, it is inscribed with the angel names of the dark lord who rules the cosmos, Michael and Elieli. Knowing these angel names gave the person power over the dark lord, to repel him, to thwart him, and to be protected from him.

What is most astonishing about this gem, however, is what it says on the reverse side. The back side was especially secret because the gem was mounted in a ring or pendant. So the reverse side was worn against the skin. Only the owner knew what it said.

In this case, the most secret and powerful name of the dark lord was none other than Ioudas, which translates into Judas in English!

On this gem we see a very specific intersection of names: Michael, Elieli, and Judas. Among Gnostics, all of these names are associated with Ialdabaoth. The lion-headed Roman warrior matches the portrait of Ialdabaoth on the famous Ophian gem. All of this leads me to positively identify the Judas gem housed in Paris as a Gnostic gem that can stand beside the example published by Bonner (1949).

Indeed, the Gospel of Judas and the Judas gem confirm each other. The gem is material evidence, in addition to the literary Gospel evidence, that there were Gnostics in the second century who identified Judas as the dark lord Ialdabaoth. This was the greatest of Gnostic secrets, of tremendous power. With the knowledge of the dark lord’s true identity, the Gnostic could overpower and repel the demon who ruled the world.

The Faithless Twelve

What about the other twelve realms? Who rules them? The author of the Gospel of Judas says that Judas is to be replaced by another apostle, probably Matthias, so that the twelve realms below Ialdabaoth will each

have a ruler. These are the twelve apostles from scripture, who are the core authorities of the Apostolic Catholic church, which prided itself on exclusively preaching the teaching of the twelve apostles. It was a lineage they created to bolster their image as *the* Christian church possessing teaching directly from Jesus' own pupils. Although Gnostic communities relied on secret teachings of Jesus to special disciples such as Peter and John, to family members such as Jesus' brother James, and to friends such as Mary Magdalene, the Apostolic Catholic church relied on the twelve disciples as a unified team.

So the author of the Gospel of Judas obliges them, but not before casting them as ignorant, blind followers of Ialdabaoth. The author compares them to Jewish priests at the Temple, who are focused on sacrifice at an altar to appease YHWH, the lord of the universe and "servant of error." Apostolic Catholic communities are unaware of their service to YHWH every time the Eucharist thanksgiving meal is performed, when Jesus' body and blood is offered to YHWH (Gospel of Judas TC 33.22–34.10). They don't understand that there is something holy beyond YHWH and so they lead Christians astray. On the final day of judgment, the twelve will be found guilty of worshipping the false God YHWH and leading astray countless generations of people who are yet to be born (TC 37.20–39.5). True Christianity, the author insists, is not Judaism.

This negative picture of the twelve actually comes from Christian scripture. The Gnostic author of the Gospel of Judas is working from the portrayal of the disciples found in the Gospel of Mark. Here they are identified by Jesus as the "faithless generation" (Mark 9:19). They are the disciples who remain unredeemed even through to the end of Mark, where they are unable to believe those who saw the risen Jesus because of their "unbelief and hardness of heart" (16:14). Peter, the famous pillar of the Apostolic Catholic church, is rebuked by Jesus and called Satan (8:33). It is the demons who know Jesus' identity and YHWH's plans in the Gospel of Mark, not the disciples (1:34, 3:11, 5:6–7).

So in the Gospel of Judas Jesus laughs at the twelve, and at Judas too, telling them all that they can never be part of the holy generation that transcends this cosmos (Gospel of Judas TC 36.11–37.20). The twelve apostles come across in the Gospel of Judas as pathetic, even less knowledgeable than the worst demon of all, Judas Iscariot.

For a Gnostic text to say that the most wicked and cursed disciple, Judas, is more perfect than any of the twelve in his understanding of Jesus and the cosmic mysteries (TC 34.11–35.20) could not be more subversive. It slams the Apostolic Catholic authorities and their teachings. If the apostles were ignorant and faithless and working for the dark lords, then whatever information they passed on that became foundational to the Apostolic Catholic church is bogus. Following their teachings, which remains focused on the God of the Jews, leads Christians astray and perpetuates rituals that empower the wrong God.

Sacrifice to the Dark Lord

The worst part of Apostolic Catholicism, according to these Gnostics, is the doctrine of a dead man—that Jesus’ death is a sacrifice to YHWH for the salvation of sinners. The Gospel of Judas was written to point out how obvious it is that this Apostolic Catholic doctrine is demonic, that it is not something the transcendent God would ever desire.

How obvious? Because Judas is demonic and is instrumental in the sacrifice of Jesus, then the only logical conclusion is that Jesus’ sacrificial death is something that the demons desired and made happen at the command of YHWH. The Gnostics thought it completely illogical that the Apostolic Catholics cursed Judas for the very thing that was at the heart of their religion. That the Apostolic Catholics couldn’t see the demonic trickery behind their central doctrine was simply dumbfounding to Gnostics.

The Gnostics thought the evidence indicated that Jesus had been killed by Judas and the dark lords, demons who thought that Jesus’ murder would bring about the end of Jesus’ talk about a transcendent supreme God beyond them. But the dark lords were tricked, because they were unaware that Jesus’ spirit was conscious, pure, and mature, unlike the spirits in other humans, which had been lulled to sleep by embodiment and its pleasures. Even more important, Jesus’ conscious spirit knew the path back to the supreme God because Jesus was a descendent superpower. At the crucifixion, Jesus’ spirit was able to leave behind his body and soul and pioneer the path home to the transcendent God. Unbeknownst to the dark lords, Jesus was a superpower in human disguise.

Christianity could not contain within itself such adversity. Diversity is one thing, but when the diversity is diametric, it is explosive. As Christianity formed, decisions had to be made about which God would be the object of

worship—the transcendent God or YHWH. Were the twelve disciples the clever founders of Christianity or ignorant men who never left behind their ancestral Jewish religion? They could not be both.

Was Jesus' death a sacrifice desired by God for the salvation of sinners or was it something of which the transcendent God did not approve but exploited to trick the demons? It had to be one or the other.

Was the Eucharist thanksgiving meal, when Christians consumed the body and blood of Christ, the central ritual or was the central ritual an initiation mystery, when the spirit began its ascent to the transcendent world? These were irreconcilable differences.

Given these kinds of baseline oppositions, the hostility between Apostolic Catholic and Gnostic Christians is not particularly surprising. It was not possible for both communities to retain their claim to *the* Christian identity. One community had to go.

The earliest Gnostic Christian communities may have functioned as esoteric Christian lodges and Christian reform movements, but it is clear that by the third century most Gnostic Christians were separatists like these Sethians who wrote the Gospel of Judas. They were operating from the viewpoint that Apostolic Catholicism was so corrupted that it was beyond repair. Gnostics felt they had to hide from or leave the Apostolic Catholic church to avoid violence. So some of them preserved, on the fringes of Christianity, what they believed was the true form of Christian belief and worship, gathering under the radar in less centralized churches and conventicles. This is what the Gnostics who wrote the Gospel of Judas did.

The other option was to move beyond Christianity and create new, competitive Gnostic religions. In the third century, that is exactly what happened.

Mani and His Avatar

The first world religion is a Gnostic religion. After its founding in the third century, the religion spread like wildfire down into Egypt, west into Rome, and along the Silk Road into Central Asia and China. Its founder is a young man by the name of Mani, who was born on April 14, 216 CE, around the time that Hippolytus was active in Rome and Origen in Alexandria.

Mani's religion is both revelatory and intentional, created from the ground up by Mani in response to a series of visions that he had as a young man (see Klimkeit 1993; Gardner and Lieu 1985, 1994, 1998, 2004; BeDuhn 2000,

2015; Tardieu 2008; Coyle 2009; Baker-Brian 2011; Colditz 2015). At the age of twenty-four, he set out to establish a religion to rival the Christian church and all other religions worldwide—every one of which, according to Mani, was a fake. His religion would be *the* Holy Church. It would be the real deal because, unlike the fake religions, his church would focus on the worship of the transcendent God beyond our cosmos. He came to know this God directly when he was twelve and began to have visions of an angel sent by a God who lived outside our world. Mani recognized this God as the Father who dwelled in the kingdom of light.

Mani grew up as a Christian baptist, living in southern Babylonia, what is modern-day Iraq. Mani's baptists were nothing like the American or Southern Baptists we know today. They followed Elchasai, a well-known Christian sect leader in antiquity. His name appears to have been a title he sported. In Hebrew and its dialects, it means "hidden power" and refers to the incomprehensible God. The name is a blend of the two words *hyl*, which means "strength" or "power," and *khsy*, which means "hidden." In the Syriac translation of the ancient Christian Pseudo-Clementines, *haylâ kasyâ* in fact refers to the God who is incomprehensible. So Elchasai was making a big claim with this title, similar to that of Simon Magus, who called himself the Great Power.

Elchasai composed a book around 100 CE in Parthia, an ancient area of the Mediterranean that roughly corresponds to the modern-day region of northeastern Iran. His followers claim that the book fell down from heaven. Elchasai says that he received it from a gigantic male angel, the Son of God, and an equally gigantic female angel, the Holy Spirit.

Although we don't know much about the contents of the book, we do know something about Elchasaite beliefs and way of life. They believed that Jesus was born of an ordinary sexual relation between his parents, Mary and Joseph. He received the Christ Spirit, as other prophets had before him and others would in the future. He taught them how to follow the Jewish laws correctly.

The Elchasaites were Christians who retained their connection with Judaism even more strictly than did the Apostolic Catholics. They taught that Christians must be circumcised and obey the Mosaic law as it was taught by Jesus. So it is not surprising that they rejected Paul's apostleship and his writings; they disliked the universality of his message and his criticism of the Jewish law.

Baptism was initiatory for them, but they also performed a once-in-a-lifetime final baptism for members who committed grave sins such as incest or adultery. Every day, to stem their passions, they took what we today would call cold showers—daily immersing themselves in the cold running water of a nearby river. They used other baptisms to heal the sick, sometimes immersing an ill person in cold water forty times over a seven-day period. They ritually washed their food before sale or preparation.

It is Mani's father who got him involved in this baptist sect, after a religious experience at a local temple. One day, when visiting the temple, one of the idols in the temple started to talk to Mani's father. It cried out to him, "Fatiq, do not eat meat, do not drink wine, and don't have sex." This experience was so dramatic that Fatiq decided to join the local baptist group and take his son Mani with him.

But Mani is never satisfied with his father's religion. His first vision, at age twelve, signals his unhappiness with religious life among the baptists. In an autobiographical excerpt, he reports that he was visited by a male angel who was his *syzygos*, his avatar angel. Mani comes to regard his avatar angel as the Paraclete, the Greek name given to the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John, the guiding Spirit of God that Jesus promises to send to his disciples after the crucifixion (John 14:16). So Mani identified himself as the final manifestation of God's Spirit, the last in a string of manifestations that included Seth the son of Adam, Enosh, Enoch, Shem, Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus.

Mani's avatar angel tells him that he does not belong among the baptists, that he is not one of them. But the angel also tells Mani that he cannot abandon the baptists until he is able to truly abstain from his desires and passions. He is instructed to stay with the baptists until he is pious enough and old enough to leave.

