

this has been realized, that we will no longer be like children 'tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, *speaking the truth in love*, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love' (Eph. 4: 14-16).

The last word must needs be with love. Love is the first of the Spirit's fruit and the highest of the Spirit's gifts. Love is the royal law and love is the golden rule. 'So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor. 13: 13). Love and unity belong together. Where there is love there must be unity. Where there is no unity there can be no love. In the Johannine Epistles, *agapē* is the love which shows itself in unity. *Agapē* is unity. It is the love with which the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father in the perfect unity of the Godhead (1 Jn. 4: 16; cf. Jn. 12: 26). This is the love which Christians are to show to one another and to those who have not yet been drawn into the fellowship of love. 'We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren' (1 Jn. 3: 14). Such love and union is what makes the church the church and shows it to be the church.

On the basis of the New Testament teaching which we have sketchily reviewed, we find ourselves unable to evade the challenge of some comments from Dean Richardson with which we conclude. 'Church unity is not "a desirable feature in the life of the Church":

it is the condition of the Church's existence, the test of whether the Church is the Church. A divided Church is a contradiction of its own nature as Church: it is witnessing to a falsehood. Its evangelism cannot be effective. Jesus prayed "that they all may be one, even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me" (Jn. 17: 21; cf. 12: 23). If we took the New Testament point of view seriously we should expect to find that the single most serious obstacle to the evangelization of the world is the disunity of "the Churches".¹⁶

Our concern in these two articles has been to elucidate the determinative biblical principles relating to the four issues of unity, continuity, schism and heresy. It is only as a proper understanding of these is attained that the prevalent confusion of thought will be dispelled. Until we are shown by the Spirit what God's Word requires of us in our contemporary situation, we shall be unable to resolve our agonizing dilemmas or to act in obedience to the divine will.

As the editor indicated in his introduction, this is an area where evangelicals themselves differ considerably in their views. Is it satisfactory to regard such divergent attitudes as reflecting legitimate interpretative variations, or can it be that we have not yet allowed the Scripture to impress upon us the unambiguous truth of God?

¹⁶ Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

Gnosticism and the New Testament 1

John W Drane

Gnosticism is a confusing subject. What was it? Was it a pre-Christian religion or a post-Christian heresy? Has the New Testament been affected by Gnostic ideas? Does the idea, e.g., of a redeemer coming from heaven to save men on earth derive from Gnostic mythology, as Bultmann suggests, or is the relationship the other way round? We are grateful to Dr John Drane, who did research on the subject at Manchester University, for this two-part article, in which he guides us through the complexities of the current debate.

The study of Gnosticism has for long been a *sine qua non* for the student of the New Testament, not

least since the discovery in the late 1940s of a complete library of Coptic Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt. Some of these texts, like the *Evangelium Veritatis* and the Gospels of *Thomas* and *Philip*, have become widely known, but the interpretation of the majority of these texts, and their relationship to the picture of Gnosticism given by the Church Fathers, is a task that still lies in the future. Most of the texts thus far published have tended to confirm the patristic evidence, though one or two of the documents have been claimed to give evidence of a pre- and non-Christian Gnosticism. Work is going ahead in the translation and editing

of these texts, and we shall have to await their appearance before their full significance for New Testament studies can be ascertained.¹

The aim of this article, therefore, is not to provide answers to the problems, but simply to set out the difficulties in as coherent a form as possible, in the hope that the student who approaches this area of study for the first time will at least be able to understand what the subject is all about, and to appreciate the various trends of scholarly opinion.

First of all, we must ask the question: What is Gnosticism? We shall then consider some of the suggestions that have been put forward about the origins of classical (second-century) Gnosticism, which in turn leads to a survey of the different views on the subject which have emerged in the literature of the last seventy years or so. Then finally, we must give some attention to the problems of terminology and definition, which are among the most pressing of all.