Mani and the Bleeding Dates

In these visitations with his avatar angel, "the mystery in magnificence and complete clarity" is revealed to Mani piecemeal. One piece of this mystery had to do with the sentience of the universe. In an initial vision, Mani sees a date tree and picks its fruits to eat. The branches bleed. He cuts grain in a field. Blood spurts up from the cut stalks.

This vision led Mani to begin practicing silence, withdrawal, and quietude, what he calls "rest" and "doing no harm." He refused to work as a

laborer in the baptists' gardens, and instead begged for his food, because he did not want to be the cause of suffering when the plants were cut from their roots. All living things, he came to believe, are sentient, containing light or soul stuff. Unlike the other Gnostics we have met in this book, Mani made no obvious distinction between the human soul and spirit, although he does seem to think that the divine light fills the soul and makes it a living self.

The second bit of revelation has to do with our separation from the Father, who lives in the kingdom of light. Mani says that his angel showed him "who I am and what my body is, in what way I came and how my coming into this world happened." Mani came to understand that his true self had been separated from the Father on high and sent into his material body, "this loathsome flesh," where it became intoxicated with desire. The third part of the mystery is about reunion with God, when his avatar angel and his soul reunite. It is Mani's "unsleeping *syzygos*," his "inseparable *syzygos*," who descends to him so that he and his angel can be reunited, when Mani would come to the "measureless heights" and "unsearchable depths" of God. Mani composed an exquisite poem to celebrate this wonderful mystery (Cologne Mani Codex 24; translation by Gardner and Lieu 2004, 51, with minor modification):

I received him piously,
And I took him as my own.

I believed him,
That he belongs to me
And that he is a good and valuable guide.
I knew him,
And understood that I am he
From whom I was separated.

I have witnessed,
That I myself am he
And (we are) the same.

When Mani turned twenty-four, he received instructions from his avatar angel to leave the baptists. He took his father and a few converts with him. He traveled around Persia, present-day Iran. Persia at that time was home to a number of religious communities, including Zoroastrians, Jews, and different sorts of Christians. Mani journeyed all the way to India. In these eastern frontiers, he encountered Buddhists.

Among none of these religious people does he find the true religion, or "dogma" as he calls it. Nothing comes close to matching the religion he had

seen so clearly in his visions. He comes to believe strongly that his religion will be better than all the religions of the ancients because it will not be geographically limited to one country or linguistically bound to one language. He intentionally creates his religion to be universal, able to inhabit any country, even in distant corners of his world, and to be taught in any language.

He also thinks that his religion is superior to all others because he himself composes its scripture and establishes its leadership structure, something that the founders of the other religions failed to do. In Mani's mind, this failure is what led to the corruption of the founders' teachings. To avoid this pitfall, Mani literally scripts his religion, making it a religion of the book, or more accurately, a religion of *his* books. Following the instructions of his angel to "write all these secrets on tablets of bronze," Mani set about the task of composing his own revealed scripture (Cologne Mani Codex 54).

His scripture included seven volumes, most of which do not survive today except in fragmented pieces. These scriptures include his epistolary correspondence to his churches, pragmatic letters, which were collected to imitate the compendium of Paul's letters in the New Testament. He also wrote the Living Gospel, arranged in twenty-two segments, each corresponding with a letter of the Syriac alphabet. The Gospel opens with Mani's proclamation that he is the Paraclete announced by Jesus, that he is the seal of all the prophets (Al-Biruni, *The Chronology of the Ancient Nations*, 207).

Mani composed a hymnal and prayer book, a book that laid out his understanding of the mysteries of the soul, and texts preserving his teachings about the cosmos and its formation. He may also have reworked an early version of the Book of Giants, a Jewish text about the Watchers, naughty angels who come to earth to mate with sexy human women. Their children are the giants who walk the earth in primal times.

Mani settled in the Persian Empire, where he was successful in blending his religion with elements of Zoroastrianism, the traditional religion of Persia. He converted the royal Sasanian family and gained the favor of the kings Ardashir I, Shapur I, and Hormizd I. Their royal patronage made it possible for Mani to construct his religion and broadcast it widely.

This success had much to do with the weakened local religious environment at the time Mani was operating. Because a variety of Christian sects had found a strong market in Persia, the traditional Zoroastrian religion

was under pressure. The Zoroastrian priests struggled against this foreign invasion, but others, like Mani, felt that the empire could be unified under a single, more universalistic faith. Mani was able to convince others that he was the culmination of all the ancient revelations and prophecies. For a while at least, the royal family was able to use this as a unifying force for their society (Pettipiece 2012, 485).

But this was not long-lasting. When the throne shifted to King Vahram I in 273 CE, Mani and his revelation fell from favor. Vahram felt that Mani's religion was a destructive force that worked against his society and its conventions, since Mani's followers refused to have children, hunt game, harvest fields, or act as warriors. Vahram was convinced that Mani had to be stopped before his infectious countercultural religion spread and destroyed the world.

Mani was brought before the king, imprisoned in chains, and died twenty-six days later. His suffering and death were interpreted by his followers to be like Jesus' passion. Each year it was commemorated in a solemn ceremony called the Bema (Judgment), a ceremony focused on the repentance of sins. The urgency and resolve of the community can be heard in a hymn that they sang during this holy ceremony (Medinet Madi psalmbook 222 8.22–25, translation by Gardner and Lieu 2004, 239):

Forgive the sins of they that know your mystery,
to whom there has been revealed the knowledge of the secrets of the exalted one,
through the wholesome wisdom wherein there is no error,
of the holy church of the Paraclete, our Father.

Augustine, bishop of Hippo and former follower of Mani, informs us that the Bema was held at the same time as the Christian Holy Week, when Christ's suffering and death was commemorated. To him, now a Christian convert and zealous advocate for Catholicism, this proved that Mani's religion was nothing but a fraudulent imitation of Christianity (Augustine, *Against the Epistle Called Fundamental* 8).

Awakened to Real Religion

What exactly was Mani's religion? This is a highly contested point in the ancient writings as well as in the modern scholarly histories about him (see BeDuhn 2015). Was he a Christian reformer who saw his religion as the true Christianity? Was he a Gnostic heretic who taught some kind of counterfeit Christianity, a dangerous simulation of Catholicism? Was he anti-Christian,

bent on bringing Christianity down because he thought it was a fraudulent religion? Was he reforming Zoroastrianism under the influence of Christianity?

Although there are arguments to be made for each of these scenarios, it is much more constructive to acknowledge the complex religious buffer in which Mani was immersed and to realize that his engagement with particular aspects of this buffer was intentional. He employed Gnostic, Elchasaite, and Catholic elements, alongside Zoroastrian and Buddhist elements, and he shaped them to fit his own vision of *the* truth. With this religious buffer as his cradle, he was able to present his religion as the new and final culmination of all religions before him.

Mani's personal encounter with his angel had awakened him to "real" religion, and he evangelized everyone who would listen. Before long, Mani was the "Living Mani," the final and absolute prophet in charge of a trendy new religious movement. He was a successful founder of a new religious movement because he was a convincing visionary who presented himself as the final manifestation of the Holy Spirit, the first and last word. He was the authority on all things. The buck stopped here.

The followers of Mani were earnest about Mani's gift of knowledge and his absolute authority in all things, as their literature and worship patterns indicate. After rehearsing the mysteries of the cosmos, their Psalm 223 ends with the congregation's pledge (Medinet Madi Psalmbook 223 11.26–31, my translation):

This is the knowledge of Mani.
Let us worship him and bless him.
Blessed is he, everyone who believes in him . . .

Glory and victory to our Lord Mani, the Spirit of Truth
that comes from the Father, who has unveiled for us
the beginning, the middle, and the end . . .

Mani's Gnostic religion was a product of revelation that emerged within a very specific religious buffer. It was a great spiritual awakening, comparable to the emergence of Mormonism out of Joseph Smith's religious revelations when he lived in New York's burned-over district. Smith's great awakening also included an angelic instructor, new scriptures, unique institutional structures, all blended with a novel story about Jesus and biblical history. The bottom line is that Mani and Smith were not alternative Christians or

Christian reformers but founders of new religious movements built to expose the real religion discerned by them through revelation.

Ships of Light

Mani was well read and well traveled, a true Renaissance man of his time. He had disciplined himself in astrology and was a keen observer of the night skies. He was a brilliant exegete, having thorough knowledge of Christian scriptures and Jewish apocalyptic writings that told about the heavenly journeys of heroes like Adam and Enoch. He was acquainted with Valentinian and Sethian Gnostic literature, too. He was creative and artsy, both a talented poet and a gifted painter.

His propensity for learning, his natural aptitude, and the revelatory takeaway from his mystical visions all contributed to his Gnostic understanding of the mysteries of God and the world, how humans got here, and how humans get out. Mani's metaphysics is Gnostic spirituality on steroids.

The cosmos, in fact, was viewed by Mani as a giant mechanism to filter out our souls and save them from evil. Where did our souls come from? Mani did not believe there was ever a time when there was nothing. He thought that there have always been opposites: light and darkness, good and evil, truth and falsehood. As opposites they were separate. This state of separation is the original, pristine condition of existence. Trouble erupts when opposites mix, when light intersperses into darkness, when good fraternizes with evil, when truth gets mixed up with falsehood. In Mani's account of the origins of the cosmos, this is exactly what happens. Mixture occurs.

This mixture takes place when the princes of darkness, who live in five realms of smoke, fire, wind, water, and darkness, first notice the kingdom of light and decide to conquer it. The father of light, who dwells in the five realms of mind, knowledge, intellect, thought, and reflection, becomes nervous when he realizes the intent of his neighbors.

Because the father of light is goodness par excellence, he has no arms to defend himself. His only defense is self-sacrifice, to allow the light to be devoured by the darkness. So the father and mother of light send their son, Primal Man, into the darkness, where he is eaten by the princes of darkness. This is something of a trick, because the light acts like a virus, infecting the darkness and putting it into a stupor. Although this stops the advance of the dark princes, it also enmeshes the light in the darkness, where it suffers.

The light-contaminated darkness takes shape, materializing as the building blocks of the universe. This means that all cosmic and human structures—from the planets and the sun to the rivers and trees to the animals and human beings—are made of darkness contaminated with light. It is this enmeshed light that becomes the stuff of souls in human beings. But sparks of God are buried in matter, enmeshed in the natural world, too. It is the enmeshed light that makes the entire universe sentient.

The creator god, a good deity named the Living Spirit, designs the world to function as an alchemical still, an elaborate apparatus that distills the light, the soul stuff, out of the dark matter. Mani envisioned the planets and the fixed stars as a rotating giant sphere hung with twelve vessels representing the zodiac houses. As the sphere turns, souls of the faithful who have died are drawn up into the vessels and are ferried to the moon.

Each month, the distillation of the light into moonlight can be observed as the face of the moon becomes brilliant and full. Once the monthly cycle is complete and the moon empties, the distilled moonlight is ferried by heavenly barge to the sun and the Milky Way. This distilled moonlight is soul stuff on its way back to the kingdom of light.

The Extreme Body

The human body is also an alchemical still, but only when it has been ritually transformed through severe ascetic practices and profound moral dedication. The alchemical body Mani instituted is the body that avoids sexual activity, agricultural labor, meat, and alcohol. It is the body that seals its mouth, hand, and breast. It is a body that inhabits radical quietude and nonviolence as it labors to do no more harm to a sentient universe.