I

Though one scholar rightly reminds us that to define Gnosticism is 'tantamount to attempting the impossible',² there is a 'basic Gnostic belief' which, by the common consent of most scholars, may be described under six main headings:

1. Theology

The basic feature of all Gnostic systems was a radical dualism between matter and spirit, which conditioned the whole of Gnostic theology. Matter was viewed in a very negative light, and it was held to be quite incapable of raising itself (or even of being raised) to the realm of spirit. At the same time, however, it was always thought possible for spirit to become embodied in material forms, and on this assumption a series of *aeōns* could be postulated, linking the worlds of spirit and matter. The 'Supreme God' dwelt in unapproachable splendour in the spiritual realm, and was completely alien and unknown to the material universe, which was the creation of lesser powers who, although originally emanating from the 'Supreme God', sought to prevent any knowledge of him in the world over which they ruled.³ The fact that the world-creator (Demiurge)

¹ On the publication of these texts, see J. M. Robinson, in *NTS* 14 (1968), pp. 356-401. D. M. Scholer, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 1948-1969* (Leiden, 1971; Nag Hammadi Studies I) contains a comprehensive list of studies on the subject, and is supplemented in *Nov. Test.* 13 (1971), pp. 322ff. and 14 (1972), pp. 312-331. Texts relating to Gnosticism are being made available in W. Foerster (ed.), *Gnosis*, the first vol. of which contains patristic evidence (ET Oxford, 1972). Later volumes will cover the other Gnostic texts. Cf. also R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism: an anthology* (London, 1961), for a convenient collection of some texts relating to Gnosticism.

² M. Mansoor, in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo* (Leiden, 1967; Studies in the History of Religions XII), p. 389. Abbreviated below as *OG*.

³ Most eloquently expressed in the standard introduction of the Mandaean works: 'In the name of the great first alien Life from the worlds of light, the sublime that

was often identified with the God of the Old Testament may suggest that this idea stemmed from Judaism. But the real source of the association was in the Gnostic awareness of a radical dualism between this evil world and the spiritual realm of the 'Supreme God'. The Gnostic Demiurge was probably closer to the Platonic idea of a creator who was able to create only by following the pattern of those things which were always the same (the 'Ideas'), and by taking them as the basis of his own activity.⁴

2. Cosmology

By ancient man, both Jew and Greek, the world was usually regarded as a more or less natural home, but for the Gnostic it was a 'prison', in which the powers of the Demiurge and the *archons* kept the spiritual part of man's being imprisoned. Around the universe lay (usually) seven cosmic spheres, each of which was under the sovereign control of a particular *archon*. Together the *archons* ruled the world, keeping it in subjection by their exercise of *heimarmenē* (fate), and individually each one attempted to block the path of souls trying to ascend to the spiritual reality after death. In some systems the number of *archons* and their spheres was greatly increased. Basilides, for instance, had 365 of them.⁵ What these mythical forms really represented, of course, was the degree to which man was thought to be separated from the 'Supreme God', and the number of *aeons* through which the divine spark must pass after death is indicative of the extent to which any particular theory envisaged its isolation from its spiritual source.

3. Anthropology

According to most Gnostics, man is composed of flesh, soul and spirit, and these elements are to be distinguished according to their origins. Body and soul are the products of the Demiurge, and by his possession of these elements a man is subject to *heimarmenē* in the world. But within the soul is to be found the spirit (*pneuma*), a part of the divine substance from the spiritual realm fallen into the world, and there imprisoned by the material shroud of the creator. The cosmic drama whereby these pneumatic sparks came to be imprisoned in matter varied according to the different systems. But most Gnostics held that the demonic *archōns* gained control of some being who originated in the spiritual world, and imprisoned him (or her) in the materialism of the universe. The release of these divine sparks in the spirit of man constitutes the Gnostic idea of salvation, for the *pneuma* is not at home in the universe, but must return to its original source in the world of light and spirit. The New Testament also recognizes that man is not at home in this world, but

stands above all works. . . . This was so basic a part of Gnostic thought that Hans Jonas could subtitle his book *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1963), 'The message of the Alien God'

⁴ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 56C.

⁵ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.24.3.

there is a very important difference between the biblical and Gnostic views. The Gnostic account of the *pneuma* in man and its desire for salvation is ultimately based on the dualism of spirit/matter, whereas the biblical statements of man's divine nature are based on the (non-Gnostic) assumption that God initially created man in his own image, but because of *sin* a barrier was set up between the divine and the human spheres of existence. In Gnostic thought man's spirit was separated from its true home by the conspiracy of demonic powers against him; but in the Christian view, his separation from God was the result not of external influences, but of man's own spiritual pride.