This extreme body, Mani believed, was capable of distilling the light from food eaten. Through highly choreographed once-a-day ritual meals, the extreme body separated the sentient light, the living self, from the flesh of the vegetables served. The distilled light either could be stored inside the stomach until the person died, when it would be taken up into the cosmic still with the person's soul, or it could be released on its sky journey immediately after the meal, through the person's mouth. Augustine, bishop of Hippo and a former Manichaean, tells us that the release of the living self came through the mouth when one belched. Other texts suggest that the release through the mouth occurred during the singing of the after-meal hymns, which included

lines such as, “O light soul, great light self” and “You, Lord Mani, liberate my soul” (Sogdian text M 114).

Mani’s system of soul liberation, like other Gnostic systems we have examined, was highly ritualized. But the soul’s ascent was not initiatory or mystical. It was concrete and pragmatic, the consequence of extreme bodies eating daily ritual meals (BeDuhn 2000). These extreme bodies were vessels for the living self, discharging the soul stuff back into the spheres so that it could be returned to the transcendent realm of light.

This discharge happened through the mouth, when breath or spirit was exhaled. Any light that remained within a person, stored safely in the stomach, would be liberated when he or she died. Then the soul would be escorted by great guardian angels, whose protection ensured that the light would be able to make the journey safely home along the cosmic route taught by Mani.

It is impossible for a community to exist for long if its people refuse to harvest food or have children, so how did this work out practically in Mani’s church? Mani’s extreme bodies were supported by bodies that were not so extreme. The extreme bodies Mani called the “elect.” These were avowed monastic men and women living in religious community. At death, the elect avoided reincarnation because they had perfected themselves through their extreme lifestyle and devotion. The not-so-extreme bodies were called “hearers.” These were the laypeople who made up Mani’s congregations.

The main job of the hearers was almsgiving, which meant harvesting and presenting vegetarian food as offerings to the elect at their daily ritual meal. This was a significant sacrifice for them, because the rate of almsgiving was set at one-tenth of their property. They were allowed to marry as long as they maintained monogamy. They participated in regular orchestrated fasts and prayer vigils and were obliged to live a decent, moral life free from lying, avarice, larceny, and murder.

Most of the hearers could expect to endure reincarnation at their death, when their “forgiven” souls would transmigrate into the body of an elect. But every once in a while a standout hearer could expect the same postmortem fate as an elect, avoiding the painful migration into another body. This was the truly zealous hearer, who lived as emotionally detached as possible, acting like a stranger in the home, caring naught for possessions, and aggressively serving the elect (Kephalaion 91, 228.22–229.20).

This standardized two-tiered system was genius. Coupled with an aggressive missionary policy, the longevity of Mani's church was all but guaranteed. Indeed, even with imperially enforced brutality and deadly persecutions at the hands of Persians, Romans, and Christians, Mani's religion survived in the West until the sixth century, a Gnostic religion competitive with Christianity. It lasted longer in central Asia, where it became the state religion of the Uighur Empire in 762 CE. It persisted at least into the thirteenth century in China, where Mani was revered as the Buddha of Light and the Bema ceremony celebrated his entrance into nirvana. An Australian team of researchers thinks that the veneration of Mani persists in China even today. According to their fieldwork, a shrine in Quanzhou, Fujian, contains an image of Mani ([figure 10.4](#)), and local worshippers still venerate Mani as the Buddha of Light (Lieu et al. 2012).



Figure 10.4 Image of Mani in Cao'an temple near Quanzhou, Fujian, China. The inscription in gilded Chinese letters reads *moni guangfo* (Mani, the Buddha of Light). Photo by Gunner Mikkelsen. Reprinted with permission.

The Mysteries of Jeu

The oldest known Gnostic church handbooks are two Egyptian Coptic manuscripts that surfaced in the middle of the eighteenth century, the books of Jeu and Pistis Sophia. Both Jeu and Pistis Sophia come from the third and fourth centuries, and they share a similar mythology, theology, and set of rituals.

The two books of Jeu contain standardized hymns, prayers, and chants, along with hand-drawn maps and seals of the heavenly realms and the secret names of their inhabitants. They list plant materials and ritual objects to be used in water ceremonies. The focus of this liturgy is on cleansing the soul and then enabling it to ascend into the heavenly realms to enter the house of the true God.

Pistis Sophia comprises lengthy dialogues between Jesus and a handful of his disciples, including Mary Magdalene. It functioned as a catechism or primer for initiates.

The existence of these books points to the existence of a Gnostic church in the late third and early fourth centuries that centered on the worship of the God Jeu and Jeu's Father. Jesus is the knower of truth, the revealer of Gnostic secrets. Jesus is not Jeu. Jesus is the heavenly messenger sent down to earth from the Father. He is called the Living Jesus and the Word of Life. He comes from the Father, from the realm of light, to share the Son Jeu's hidden knowledge. The Son Jeu is the only one who knows directly the true, unapproachable Father God, the divine eternities, and the path of immortality. The group calls this knowledge the mysteries of Jeu.

The modern publication of these books caused quite a buzz among academics and laypeople. Nothing like them had ever been seen. Their contents matched nothing mentioned by the leaders of the Apostolic Catholic churches, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, or Hippolytus. Nonetheless, scholars at the time proposed that Valentinus must have composed at least portions of them, that they had to be derived from the Ophian Gnostics, or that the Sethians must be involved.

When serious objections to these proposals were raised, arguments that the books were not Valentinian or Ophian or Sethian, the inquiry lost steam. Scholars did not know what to do with them, where to locate them historically, or how to understand them theologically because they couldn't be pigeonholed. They didn't match any religious categories that were known at the time.

When the Nag Hammadi collection surfaced in the mid-1940s, work on Jeu and Pistis Sophia ground to a complete halt. These books have become the most neglected and misunderstood set of Gnostic texts ever recovered from antiquity.

But there is hope. A brand-new monograph by Dr. Erin Evans (2015) is devoted to understanding these texts. Evans bases her analysis on the

hypothesis that this collection was not penned by one author, at one time, but instead represents snapshots of what the community believed and practiced over the course of two hundred years. This means that their ideas and practices shifted over time as the community interacted with other religious groups or was exposed to new revelation.

In her reconstruction, the sequence of writings begins with the first book of Jeu, followed by the second book of Jeu. Written later are the four sections of Pistis Sophia. The first chapters to be composed were 136–143, followed by chapters 144–148, 102–135, and 1–101. Because their thought and practices are unique in their worship of Jeu, Evans calls these Gnostics Jeuians. Evans's brilliant analysis has laid the groundwork for my own reading and understanding of these church handbooks, which I offer here.

The earliest text in the collection, the first book of Jeu, represents the views of a group of Egyptians who have blended their reading of the Gospel of John with the practices of an Egyptian solar cult. This new religious movement likely emerged in the middle of the second century, at the same time similar groups, such as the Peratics and the Ophians, came online.

In the book, Jesus is a revelatory figure, the living Jesus, who comes from the true God, the Father. He reveals that the Father lives in the farthest reaches of the universe, in a realm of light. This Father speaks a word and produces his son, Jeu, who is his spitting image. The word that the Father actually pronounces is Jeu's secret name, Ioeiaôthôouichôlmiô. This is Jeu's name of power, which the congregation memorizes and guards.

Once produced, Jeu in turn becomes the author of creation, forming sixty "treasuries" of light. These treasures represent all the realms in the sky populated by the stars. In their book, the Jeuians record all the names of the star deities who live in these celestial realms or treasures. Each treasury has three guardians of the gates, twelve powers, and one ruler who is a progeny and image of Jeu.

The names of these rulers vary, yet they follow a standard pattern. Their individual names are suffixed with Jeu's name, Ieou. So the ruler of the first realm is Ieouaieaôieou-Ieou; the second ruler is Ôêeaôiot-Ieou. There are sixty named rulers, whose names are constructed following this suffixing pattern.

This pattern may help explain the origin of the name Ieou, a question that has remained unresolved in scholarship. The word appears to be formulaic, used in conjunction with names of gods. In magical spell books from the

same historical period and geographic area, we find invocations like Êi-Ieou-Mareith and Êi-Ieou-Sathimôoueêou (Greek Magical Papyri XII.337–350). In these cases, “Ieou” derives from the word *i3w* (pronounced ah-oo) in Egyptian hieroglyphics, which means “praise,” so that the spell is cast by hailing the deities: “Oh, praise Mareith!” and “Oh, praise Sathimôoueêou!” (Ritner in Betz 1992, 165, note 86).

In the case of the Jeuians, they appear to hail their greatest deity with the shorthand “Jeu” or “Praise!” They address the other deities by their names, followed by the invocation to praise. So, “Ieouaieaôieou! Praise!” and “Ôêeaêiot! Praise!”

Who is Jeu, then, the much-praised world ruler? A clue comes from one of their liturgies, where it is said that the sixty treasures are bisected by the five ranks in the “middle.” This is technical astrological language referencing the path of the sun, the ecliptic, as the “middle” through which the five planets move. This is where the Jeuians believed that their god Jeu lives (1 Jeu 33, 83.16–19). Jeu, then, is the sun god Rê, moving through the ecliptic. His Father, who emits him as the first word from his mouth (“Praise!”), must be Atum, the primordial god who transcends the cosmos.

In this religious narrative, we are back to the old Egyptian story from Heliopolis we discussed in [chapter 2](#). The difference here is that Jesus has entered the picture as the chosen divine emissary, sent by the Father to reveal the mysteries of Jeu to the faithful. To put it bluntly, the earliest version of Jeuian faith was a Christian Gnostic adaptation of the worship of Rê.

The Jeuian faith is a new religious movement that emerges within Egypt, from a religious buffer where Gnostic spirituality meets up with the predispositions of an Egyptian solar cult and familiarity with the Gospel of John. The resulting blend is a revealed Gnostic religion, unique unto itself. It doesn’t match our pigeonholes. Its claim to revelation is not a claim to a personal vision, such as we saw with Mani. There is no privileged founder or first prophet among the Jeuians. Rather, the claim to revelation is a claim that the Jeuians are the only people to fully understand what Jesus came here to reveal—not during his life, as recorded in the Gospels, but after his resurrection.

Liturgies of the Dead for the Living

The first and second books of Jeu complement each other in that they are Gnostic liturgical handbooks. Each contains directions for ritual activities

that release the soul from the body and assist its ascent through the star gates. The final stop is the highest and innermost treasury of light, the house of Jeu.

The journey is very similar to what was envisioned for the Egyptian dead, who had to journey through Duat, the Egyptian underworld. The *Book of the Dead* comprises liturgical spells that guide the dead through the gates into underworld realms and lead to Osiris, who lives beyond the final gate. On the way to Osiris, however, the deceased is met at the gates by horrible guardians with hippopotamus faces and snake bodies, watchers who must be appeased with the correct spells.

These spells include calling out the guardians' names and displaying the guardians' symbols. Failure to do so would result in immediate annihilation of the deceased, who is swallowed by the frightening beast-like gods. The deceased hoped to make it through all the gates safely and to be brought under Osiris's protection when he or she was admitted to his court as a devotee. It was only the pharaohs, the royalty, who might look forward to an afterlife sailing on Rê's boat through the stars.

In Hellenistic times, however, the stellar afterlife became the prerogative of people beyond the royal household. They thought it possible for their souls to catch a ride on Rê's bark, too. The liturgies in the books of Jeu reflect this trend. The people who used these liturgies were trying to make certain that their souls would not get stuck in the afterlife purgatories but would be prepared to journey successfully through all the star gates and make their final resting place with Jeu, the sun god.