4. Soteriology

One of the main features of Gnostic anthropology was that although in each (elect) man there exists a spark of divine origin, in its unredeemed state this divine element is unaware of its own existence and destiny, and needs the enlightenment of *gnōsis* to make it aware of its plight. To know the heavenly origin of one's divine *pneuma* is the essential precondition of salvation: '... it is not only the washing that is liberty, but the knowledge of who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed, what birth is, and what rebirth'.⁶ Since the divine sparks were in fact imprisoned in the material world, where even the very existence of the spiritual world is hidden from them, redemption must finally come from without. Thus it was that a divine redeemer⁷ descended from the spiritual realm, bringing with him the saving *gnōsis*, teaching the elect about their divine origin, and telling them how to regain their true spiritual position. So that the *archōns* would not recognize his true identity, this saviour appeared on earth disguised as an ordinary mortal, but after completing his work he returned to the spiritual realm, thus paving the way for the pneumatics who will follow at death, when the spirit leaves the body and soul and returns to its original heavenly home. This doctrine of salvation has more than individual application; it is also bound up with the Gnostic theory of universal destiny. Since the existence of divine sparks in men is explained on the basis of a figure from the spiritual world having been imprisoned in matter, all Gnostic pneumatics are simply parts of this divine personality fallen into the world, and in their totality they constitute this person.⁸

⁶ *Exc. Theod.* 78.2 (Valentinian). ET in *The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria*, ed. R. P. Casey (London, 1934; vol. 1 in *Studies and Documents*, eds. K. and S. Lake).

⁷ Often, though not always, associated with the Christian Jesus. Simon Magus, for instance, was himself the divine redeemer, though he could be described in terms like those used in the New Testament of Jesus. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.23.

⁸ Cf. the position of Helen in Simonian doctrine, Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.23. See also W. Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church* (ET London, 1971), pp. 159ff.

When the process of liberation of all divine sparks is completed, this divine personality can be reconstituted, and the whole world system will come to an end.⁹ Because of this the *archōns* jealously guard the *aeōns* over which they exercise authority, for by allowing the divine *pneuma* imprisoned in man to escape to its true abode, they are in effect sealing their own doom.

5. The Gnostic redeemer

One of the most characteristic features of almost all known Christian Gnostic systems is the presence of a divine redeemer as the agent through whom *gnōsis* is imparted and salvation obtained. In many Gnostic theories, this divine redeemer is identified with the Christian Jesus, is described in similar language to that used in the New Testament, and performs largely the same functions in relation to those who are saved. It is not surprising that this should have encouraged some to conclude that the redemptive function of Jesus in the New Testament found its origin in some sort of pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth.¹⁰

However, there is as yet no certain evidence for the existence of such a myth in pre-Christian times, while there is plenty of evidence to show that this kind of speculation was well-known in the post-Christian era. Almost all recent (non-German) scholars have concluded that there is no evidence for the existence of a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth, and Wilson speaks for many when he affirms that the Christian Jesus came first, and the Gnostic redeemer is 'simply a more radical interpretation of the Christian Jesus in terms of current belief'.¹¹

6. Gnostic knowledge (gnosis)

The ultimate goal of *gnōsis* was that the pneumatic might know the heavenly origin of his spirit and that through this knowledge he might at death be enabled to outwit the *archōns* and return to the sphere where he truly belonged. 'The redemption must therefore be of a spiritual nature; for they affirm that the inner and spiritual man is redeemed by means of knowledge, and that they, having acquired the knowledge of all things, stand henceforth in need of noth-

⁹ This fact provided the motivation for Gnostic missionary activity. Both Christians and Gnostics realized that the coming of the *eschaton* depended to some extent on their own evangelistic efforts, though for the Gnostics the full and final revelation was already present. But this need not lead to the conclusion of Schmithals, that the Christian mission of the first century was based on an earlier Gnostic mission (*Office of Apostle*, pp. 201f.).

¹⁰ This is predominantly the view of the Bultmannian school. See below for its historical background.