The liturgies are systematic and instructional, ultimately leading the initiates through the sixty treasuries with directives like "When you reach the X realm, the rulers of that realm will come and stand in front of you. Seal yourselves with the seal. Y is its name. Say it once. Hold this cipher in your hands. When you have finished sealing yourself with this seal and you have said its name once only, say these defenses too: 'Withdraw! Because we call upon Z.'"

The instructional nature of these liturgies strongly suggests rehearsal and performance in a communal setting where a leader assists initiates in memorization and verbal recitation of the guardians' names and their visual presentation of the hand-drawn signs to the rulers. In addition, the initiates had to clutch in their hands amulets, small stones or gems carved with the numerical cipher that corresponded to a particular treasury. Given the

number of treasures and the amount of information that needed to be known, the initiations likely were graduated and would occur over a lifetime.

Before the soul could be released from the body and make these initiatory flights, the initiates had to go through an extensive preparation (the text claims it is twelve years), which included segregation from the traditional family unit and integration into the church unit. Moral fitness also had to be proven. Then a series of three baptisms was performed, beginning with water immersion, followed by the burning of incense, and finalized by the sealing of the initiate on the forehead with God's spirit.

These were complicated baptismal rituals, performed to wipe out sins and permanently safeguard the initiate from demonic attack. They involved specified prayers, plant materials and offerings, drawn seals or symbols, numerical ciphers, and names of deities. These baptisms prepared and safeguarded the initiates as they undertook progressive initiation into the sixty treasures, one treasury at a time.

At the finale of the sixty celestial initiations, when the initiate reached the sixtieth treasury, the group gathers around the leader. Together they stand and sing in recitation style a hymn of praise to the Father, the unapproachable God (1 Jeu 41.92–98):

Leader: I sing praise to you, O God, my Father, for it is you who allowed this little thought to shine within yourself.

What now, O Unapproachable God?

Congregation: Amen. Amen. Amen.

Leader: I sing praise to you, O Unapproachable God,

For you shone within yourself alone, because you willed yourself to shine.

What now, O Unapproachable God?

Congregation: Amen. Amen. Amen.

The hymn continues along these lines for several pages, rehearsing as a song of praise the entire cosmological story of Jeu's emanation from the Father, the creation of the sixty realms of light, and the revelation of Jeu's mysteries. In the end, the congregation asks the Father, the unapproachable God, what he wishes them to do next, seeking guidance and ongoing revelation.

These liturgies were meant to give peace to the living by providing them with exact knowledge of the way to immortality and a stellar afterlife. This group had transposed well-known aspects of Egyptian mortuary rituals into a new communal initiatory context, which made their writings Gnostic liturgies of the dead for the living.

Transposing the Stars

The later books in the Jeuian collection, starting with the second book of Jeu and including all four books of Pistis Sophia, show a gradual shift in perceptions of God and the cosmos. The Father, Jeu, and the celestial treasures are transposed into ever higher and more distant realms until the light treasures become transcendent places outside the created cosmos. The celestial realms become populated by increasingly fearsome dark lords, becoming places of purgatory. The writings themselves become a catalog of sins and the fate of sinners, detailing where certain reprobates can expect to go in the afterlife, what tortures they will have to endure, and how they will be purged and released from incarceration.

The goal of these books is to reveal to the faithful how to avoid falling into the hands of the rulers of the realms of purgatory and instead, at death, to ascend immediately to the sun, and then up into the transcendent treasures of light. These treasures are the apartments of the unapproachable God, the ineffable Father of all Fathers.

The only way to attain safe passage to the penthouse suite is to learn the mysteries of Jeu through a long process of ritual initiation and then, at death, to use this knowledge to thwart the cosmic rulers. The group's new books were written to give exact details about all the cosmic realms that the soul must pass through on its way to the now *transcendent* world of light.

The cosmology of the Jeuians in these new books is very complicated and layered. At the edge of the universe is the outer darkness, the realm of utter destruction for the worst sinners. It is described as a dark ouroboros dragon, encircling the world, with torture chambers in its belly.

There are not one but two underworld realms. These are Amente, the Egyptian realm of the dead, and Chaos, the home of the Greek goddess Persephone and the Gnostic dark lord Ialdabaoth—the latter must be a stand-in for the Greek gods Hades or Kronos. Both are places of purgatory.

Mête, which means “middle” in Coptic, is another realm of purgatory, sandwiched between the underworld and the celestial spheres. It contains five sublunar abysses for the detainment and punishment of souls, overseen by the dark lords Paraplex, Ariouth, Hekate, Parhedron Typhon, and Jacthanabas. The gates to these abysses regularly open to release the purged souls, following a calendar based on certain astrological cycles of the sun, the moon, and Jupiter. The rulers of the five planets, the sun, and the moon

use their powers for both good and evil, assisting in the release of tortured souls as well as locking them in the afterlife dungeons for specified terms.

The zodiac is the realm of Sabaoth the Bad, also called Adamas the Tyrant, and his demonic horde. They determine the fate of souls transmigrating to new bodies. They establish when, where, and how each person's death will happen. Just before the souls transmigrate into their new bodies, the dark lords bind the souls to counterfeit spirits, which will coerce the souls into sin rather than helping them to live well. Then these lords of fate make the souls drink from the cup of forgetfulness. This erases their memories, keeping the souls ignorant of the mysteries of Jeu. In this state of ignorance and sin, they continue on, mired in the material world and perpetual transmigration.

Mesos, which means "middle" in Greek, is the region where souls are judged in order to be placed into new bodies. It serves as a reincarnation triage and is run by Sabaoth the Good and the Virgin of Light, likely referring to the moon and the sun, respectively. Also present in Mesos is the soul-snatcher Melchisedek, the great power who grabs up souls and takes them before the Virgin of Light for judgment. Because it is the home of the Virgin of Light, the ruler of the sun, Mesos must be the ecliptic, the path the sun journeys through the middle of the belt of fixed stars.

As a kind of cushion between the cosmos and the ineffable treasures is a region called the thirteenth realm, in which rules the high god of the Sethian holy trinity. This is the invisible Father Spirit. In later Jeuian stories, the ruler of this realm is called by the name Authades, which means "willful" and "stubborn." He is the tyrannical ruler who spawns Ialdabaoth and sets him up as lord of Chaos. In most Jeuian texts, the Sethian Mother God, Barbelo, and her son live there, too.

This demotion of the Sethian transcendent gods to an inferior realm and their association with undesirable characteristics and the abuse of power suggest that the Jeuians' main competitors in the religious marketplace were Sethian Gnostics. The Jeuians were marketing their gods Jeu and the unapproachable Father as the *truly* transcendent deities, exceeding even the popular Sethian trinity in their ineffability.

The thirteenth realm in the Jeuian scheme appears to be an in-between world, neither a treasury of light nor a place of cosmic chaos. It is populated with twenty-four denizens, one of whom is Pistis Sophia, the universal soul. In the Jeuian version of her story, she is a traumatized victim, tricked by

Authades to leave his realm. When she enters the universe proper, she is assaulted and raped by Ialdabaoth and bound in cosmic darkness.

She calls upon the light beings for help. After she undergoes a lengthy process of ritual repentance, Jesus looses her bonds and raises her up out of cosmic horror. Her thirteen penances serve as the basis for the ritual penances and dedicated moral life of the Jeuian faithful, recorded in liturgical prose in chapters 32 to 57 of Pistis Sophia.

Jesus Is Not Jeu

Where is Jeu in all of this? Jeu, no longer the cosmic solar deity, is transposed with his Father into the realms of the ineffable. He is still the author of the treasures of light, but these are transcendent realms now, rather than cosmic.

Even so, Jeu does not give up his job as creator of the universe. He still is responsible for organizing the cosmos and setting the planets into their realms of orbit. He brings control to Chaos by establishing realms of judgment and purgatory. He puts controls on evil by imprisoning wicked dark lords such as Sabaoth and his cronies in the sphere of the zodiac, and he rewards repentant ex-dark lords like Jabraoth by relocating them into the highest celestial spheres. All of Jeu's creative and structural activities are done with the express purpose of establishing at the cosmic level a regulated system that assists in the purification, release, and transportation of souls to the light treasures.

What about Jesus? The Jeuians have their own interpretation of Jesus, who they understand to be the divine messenger sent from the Father to reveal Jeu's mysteries, an understanding based on their familiarity with the Gospel of John. Although the Jeuians eventually incorporate a handful of references to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in their writings, and one reference to Paul, they do not appear to know or use the Christian writings in any systematic sense. The Jeuians have no concern for events in Jesus' life and death or his teachings before his crucifixion.

There are only a few instances that matter to them. They want to be precise about how Jesus the Light got to earth in the first place. In this case, they think that Jesus, like Jeu, is a light being from the ineffable realms, a power that emanated from the Father. On the Father's command, Jesus the Light descended down into the lower realms, where new manifestations of him are formed. His spirit is created by Barbelo and his soul by Sabaoth the Good.

These two are linked with the baby Jesus forming in Mary's womb. As a boy, Jesus is visited by Jesus the Light and the two embrace, kiss, and become one being, at least temporarily. This reunion also takes place again at Jesus' baptism. More than anything else, these preemptive descents of Jesus the Light upon the person Jesus are meant to amuse and amaze.

The real story starts when Jesus the Light descends upon the resurrected Jesus at dawn after the crucifixion. Jesus is given a garment of light with secrets written inside of it. When he puts on the garment, he becomes a light being and flies up into the sky, through the gates of the firmament and the celestial spheres. His journey is charted through all the gates, until he reaches the place where Pistis Sophia, the universal suffering soul, is imprisoned.

With his power he confuses and defeats the dark lords by reorienting the rotation of the celestial spheres. This also expedites the process of purifying and transporting souls up into the treasures originally set in place by Jeu. Jesus empowers Pistis Sophia with his light and she is released from Chaos as a purified light being, ready to ascend into the treasures. Her repentance and salvation becomes the model for the Jeuian faithful.

But Jesus does not remain in these high places. Jesus makes his way back to earth, emptying himself of Jesus the Light on the way. On earth again, like a bodhisattva, he instructs his followers, both men and women, for eleven years. During these years he teaches them only the first mystery, revealing the secret twenty-four-level passage through the cosmos to the thirteenth realm. These are the lesser mysteries that chart the path of the soul up to the gates of the treasures of light. The other Jesus moment that mattered to the Jeuians is Jesus' ascension. It is remembered as a very specific day and time in the calendar, suggesting that the Jeuians celebrated Jesus' ascension as a religious festival, keeping an overnight vigil of silence on January 24, known in their calendar as the fifteenth day of the month of Töbe (Pistis Sophia 1.2–3). The vigil started when the moon was full and the sun was at its zenith. The Jeuians thought that Jesus' ascension was initiated by the final descent of the Jesus of Light, which engulfed the person Jesus in power and luminosity. The vigil ended the next day, at the ninth hour, when they believed that Jesus' ascension to the kingdom of light had been completed. They thought that Jesus, united with the Jesus of Light, had ascended to the very highest treasures. Then he returned to earth to reveal to his followers the greater mysteries of the ineffable realms.

In the second century CE, the Jeuians emerged as a new Gnostic movement, an Egyptian solar cult whose mysteries were revealed by the Jesus of the fourth Gospel, but only after his resurrection. The focus of the movement was to provide initiates with the information, rites, and experiences needed to ascend safely through the star gates to the innermost realm, where Jeu, their solar God, resided.

A hundred years after its founding, there was a marked shift in Jeuian cosmology and theology, perhaps under the pressure of competition with Sethians who claimed to have a better religion, featuring an ineffable trinity of gods in a transcendent realm. To compete, the Jeuians transposed their solar mysteries to a transcendent realm and developed lower mysteries to assist the souls of the deceased in evading horrible purgatory realms before entering the light treasuries, now the ineffable world of Jeu and his father. The Sethian deities become little more than demons in a liminal realm below the world of light.

Mandaean Memories

The third century witnessed the birth of a number of Gnostic movements that consolidated into new popular religions. Yet the Sethian separatists, the followers of Mani, and the transposed solar cult of Jeu did not survive into the modern period as religions. The competition with Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and then Islam proved to be too much, especially given the political power that the leaders of these other religions were able to exert to oppress and persecute their rivals.

That said, Islam has long operated from a position of religious tolerance for “People of the Book,” so that religions like Judaism and Christianity, which have ancient holy scriptures and prophetic leaders such as Moses and Jesus, generally have been tolerated. This is probably the main reason that the Mandaeans, a group of Gnostics who settled in today’s Iran and Iraq, in the southern marshes of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, have survived from the ancient world to the modern (see Drower 1937, 1960; Deutsch 1995, 1999; Lupieri 2002; Buckley 2002, 2006).

When Islam first became dominant in the region, the Mandaean leader led a delegation of Mandaeans to visit the Muslim authorities—or so their story goes. They showed the authorities their old holy book, the Ginza, and declared that John the Baptist, a prophet known to Muslims, was their prophet. Convinced, the Muslim authorities granted them the status of People

of the Book and recognized their religion as legitimate. The Muslims called them *subba* (baptizers).

Who were these people? Where did they come from? The Mandaeans understand human history to have started with Adam and Eve, but although this first couple started it all, the actual hero and ancestor of the Mandaean community is the biblical Shem, Noah's son. The Mandaean community traces its origins back to Shem, whom they consider the only legitimate son of Noah and his wife. Noah's other three sons, considered illegitimate, are the ancestors of everyone else in the world.

This understanding means that their legends turn upside down the conventional understanding of biblical history, a hermeneutic that is characteristic of other Gnostics we have discussed. For instance, according to Mandaean lore the first false prophet is Abraham, who serves the Jewish God, a solar deity. Moses is the second. Their stories about the exodus from Egypt identify the Mandaeans with the Egyptians. In their folk memory, the Egyptian pharaoh is the Mandaean leader of this period, the enemy of Moses and the Jewish people. The pharaoh, however, becomes the unfortunate victim of the Jews and their false God when many of his people are killed in the Red Sea. The third false prophet is Jesus, who appeared during the time of Pontius Pilate.

Whatever else the Mandaean religion may be, it is a religion that identifies Judaism and Christianity as Other. The Mandaeans are the only ones who know the true God. Their name in fact derives from the Aramaic word *manda* (knowledge). They are self-designated knowers, or Gnostics. Three times daily the Mandaeans face celestial north, where they believe the entrance to the world of light exists, and pray, "In the name of God almighty, praised be God with pure hearts. Life exists. God exists. Knowledge of God exists" (Fourouzandeh and Brunet 2001, 13).

This sweeping story of their history is their "official" version of their past, but it does not help us determine exactly when, where, and why Mandaism emerged as a historical religion. What we know is that by the third century, Mandaism was an established Gnostic religion with scriptures that were being copied and preserved by a scribal priestly class.

The manuscripts of their scriptures internally track the history of their copyists. The earliest scribe of the Left Ginza has been identified as a woman named Shlama. Even though women cannot be Mandaean priests today, here we have incontestable evidence that Shlama was a Mandaean

priest living at the beginning of the third century (Buckley 2002, 4). We also know about the work of a scribe at the end of the third century, Zazai. He seemed concerned to preserve every Mandaean scripture he possibly could during the time when Mani was killed and persecution of non-Zoroastrian religions was on the rise in his locale. He understood that a community's written documents often survive when its people may not.

This hand preservation of texts continues up to the present day, meaning that it is very hard to fix dates to the original composition of any Mandaean scripture or to know how much they have been edited and altered over the years to bring the scriptures in line with current beliefs and practices. In addition, although Mandaean scriptures show familiarity with Jewish and Christian writings, they observe these from a distance. The authors of these scriptures rarely appear to be consulting biblical texts directly but instead rely mostly on hearsay and secondhand information about biblical stories, which they then code unconventionally. This means that the Mandaean presentation of information sometimes can be convoluted, contradictory, and confusing to people who are used to consulting biblical texts directly and reading them traditionally.

Miriai and the Exalted Light

So where do we start in our quest for the beginnings of Mandaeism? I begin with a prayer performed on Sundays, their holy day. As it is uttered today, it is done so from the viewpoint of the Mandaean priest who vocalizes it. But this hymn had a revelatory origin.

The vision recorded in this hymn is of the descent of the great Mandaean savior, Manda d-Hiia (Knowledge of Life). Manda d-Hiia is a great light being (‘*uthra*) who, like an angel, comes down from the world of light as a stranger to the world. Here, the visionary watches his descent and is filled with knowledge of the Father (Hymn 163, Drower 1959, 141, with slight modification):

On Sunday, on the chief of days,
Who saw what I have seen?
Who saw the Stranger who went
And stayed at the house of his friends?
I, who saw the Stranger,
My eyes were filled with his light,
My eyes with light were filled
And knowledge (*manda*) settled in my heart,

In my heart settled knowledge
And my mouth filled with his praise,
His praise filled my mouth.
And I arose and I praised my Father.
I arose and I gave praises to my Father.
From dawn until the evening
I praised the exalted radiance,
I praised his lovely light.

Who is the seer? The previous hymn tells us that the seer is a woman, an estranged Jew named Miriai, whose vision of the descendent angel of light is not believed by her ancestral people when she shares it with them. The Jews are characterized as wicked, unable to behold the great angel she has witnessed. She says in this hymn (Hymn 162, Drower 1959, 140–41):

At his tread and at his footsteps
The earthly world was alarmed.
The dead heard him and lived.
The sick heard him and were cured,
Lepers heard him and were healed,
They got up, they arose, they were healed
By the healing of Manda d-Hiia,
Which, in his goodness, he bestowed upon them
And life is victorious.

Miriai's story is amplified in other Mandaean literature. In these stories, Miriai hates everything about her ancestors, from their synagogues to their laws. She curses them with dust in their mouths and dung on their heads. She only loves Manda d-Hiia, her Lord, her helper come from the world of light (Book of John 34).

In another prayer, this one uttered by Mandaean priests on Fridays, the great angel of light is described as a man, a *nazirutha* (*nazoraean*), whom Miriai loves. *Nazoraean* is another Mandaean self-designation, meaning “guardian” or “possessor” of secret knowledge, and today it refers to priestly initiates or learned laymen. To make matters even more interesting, this is also the name that some of the first Christians used to designate themselves as guardians of the Jewish law as Jesus wanted them to observe it (Fossum and Munoa 2004, 156–57).

Miriai is the object of persecution by her Jewish family and her neighbors in Jerusalem, who do not like the fact that she not only abandoned the ancestral religion but also is a priest of a new baptizing religion, the Nazoreaens. She has been installed as a priest by Anush (Man), an *'uthra*-like Manda d-Hiia who is from the realm of light and is a stranger on earth.

Anush is the heavenly messenger sent to earth during the Roman period. He takes on bodily form and appears in Jerusalem. According to the Mandaean scriptures, he heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, cleanses lepers, raises up the lame so that they can walk, and makes the deaf and dumb speak. He also raises people from the dead, using the power given him by the king of light. He teaches that there is life and death, light and darkness, truth and error. His teaching is recognized as the true religion. Stories about him emphasize that he healed Miriai from head to foot and did so for no fee (Right Ginza 1.29, 2.53, 14.328, 14.331).

In her priestly role, Miriai is regarded as a vine or great tree that shelters birds who wish to nest. Her fruit provides the birds with sustenance. Anush comes and sits in her branches as a white eagle, teaching the birds to join up with Miriai and stay with her no matter what happens. He tells them that he is a great *'uthra* from the realm of light, come to heal Miriai and her converts via water baptism, which will raise up their souls. He is the voice of life, rousing them from sleep. He baptizes Miriai in the running waters of the Jordan, establishing her baptism as the model for the religion's baptismal practices.

During his time in Jerusalem, Anush is said to convert three hundred and sixty-five people to his way. These converts preach about the Lord of Glory and then are killed by the Jews, who do not believe them. Because the Jews scoff at Miriai and persecute her people, Anush the eagle takes punitive flight over the city. As punishment, Anush destroys the Temple, sets fire to Jerusalem, and decimates the city's population. When Anush is finished, he ascends to the realm of light. Miriai's people abandon the city and migrate east into Persian territories. There, she is pictured sitting on a throne at the mouth of the Euphrates river with a white priestly banner next to her, a sacred scroll in her lap, a priestly belt wrapped around her waist, and a staff in her hand that commands the living waters. People bow before her as she teaches them about the God she has come to know, a God who is not YHWH (Book of John 35).

What are we to make of this story, especially given that, in later Mandaean memory, Anush is not Jesus but Jesus' rival? And that Miriai is understood by the Mandaeans to be Mary, Jesus' mother, not a visionary and priest of a new religion? And that Jesus is a lapsed Mandaean, a false prophet, whereas his teacher John the Baptist is the real deal? What this points to is change. The Mandaean religion today is not what it was when it started. Like all

religions with a long history, Mandaism has shifted to accommodate and respond to the needs, experiences, and desires of its people.

Nazoraean Gnostics

So what did Mandaism look like when it first started, before Jesus lapsed and Miriai became Mary his mother, before John the Baptist became an essential prophet in the Mandaean bid to convince Muslim authorities of their legitimacy? Scholars have suggested a number of options. Early in the academic discussion of the origins of this religion, Mark Lidzbarski (1925, vi–xvii) and Rudolf Bultmann (1925) favored a pre-Christian, Palestinian origin for Mandaism. The Danish scholar V. Schou Pedersen (1940) was not convinced, arguing that there has to have been a Christian stage within the early development of Mandaism. After World War II, the view that Mandaism has Jewish origins again gained momentum, especially because the Mandaean text *Haran Gawaita* gives the Mandaeans' own account of their movement from Palestine into Mesopotamia (Macuch 1957, 1965; Rudolph 1969, 228). Edwin Yamauchi (1973, 140–42), however, thinks that the origins are Babylonian and can be traced to a non-Jewish sect, similar to the Elchasaites, who took their form of Gnosticism to Mesopotamia and blended with a Mesopotamian cult of magic at the end of the second century CE.

Given the strong Christian parallels and the portrayal of Jesus as lapsed, which is a reversal of the Christian story, my own research has led me to conclude that the first Mandaeans were a group of Nazoraean Gnostic Christians led by a woman seer and priest named Miriam. The origin of Mandaism points to the very late first century, when, in the southern marshes of the Euphrates, Miriam founded a group of Gnostic Christian baptists. Her fledgling community was mainly Nazoraean Christians from the diaspora, whose families had fled Palestine around the time of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans in 70 CE. They likely had some connections with the community of baptizing Gnostic Christians we discussed earlier in relation to the fourth Gospel.