¹¹ R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem* (London, 1958), p. 225. Wilson also points out (p. 227) that in both form and function the Gnostic redeemer was quite different at almost every point from the Christian Jesus. For a judicious summary of the various arguments, see now also E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (London, 1973), pp. 163-169.

ing else. This, then, is the true redemption.¹² Thus *gnōsis* for the Gnostic was completely unlike *gnōsis* for either the Greek or the Jew, for it had scarcely any rational element at all.¹³ *Gnōsis* was a matter of knowledge of the 'Supreme God', and as such it included the understanding of all kinds of secrets relative to the world of spirit. Gnostic knowledge could not be isolated from its context, for besides being a store of theoretical information (albeit of a most peculiar esoteric nature), it was also an actual part of the subjective religious experience of the 'knower': 'the knowledge is not only an instrument of salvation but itself the very form in which the goal of salvation, i.e., ultimate perfection, is possessed.'¹⁴ The Gnostic did not 'know' because he had been taught, but because he was the recipient of some specific revelation. Such *gnōsis* imparted to the 'knower' an apprehension of the character of ultimate reality in the person of the 'Supreme God'. But since the Gnostic had within himself a divine *pneuma* this also meant that his knowledge was a knowledge of himself. When R. M. Grant isolates this as one of the peculiar distinguishing marks of Gnosticism, for 'Other religions are in varying measure God-centred. The Gnostic is self-centred',¹⁵ he is drawing out an antithesis which for the Gnostic can have had little meaning, for it was precisely because his *gnōsis* was self-centred that it must also be centred upon the person of the 'Supreme God'. It is just this very characteristic of Gnosticism that has enabled certain modern interpreters to view the whole phenomenon not only historically and religiously, but also ideologically.¹⁶

II

When we come to consider the possible origins of Gnostic thought, we find ourselves confronted with many and varied opinions. It is easy to recognize this or that Gnostic idea as having affinity with the concepts of some other religion, though it is difficult to pin down more precisely the actual origin of Gnostic thought. Scholars have seen the main influence in Gnosticism coming from at least four different directions, the Old Testament and Judaism, the Greek world, the Orient and the New Testament, and we shall consider each of these in turn.

¹² Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.21.4.

¹³ Cf. R. Bultmann, *TDNT* I, pp. 689ff.

¹⁴ Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, p. 35.

¹⁵ R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism & Early Christianity* (New York 1966²), p. 8.

¹⁶ Carl Jung, e.g., based much of his psychiatry on a study of Gnosticism. Cf., *inter alia*, his *Modern man in search of a Soul* (ET New York, 1933); *Aion: researches into the phenomenology of the Self* (ET New York, 1959). Cf. also G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (Zurich, 1951); and the final chapter of Jonas, *Gnostic Religion* (pp. 320ff.). Bultmann has been accused of displaying Gnostic tendencies: cf. W. Rordorf in *NTS* 13 (1966/67), pp. 351-362; G. L. Borchert in *EQ* 36 (1964), pp. 222-228.

1. The Old Testament and Judaism

Three areas call for attention here: the Old Testament itself, Philo and Hellenistic Judaism, and the Qumran Scrolls.

One very obvious feature of many of the dualistic Gnostic systems is the way they identify the God of the Old Testament with the Demiurge rather than with the 'Supreme God'. Because of the demonical character of the Demiurge, all such systems share a general hatred of and opposition to the Jewish God, and some of them show a marked reverence for his adversary, the serpent (Satan). The eventual outcome of this association was that Yahweh could be identified with his adversary. The way for such an interpretation had been prepared by people like the authors of Chronicles (1 Ch. 2: 1) and Jubilees (48: 2-3, cf. 17: 16ff.) who had substituted Satan for God from motives of reverence; and the idea is made quite explicit in the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John*.¹⁷ The figure of Sophia, a prominent character in Gnostic mythology, can also be traced in the Old Testament, where Wisdom is the first of Yahweh's creations (Pr. 8-9).¹⁸ The *archōns*, whose function it was in Gnostic thought to prevent the escape of pneumatics from the world to the realm of spirit, could also be found in the Old Testament, in the person of the *archons* of certain Psalms, where they appear as powers hostile to God (cf. Pss. 2: 2; 107: 40; 119: 161).

According to R. M. Grant, it is in the Gnostic development of such concepts that the origin of Gnosticism proper is to be found. He argues that the genesis of Gnostic ideas lies in the thwarted Jewish apocalyptic hopes of the late first century AD. Although there were those who clung onto a crudely materialistic expectation after the events of AD 70, the majority even of orthodox Jews were shaken by this unexpected turn of history, and out of this came a movement towards Gnostic thought, trying to re-interpret the Old Testament to show that it had hitherto been misunderstood.¹⁹

In a later presentation of this basic hypothesis, Grant allowed that it would be very difficult to derive Gnosticism directly from the mainstream of orthodox Judaism, but he still argued vigorously in favour of the elements of Jewish apocalyptic thought being transformed into an anti-cosmic dualism.²⁰ It is doubtful, however, whether this can be upheld as a complete explanation of the phenomenon. Perhaps some Jews did become Gnostics as a result of the vicissitudes of their history, but there are several

¹⁷ *Apoc. Jn.* 61: 5-13; 70: 28-72: 25, etc. Cf. the comments of S. Giverson in *Apocryphon Johannis* (Copenhagen, 1963; *Acta Theologica Danica* V), *in loc.* Also Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, pp. 92ff.