Other than the fact that her group maintained a Gnostic spirituality, it would have been quite similar to the Elchasaites who were operating in the same vicinity. Her baptisms, like Elchasai's, were therapeutic, healing for body and soul. Her group, like Elchasai's, stressed the importance of cleanliness, both physical and ethical, and prescribed a special diet of properly washed and prepared food. Any contact with contaminating bodily

fluids such as blood or semen had to be resolved in the waters. Like the Elchasaites, Miriam's group performed daily prayers and river baptisms to sustain the physical and spiritual health of her followers.

Miriam's authority as priest and her knowledge of the true God came from her vision of the descent of the exalted angel of light, Manda d-Hiia, which she must have originally identified with Jesus. Although there is no evidence that she saw herself as the Great Power, like Elchasai, or as the Paraclete, like Mani, she did assume Jesus' role as the "vine" from the fourth Gospel (John 15), a Gospel with which she appears to have been familiar. She believed that she had been appointed by the exalted angel of light to be the spiritual mother and founding priest of a new community. She conceived of her community as the kingdom of God that Jesus foretold in his parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19), which had become a bush to shelter, feed, and nurse the birds who roosted there.

In the second century, Miriam's group began experiencing severe persecution at the hands of other Christians. The animosity between these Nazoraean Gnostics and other Christians was serious enough that it caused an inseparable rift between the communities. The more the Nazoraean Gnostics interacted with other Christians and their prescriptive proclamations about Jesus, the more the Nazoraean Gnostics distanced themselves from the Christian Jesus. Rather than argue that their understanding of Jesus as the Knowledge of Life or Manda d-Hiia was right and the Apostolic Catholics' view of Jesus was wrong, the Nazoraean Gnostics pulled away from Jesus altogether, feeling strongly that the Christian Jesus was a fraud. In this context emerged the story of Anush, the rival of the Christian Jesus, and Jesus became a lapsed Mandaean.

In this vortex of communal soul searching, Miriam became associated with Jesus' mother, but not as the Christian story remembers her. The Mandaean memory of Miriam is as a Mandaean convert alienated from Judaism, a mother who could not stop her deceitful son Jesus from starting the false religion Christianity. In the end, the Nazoraean Gnostics turned away from both Judaism and Christianity, and from this estranged interface emerged Mandaeism, a new Gnostic religion with its own Gnostic identity and its own Gnostic reformulation of history.

Soul Vessels

In the second century, the Mandaeans were conceptualizing God in ways very similar to what Mani would propose a century later. In the Mandaean scheme, the world of light exists above the celestial sphere. This is the origin and home of the human soul. A gate to the light world is found in the celestial north. At the summit of the world of light is an unknown or unapproachable God who is primal life itself. This transcendent God is known by many names, but most simply Hiia (Life). Other names include First Life, Great Life, Lord of Greatness, and King of Light. He is envisioned at rest, seated upon a throne. From him originates a series of descending and progressively deteriorating light beings known as Iushamin the Second Life, Abathur the Third Life, and Ptahil the Fourth Life.

There are innumerable realms and *'uthras* (light beings) who dwell in the light world. There are female light beings as well as male; these are acknowledged as husbands and wives. The light world flows with a network of rivers of light that serve as baptismal pools for the *'uthras*. The *'uthras* praise God by regularly immersing themselves in these transcendent currents of the Jordan. Sometimes *'uthras* descend into the lower realms as envoys to teach fallen *'uthras* and people about the true God and the world of light. The three important *'uthra* envoys are Hibil, Shitil, and Anush. These are the Gnostic superpowers in the Mandaean universe.

In opposition to the world of light is the world of darkness, which is located beneath or below the earth. It is the underworld, arising from the dark waters of Chaos that existed primordially. Trapped in this region is Ruha, the spirit of holiness, who has fallen from the world of light and become a wicked dark lord herself. How this happened is never explained, but it is assumed, because Hibil descends to the underworld and tries to return her to her true parents in the world of light (see Buckley 2002, 41).

When Ruha mates with her brother, the demon Gaf, Ruha produces Ur. Ur is the king of darkness, opposed to the world of light. Ur is born a giant serpent whose coils wrap around themselves, forming the abysses and demonic realms. Eventually, Ur mates with Ruha and she gives birth to the seven planets, the fixed stars of the zodiac, and their demonic rulers.

Earth is a middle region called Tibil. Earth was created by Ptahil the Fourth Life, who, being the last emanated and most deteriorated, lives on the border between the world of light and the world of darkness. He is encouraged by his father, Abathur the Third Life, to create the earth realm between the light and dark worlds. This suggestion does not come from the

primal God but is the dangerous idea of Abathur, who wants his son to have a realm of his own to rule, with Ptahil's own light beings populating it.

Ptahil undertakes to carry out his father's suggestion, but he finds the task impossible to accomplish on his own. He discovers that he has lost his power by stepping out of the light world. Without the light to empower him, he struggles to give life to the middle realm. Eventually, with the aid of Abathur, he casts the planets into orbit, solidifies the earth, and shapes its waterways.

Then Ptahil turns to Ruha and the ancient demonic gods who rule the planets and stars for help in creating the first human being, Adam, in the image of the light beings above. Although they are successful in molding Adam's body and installing an elemental vital spirit from Ruha, they cannot give Adam life as a conscious, standing, speaking person. No amount of fire, wind, water, or air will do the trick. Adam does not live in this conscious capacity until Inner Adam, a light being, takes pity on the poor creature and agrees to become contained within Adam as his soul.

This may be why the soul is also called *mana* (vessel or container). The vessel, or soul, here the divine element in the human, gives Adam consciousness and personhood. The elemental spirit within the soul is the middle, psychological component of a person, which vacillates between the divine soul and the flesh, influencing the person one way toward the good, and then the other way toward wickedness. It is the soul that contains or limits Ruha's demonic spirit. So the Mandaeans write about the soul of Adam and the soul of every Mandaean (Left Ginza III.1 75.17):

O soul, arise, go forth,
enter the body and be chained in the palace.
The rebellious lion will be chained by you,
the rebellious, unruly lion.
The dragon will be chained by you,
the evil one will be slain where it is.
By you (O soul) the King of Darkness will be bound,
against whose might no one can prevail.

In life, as in death, the Mandaeans believe that this elemental spirit from Ruha must be integrated into the soul, where it can be contained by it and subordinated to it, where it can be brought under control, so that Hiia (Life) is victorious. Although clean living is practiced—almsgiving and other charity, brotherly love, care for spouses and family, a kosher-like diet, bodily cleanliness, sobriety, and avoidance of sins such as murder, theft, and

adultery—the job of controlling and containing the Ruha-like spirit in the soul is largely the work of Mandaean ritual.

Ritual Waterworks

Lamea Abbas Amara, a famous poet and Mandaean woman living in San Diego, cuts to the chase when she is asked about the soul and the afterlife: “When you die, your soul goes back to its origin. The soul is given to the child by God. And at the end of life, the beginning becomes the end, like a big pot of water. The water always moves. It is a never-ending cycle” (Buckley 2002, 30).

Recall the tributaries of light that run through the world of light. These light world waterways are linked to the rivers of the earth—the Jordan, the Euphrates, the Tigris—so that the world’s rivers establish a connectivity with the world of light. The Mandeans call this link *laufa* (communion). When they immerse in the rivers, they are linking into the world of light, communing with the *‘uthras*.

This ritual immersion by a priest is called *masbuta* (baptism). It is performed for the community every Sunday (figure 10.5). It is not an initiatory practice, because there is no Mandaean conversion. It is a habitual practice that rehearses the entry into the divine realm and ensures these Gnostics frequent and steady linkage to the world of light.

During the ceremony the priest is transformed into an *‘uthra*. He opens up a channel from the light world into the river and enters the river himself, calling upon light world beings to guard and protect from all evil the souls of those to be baptized. Through ritual actions, he binds the forces of evil, making the water suitable for baptism.

The baptizands are robed in white and are called to the water by the priest: “In the name of Life! Let everyone whose strength enables him and loves his soul, come and go down to the Jordan and be baptized and receive the pure sign. Put on robes of radiant light and set a fresh wreath on his head!” (Buckley 2002, 83).

In the water, as the baptizand’s name is recited, the baptizand is sealed with the Sign of Life in the name of Hiia (Life) and Manda d-Hiia (Knowledge of Life). The person is immersed three times. Water from the river is drunk and the baptizand is invited by the priest to “be healed and strengthened!”



Figure 10.5 Mandaean youth called to baptism by a Mandaean priest in the Saint Charles River, 1999. Still from the film *Masbuta* (2003). Photo courtesy of Jesse Buckley.

When the baptizand leaves the water for the second part of the ceremony, his or her forehead is sealed with sesame oil and a ritual meal is eaten. This ceremony includes a number of consecutive prayers that call upon the beings of light to protect and cure the baptizand, “to heal, uplift, raise up, and ameliorate all pains, diseases, complaints, tumors, and the seven mysteries that inhabit the body” (prayer 23.19, in Buckley 2002, 84). These seven mysteries refer to the rulers of the planets, who affect the body by controlling it through astrological influences and who try to trap the soul as it ascends to the world of light at death. There also is a principle prayer recited for the absolution of sins for all Mandaeans past and present (prayer 72, in Buckley 2002, 85).

Through baptism the Mandaeans secure their connection to the light world and to each other. Their souls are being safeguarded from evil every time it is performed. Their souls also are being continually conditioned to confine

the vacillating spirit, to limit its negative influence. The constant refreshing of the link with the world of light provides both body and soul with healing. The therapeutic nature of their ritual waterworks is clear: it is a religious therapy, dependent on the soul regularly tapping into the world of light and communing with Hiia, which stimulates its wholesomeness and its ability to limit the negative influence of the Ruha-like spirit.

The baptismal rehearsal of the soul's entrance into the world of light is realized at death, with the performance of another vital ritual, the *masiqta* (death mass). According to Lamea Abbas Amara, "There is a person like me waiting for me [in the world of light]. She is waiting, very happy to embrace me when I come. Here, on earth, we live only temporarily, as in a prison. It is a suffering place. But we are going to a beautiful place" (Buckley 2002, 29–30).

Amara speaks here about the Mandaean view of death: the soul must be returned to the world of light. Its return is dependent on a complicated death ritual that works to permanently join the Ruha-like spirit with the soul. This union must happen to enable the person to be incorporated into a light world body, the *'ustuna*, and then permanently dwell in one of the light realms with the Mandaean ancestors. Some Mandaeans think that this body of light is their *dmuta* (divine double). It also is described as a stole of light that they will don upon their arrival in the world of light (cf. Left Ginza II.5 43.18–44.13).

Three days after death and burial, the twelve-hour *masiqta* is performed. The ritual aids the soul of the deceased in its separation from the body, its unification with the person's elemental spirit, and the journey into the light world.

The journey to the door of the world of light takes forty-five days. The ascent occurs through dangerous demonic regions of purgatory, where star demons and planetary rulers try to arrest the soul and place it in detention. But the Mandaean soul is escorted through these purgatories by angels of light who have come for the soul. Although these angels serve as guardians and navigators along the way, it is the soul itself that must answer the interrogations of the dark lords in each of their horrible regions. The soul must announce its name, its sign, and its blessing—all that it had received on earth in the living waters of baptism, from Hiia.

At the summit of the ascent through the cosmic realms is the region of Abathur, Ptahil's father. Abathur, as punishment for his part in the creation of the world, serves as the judge of the deceased, weighing on his scale each

person's soul and spirit, measuring them against the soul of Adam's son Seth, which is regarded as the purest and lightest soul ever to have ascended. If the soul's weight does not tip the scale, this demonstrates that the spirit has become pure like the soul. At this moment, the spirit and soul embrace as sisters and are united. The united pair mounts a ship of light that ferries across the river surrounding the world and is transported to the light world. If they are heavy with sin, they are taken to a place of purgatory to undergo purification until a time when they can be released and weighed again.

There is no reincarnation, no transmigration into other bodies. There is only an eternity to be spent either bathing in rivers of light with *'uthras* and the raised ancestors or locked in purgatories, tortured by demons. The former is the fate of the Mandaeans, the Gnostics. The latter is the fate of everyone else.

“True” Religion

The third century saw the emergence of several new Gnostic religious movements. These religions were plugged into other religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism, but they identified themselves as different, as superior to the traditional religions, as offering *true* religion to their converts. They viewed the traditional religions as corrupt or fake.

In contrast, these “true” religions emerged from revelation, and revelation in turn authorized their claims to truth. These religions did not depend on an ancestral past, inherited scriptures, or the sponsorship of a bishop or rabbi to be legitimate. Often, the founders of these movements, like Mani and Miriam, were seers, and they relied on their own visions and knowledge to build their religious systems.

The Jeuians, for instance, believed that their solar mysteries were secretly revealed to them by Jesus. Whereas Christianity got Jesus and his message wrong, the Jeuians got it right. Jesus was a Gnostic sent from Jeu's Father to reveal the truth about the transcendent world and our innate connection to it. The Jeuians were the ones who received his revelation and understood it.

When we compare these Gnostic religions, we see that they all eventually built institutional structures, enabling the religions to be fostered intergenerationally. The Jeuians consolidated their teachings into church handbooks that the leaders used to induct and teach their congregations. They

used litanies and festivals to supplement their initiatory mysteries, in which the spirit was conducted into the transcendent realms.

Mani built his institution very intentionally and systematically. He established a strict leadership hierarchy, composed the religion's scriptures, and organized worship around prayers, hymns, litanies, and festivals.

Miriam's religion was likewise formed institutionally, so that by the third century a Gnostic priesthood and scribal class had emerged, scriptures had accumulated, weekly water rituals were performed, death masses took place, and unique festivals marked their calendar. It was this institutionalization that gave these new religious movements longevity.

The survival of the Mandaeans was helped, additionally, because their homeland remained within Muslim territories, where the Mandaeans were tolerated as a People of the Book. The effect of this tolerance on the part of Muslim authorities cannot be overemphasized. Sadly, the situation has changed in the modern world. In the aftermath of the Gulf War and the armed conflict in Iraq, the Mandaeans are no longer safe. Many Mandaeans have fled to other countries, including the United States, seeking refuge and political asylum. It remains to be seen how Mandaism will survive and adapt within this diaspora.

Unlike Mandaism, the ancient Gnostic religions, whose homelands were within Christian territories, did not survive the centuries as religions because their message was too transgressive for Christians to tolerate. Within the Christian West, the Gnostic insistence on the centrality of the individual's ability to make choices based on his or her own experiences, rather than submitting to the will of God and his kings, was too alarming to accept. So, like the actions of the people in *Pleasantville*, stones were taken up and thrown through windows, books were piled up and burned, and the Catholic church enacted laws to stop the heresy from spreading. Yet, although the churches and the books of the Gnostics could be destroyed and laws could be established against them, the idea of individual freedom, of the self as God, could not be stamped out. It lived on, and continues to turn the world colors.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gnosticism Out on a Limb

Shirley MacLaine

In the 1987 autobiographical miniseries *Out on a Limb*, based on the book of the same name, Shirley MacLaine tells the story of her spiritual awakening, beginning with a reenactment of her spiritual crisis ([figure 11.1](#)). As she has tea with her friend Bella Abzug, she becomes animated. Even though she is a successful actress and performer, with wealth and status, she feels something is missing from life.

“The more I see of the world, the more I feel something is missing,” she tells her friend. “I am not talking about fame and money and success. There is some purpose to being alive, and I don’t know what it is. This just can’t be everything, can it? Why are we here? There’s got to be more.”

Bella shakes her head and wonders at her friend’s odd behavior. Shirley is frustrated that Bella doesn’t understand.

A few days later the two women attend a painting exhibition. That is where Shirley meets David Manning, a New Age artist. Intrigued by him, she strikes up a conversation, and eventually lets him know about her longing to understand the workings of the universe. She wants to know what God is and where we fit in.

So David takes her to the Bodhi Tree Bookstore, a metaphysical bookstore specializing in New Age titles. She is overwhelmed with the selection of books and asks him what she should read to give her the knowledge she seeks.



Figure 11.1 Shirley MacLaine as herself in *Out on a Limb* (1987).

He says to her, “Well, you could read some of the more esoteric books on this wall, or you could just read Plato, Pythagoras, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Voltaire. They all wrote on this subject.”

In each new scene after this, we see Shirley hauling around books. We see her sitting by the fireplace, in a window seat, on the floor, reading book after book. She says in a voice-over, “From that day on I began to read everything metaphysical I could get my hands on. It made me think differently about the world and my own life in it.”

She had become the seeker of spiritual knowledge, a modern Gnostic who realizes that to get to the fruit of the tree she has to go out on a limb. No matter how uncomfortable or transgressive were the things she was learning, she had to keep on reading.

As the film progresses, we see Shirley performing in Hong Kong. At one point, she is walking along a local street deep in the city. She stops in front of a bookshop window. Prominently displayed in the window is the book

Seeker After Truth, along with a number of other titles. We know that this seeker is Shirley and that the truth she seeks is in the books she will find in the store.

Sure enough, Shirley enters the store, only to leave with another armload of metaphysical titles, which she takes to her hotel room and continues to read. As she directly engages the knowledge in these books, Shirley links into a spiritual conversation that has survived since antiquity, that goes back to the Gnostic New Age.

Meeting of the Minds

The title of this book, *The Gnostic New Age*, reflects my long-standing observation that, when it comes to religion, ancient and modern minds are not as different as we might like to believe. For years, I have been aware of an uncanny similarity between Gnostic movements in antiquity and New Age movements in our own time, and I have wondered what might this mean.

Ancient Gnostic and modern New Age movements cultivate a form of spirituality that is aggressively countercultural and highly critical of conventionally organized religion (see Campbell 1972; Bloom 1996; Hanegraaff 1998; Roof 1999; Versluis 2014). They revel in exposing the errors of conventional religions, which they believe to be ineffective. They delight in upsetting the cart, in exposing the deceptions that they believe traditional institutions maintain to control the masses.

At the center of their transgression is their disapproval of “talk religion”—religion that tries to codify God or intellectualize spirituality. For ancient Gnostics and modern New Agers, the heart of religion is the subjective individual experience of meeting a transcendent or transpersonal reality that is the source of all existence. Religion is about the God experience, not God talk. This is how the contemporary spiritual leader Eckhart Tolle (1999, 93) explains what God really is: “It’s not what you think it is! You can’t think about presence, and the mind can’t understand it. Understanding presence is *being* present.”

Both past and present movements have at their center a transcendent or transpersonal reality that is believed to be the source of our existence. All reality, including us, is derived from this source. So this divinity is present within the human being and is recognized as the person’s true self. Religion is marketed as a quest for wholeness or, in New Age terms, holism. The way to achieve this transpersonal spiritual integration is envisioned as some kind

of sacred psychological therapy, with high-octane contemplation and ritual magic in the mix.

The religions that emerge out of this type of spiritual orientation are vibrantly pluralistic, engaging a wide swath of religious currents, alternative science, magical thinking, and stargazing. With a few exceptions, these types of emergent movements tend to be decentralized, grassroots affairs led by charismatic revelatory leaders. Revelation and prophecy are central, providing leaders, past and present, with authority, legitimacy, and “new knowledge” to package and market.

Historians are very reluctant to make anything out of these types of “coincidences” because of the long span of time between past and present and the clear lack of historical cause and effect. Because no ancient Gnostic church survives in modern America, the linear track of historical development between the old Gnostics and the modern New Agers is reduced to nonsense.

Nonetheless, the similarities are too close to credit to mere coincidence. Something is going on here, and it begs for an explanation (see Bloom 1992, 1996; Smoley 2006; Burfeind 2014). My need to come to terms with this similarity, with the meeting of Gnostic and New Age minds across the expanse of two thousand years, compelled me to write this book, to map the origins of Gnostic spirituality and to try to understand its survival in modern American religion.

Certainly there are a number of factors at work, including sociological comparatives. Both Gnostic and New Age movements arose during historical periods of rapid breakdown in traditional institutions and structures. In antiquity, we had the brutal imperialism of Rome, which advanced the collapse of native cultures and created enmity toward the dominant political regime. Likewise, in the 1950s and 1960s the American romance with traditional politics and cultural structures disintegrated, leaving a vacuum in which countercultural movements could make headway.

It is equally true that both the past and the present feature increased interaction between native and nonnative cultures. This expansion in cultural knowledge, past and present, creates a pluralistic environment in which eclecticism and inclusiveness allow for innovation in the realms of spirituality and religion. The ancient Mediterranean world at the time of the Gnostics was undergoing a previously unknown level of internationalization, a result of the increased traffic of merchants, tourists, and new residents on

Roman-built roads, along the Silk Road, and over the seas. The search for truth gained more options in this rich international environment. The same can be said of the 1950s and 1960s, when there was an explosion of the Asian into America. There also was an explosion of space. With our race to the moon, the options for truth expanded to the point that they became alien.

So both eras, the first century CE and the twentieth century CE, were the right moments for countercultural religious movements to emerge and take hold. Yet we can't reduce the similarities to the fact that the cross-cultural milieu or conditions were spot-on (cf. Kaler 2009). Although the conditions were right, we have to turn elsewhere to explain the meeting of the minds, the shared metaphysical orientation common to past and present.

Gnostic Artifacts

Except for Mandaicism, which survived quietly into the modern era within the bubble of tolerance granted to it by Islamic regimes, Gnostic movements and religions did not persist from antiquity to today. Some died out immediately with the death of their prophet; others became organized religions that persisted for several hundred years. They ultimately failed, but not because they were unable or unwilling to organize themselves into religions replete with rituals, scriptures, and leadership structures. The main reason Gnostic movements and religions didn't survive into the modern era had to do with their countercultural orientation and their radical critique of Christianity as a false religion that never abandoned Judaism and the worship of its God YHWH. This transgressive talk put Gnostics at odds with both civil order and the church polity of the Catholics, whose form of Christianity was marketed and accepted as a "natural" and "ancestral" religion for the masses. This made systematic persecution and extermination of "unnatural" and "new" Gnostic movements and religions not only possible but likely, especially as politics and religion became bedfellows in the medieval Christian West.

Even so, although it is true that Gnostic movements were effectively suppressed in antiquity, it is a mistake to think that Gnosticism was destroyed. The big question for me is how Gnosticism persisted over the centuries without a church home that lived alongside the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant institutions.

As I have shown, the solution lies in understanding Gnosticism as an emergent religious orientation, an innovative form of spirituality, a new way

of being religious that persisted outside conventional religious structures while engaging them in disruptive ways. Gnosticism arose in the first century CE as an innovative spirituality of human empowerment and individualism, at a time when nothing like it existed. It worked at the edges of the conventional religions, engaging the margins by critiquing and subverting the old servant models of religion. In the wake of its interrogation of the old structures, new religious movements began to form that worked for the welfare of the human being rather than the welfare of the gods.

So where does Gnosticism historically survive, if not within its own institutions? Quite simply, it is embedded in the literature our ancestors wrote and the cultural artifacts they created, whether as expressions of Gnostic spirituality or as attacks meant to suppress it. Artifacts such as literature do not require a church to pass on a tradition from one generation to the next in a historical chain of transmission. All they require is people like Shirley MacLaine—at any given time, in any given location—to pick up the book and read it for themselves. The connection to Gnostic spirituality is made directly, from text to readers, whenever and wherever they are. Time and location are irrelevant.

Each time literature like this is read and then distributed to larger populations, whether through word of mouth or through public channels, Gnostic spirituality is reengaged. Each time a religious movement emerged as an expression of this reengaged Gnosticism, and then was suppressed, the concept of “the Gnostic” was redistributed and entrenched deeper and deeper into the structures of our personal and social memories, becoming part of our human story and consciousness.

In discussing literature that has been consistently accessible in the Western world since antiquity, we should mention the great opponents of Gnosticism such as Irenaeus of Lyons and Tertullian of Carthage, whose writings have been available to readers since they were first published in the late second and early third centuries. We also ought to include the later diatribes of Augustine and others fighting the Manichaeans in the Latin West. Their writings were “good reads” for Christians over the centuries. Believing that they were soldiering against the spread of Gnosticism, these authors probably never realized that their attacks only preserved Gnosticism and redistributed Gnostic spirituality into the religious buffer and our communal consciousness every time their condemnations were picked up and reread. It is likely that the literature written by the opponents of the Gnostics

did more for the survival of Gnostic spirituality over the centuries than it did for its destruction.

The other texts to mention are the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. As we have seen, these texts are advocates of Gnostic spirituality. To suppress their Gnostic sensibilities and domesticate the texts, the leaders of the Apostolic Catholic church imposed strict, orthodox interpretations on them, which were successfully marketed as the “natural” way to read John and Paul. This successful reinterpretation of the texts enabled the leaders of the Catholic church to canonize the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul within the New Testament.

However, because the interpretation is the only thing controlling the Gnostic spirituality embedded within these texts, the fourth Gospel and the letters of Paul are Trojan horses. They await readers who either don’t know or don’t care about the orthodox interpretation. When these readers engage John or Paul, the door in the Trojan horse opens up and they are confronted with Gnostic spirituality head-on.

Gnostic Awakenings

This brief chapter is not the place to map the complex movement of Gnostic spirituality from antiquity to the present. Nonetheless, explicit Gnostic renaissances have taken place when actual literature written by Gnostics has resurfaced. These accidents of history have reengaged Gnosticism in very public and profound ways. These awakenings have been instrumental in the survival of Gnostic spirituality and its ever-widening distribution, as it has been reframed over and over again to meet the needs and interests of new generations of religious people.

There are four such Gnostic awakenings that we can mention. The first awakening probably took place in the medieval period, evident in the emergence of the groups we know of as the Paulicians, Bogomils, and Cathars. Although very little, if any, of their literature has survived to affect future generations, legends about them certainly have played heavily into the modern Gnostic consciousness.

The second Gnostic awakening took place in the late fifteenth century when Greek classical literature, which had been lost to the Latin West for centuries, was rediscovered and translated into Latin. In 1471, eighteen tracts of the Corpus Hermeticum were translated in Italy by Marsilio Ficino. Although Hermetic Gnostic wisdom had been known and debated by Islamic

philosophers throughout the Middle Ages, during the Italian Renaissance it emerged again and was distributed extensively into Western European philosophical discourse. Once these texts came online again, they became a reservoir for reengagement with Gnosticism by new generations of people—everyone from Ficino and his European friends, to early Americans such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, to contemporary New Age Americans such as Shirley MacLaine.

This reengagement with Gnostic spirituality in its most cosmic-friendly guise cannot be overemphasized. As we have seen, the Gnostic spirituality of the Hermetics is quite tempered when it comes to our universe. Our universe is the best-case scenario of a God who unfolded himself into lower and lower forms of life. It is this tempered form of Gnosticism, not the forms that framed our world as a dark, demonic place, that became the undercurrent of Western spirituality.

In addition to translating the *Corpus Hermeticum* into Latin, Ficino worked on translating the collected works of Plato and writing commentaries on Plato's major works. He did this, too, for Plotinus, the leading Neoplatonist in antiquity. Ficino also founded an academy to study Plato and Plotinus, bringing alive once again a worldview that had influenced so many Gnostics in antiquity.

Like the ancient Gnostics who read Plato, Ficino became enamored with God the Good, from whom emanated deities that created the universe and whose soul embedded itself within the human being. Once again, the human became the center of the universe, with a soul, a drop of the divine that could be brought into contact with higher and higher levels of reality and its entities through contemplation and ascent exercises that prompted soul journeys. The reintroduction of Plato and Plotinus into Western philosophical discourse went on to inspire repeated revivals of Gnostic spirituality within numerous local environments, from the Renaissance to modern America.

The third Gnostic awakening occurred during the nineteenth century, a result of the recovery in 1769 and 1772 of two old Coptic Gnostic books known as the Bruce and Askew codices. The Bruce Codex contains the books of Jeu and an untitled Gnostic book. The Askew Codex contains *Pistis Sophia*. The initial modern-language translations of this material took place during the nineteenth century, including the influential English translation of *Pistis Sophia* by G. R. S. Mead. These materials became a revitalized reservoir of Gnostic spirituality for instrumental figures such as H. P.

Blavatsky and Carl Gustav Jung, who are arguably the grandmother and grandfather of New Age religion.

The fourth Gnostic awakening began in the mid-twentieth century. It was the result of the remarkable accidental finds of several hoards of Gnostic texts, the Nag Hammadi collection being the most prominent. Twelve Nag Hammadi codices, and part of a thirteenth, were recovered in 1945, and translation work began in the late 1950s. A complete English translation of the collection was available to the general public by 1977, although scholars had been publishing translations of single texts since the 1960s.

The other Gnostic book translated and published in this period is known as the Akhmim or Berlin codex. It was acquired by the Berlin Museum in 1896, but the two world wars held up its translation until 1955. It contains the now famous Gospel of Mary, a fourth copy of the Sethian book called the Apocryphon of John, a second copy of the Sophia of Jesus Christ, and the Acts of Peter.

If this weren't enough, seven Manichaean books were recovered in 1929 near Medinet Madi, Egypt. Publication of these texts began in 1938 and was completed in 1989. From 1975 to 1982, the autobiography of Mani, known to us as the Cologne Mani Codex, was also published. In the late twentieth century, other Manichaean materials surfaced, in the Egyptian village of Kellis, and work on publishing these is ongoing.

The final Gnostic book to mention was recovered in the 1970s from the sands of Egypt, but it was not until 2006 that an English translation was made available. This is the Tchacos Codex and it contains the Gospel of Judas, second versions of the Apocalypse of James and the Letter of Peter to Philip, and a fragment from a book featuring a figure called Allogenes the Stranger. It may also have included some pieces of the Corpus Hermeticum.

The fourth Gnostic awakening is so massive that we are still in its throes. The extraordinary recovery of so many texts written by ancient Gnostics has inspired an unprecedented renaissance of Gnostic spirituality in America. This renaissance helped build up New Age movements on the old Gnostic frame, which has been bent or broken open to accommodate modern developments such as Darwinism, environmentalism, and our race into space. The fourth Gnostic awakening has fueled skeptical, spiritual-but-not-religious sensibilities, which condemn conventional organized religion in favor of personal religious satisfaction and direct experiences of the holy.

Gone is the God of damnation. Gone is the focus on sin and retribution. In its place is the God of Love that the Gnostics claimed to know. Separation from God and reunification with the sacred has become the story of salvation. Behind it all is the individual as the divine human agent empowered to do great things. The demand is for therapy, for religion that is useful. To be successful, religion today must promote personal well-being, health, and spiritual wholeness. It must be attuned to a raising of consciousness, to global awareness, to life that is linked with the transpersonal or transcendent.

The Future of Gnosticism

When it comes to the survival of Gnostic spirituality, there is another factor that most modern people are uncomfortable trying to explain, because it is irrational, but it has happened and still happens and will happen over and over again: rapture. The spontaneous religious experience. The sudden overwhelming revelation. The ecstatic encounter with transcendence, with ultimate reality, with the God Beyond All Gods. Such rapture can be routinized through particular religious rituals and practices, as gnostics did, so that the ecstatic experience of the God Beyond All Gods is the living source of the Gnostic current. Whether we can explain it, ecstasy and the transcendence of the self is what continually births Gnostic spirituality.

The ecstatic experience of an all-encompassing transcendent reality, a source of being that is goodness and love, prompted many Gnostics to seek religious truth beyond their ancestral and regional religions. Because their profound religious experiences did not align with the conventional religions of servitude to powerful, capricious gods and obligatory covenants, they cast traditional religion aside. The gods and religions of the world, they came to believe, were false attempts to capture what cannot be captured, the reality that is the source of our being.

In today's global environment, this Gnostic, transtheistic perspective may provide a new solution to religious intolerance and exclusivism. Rather than indulging in the perennialist view that all religions are expressions of the same God, which leaves us with no ability to assess the truth claims of various religions, the transtheistic Gnostic experience encourages critique of religions as human constructions. Perhaps Mani said it best when he called all religions false because their organizers were unable to truly capture the

God who had been revealed to them through prophets like Moses, Zoroaster, and Jesus.

Gnostic spirituality encourages us to seek the transcendent, the God Beyond All Gods, as the source of our being. But because transtheism focuses on an ultimate reality that has not been captured successfully in the religions we have created, it gives us a new way to think about ourselves in relationship to one another and to our religions. At the very least it gives us pause to ask why we think our own religion is better than someone else's, or to wonder why religion perpetuates sexism, racism, and violence alongside more charitable structures.

The story of this book is the story of Gnostic spirituality—how it emerged, how it survives, and how it will continue to survive. It survives because it remains lodged in literary productions such as the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John, which are part of the Christian canon, easily drawn upon by people who do not take from them the same meaning as Catholic Christians. It lies beneath the vehement words in the writings of the early Catholic leaders, waiting to be resurrected every time they are read. It inhabits the Hermetic literature, exposed with each new renaissance. It lives in the Gnostic writings themselves, buried in tombs and brought to light by accidents of history.

It is waiting to be rebuilt by new generations who read the same passages in Genesis and the New Testament Gospels, the same sentences in Plato, and, like the first Gnostics, wonder how their own ecstatic and transcendent experiences of God fit into it all. This is the reason that, since the first century, there have always been Gnostics among us.

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