¹⁸ Cf. G. W. MacRae, in *Nov. Test.* 12 (1970), pp. 86-101.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 27ff. This is similar to a hypothesis put forward some thirty years earlier by F. C. Burkitt (*Church & Gnosis*, Cambridge, 1932), who argued that Gnosticism grew out of frustrated *Christian* eschatological hopes.

²⁰ R. M. Grant, in *OG*, pp. 141-154.

major difficulties standing in the way of a complete acceptance of Grant's theory. For a start, it simply is not true to the facts, since the events of AD 70 did not see the end of Jewish apocalyptic hopes, and at least two apocalypses (the Syriac *Baruch* and *4 Ezra*) appeared after the destruction of the temple.²¹ Nor is there any real justification for assuming that the faith and spirit of the Jewish people had been broken by such events: the historical outcome of the destruction of AD 70 was not despair but another revolution, leading up to the climax of AD 132.

There are also theological problems to be considered. H. Jonas has pointed out that if we assume Gnosticism to have grown out of Jewish ideas, this must involve 'a major revolt within Judaism'.²² The way in which Old Testament materials are utilized, as Yahweh becomes the Demiurge and the figure of Satan is exalted, while other notorious characters are given a place of special privilege, hardly suggests that those Gnostics who used these ideas could ever have been Jews, while the fact that Gnostic knowledge of the Old Testament tends to be limited to the first few chapters of Genesis indicates no more than that the Gnostics found a convenient cosmological framework in this section of the Old Testament. In view of the fairly wide knowledge of Jewish beliefs and customs in the Hellenistic world in general, it seems better to suppose that such elements entered Gnostic thought by some indirect route. So far as Grant's theory is concerned, if the events of AD 70 had played a formative part in the evolution of Gnostic doctrine, one would have expected them to have found at least a mention in Gnostic teaching. The Gnostics were already eager to devalue the God of the Old Testament, and his evident defeat with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple would surely have added fuel to their fire. As it is, however, they portray him not as a God who was unable to keep things under control, but as just the opposite: as a Demiurge who held a firm hold over the whole world!

That there are connections between Gnostic thought and the Old Testament is fairly clear, but there is no certain answer as yet to the precise relationship that may exist. In any event, we do well to bear in mind that, whoever the Gnostics had been, once they embraced Gnosticism they were neither Jews nor anything else, but simply Gnostics.²³

Another way in which Gnosticism has been connected with the Old Testament and Judaism is through the thought of the Alexandrian Jew, Philo. One of the difficulties here is that, while certain similarities can be traced between Philo and the Gnostics, it is difficult to know how far Philo was representative of the rest of the Diaspora, and how far he was nothing more than an eccentric individualist. Parallels can be drawn between the work of Philo

and that of his known predecessors which seem to suggest that he was modifying and developing their work.²⁴

One thing that is quite certainly known of Philo is that he was, first and foremost, a devoted adherent of the Jewish faith, and his aim was not to dilute that faith with heathen elements, but rather to give it a wider appeal by reinterpreting it after the ideas of contemporary philosophy. In doing so, he raised questions which plagued Christians for centuries afterwards, though Philo was among the first to bring to light the peculiar problems to which Gnosticism was one possible answer. The inherent problem of connecting the material and spiritual worlds had long been recognized by Philo's predecessors, and the Old Testament principle of Wisdom had been regarded as God's instrument of creation, though at this stage Wisdom was not thought to have an independent existence of its own. Faced with a somewhat similar concept in pagan thought, where the universe was held to have originated by the emanation of a divine Logos from Zeus, which was manifested in the pantheon, in mankind and in the world, Philo set about to develop the Old Testament idea of Wisdom and associate it with Logos. It was in this attempt to reconcile the immanence and the transcendence of God that he found most difficulty, for it was almost impossible to postulate the existence of intermediaries without also allowing them to have an independent existence of their own. In spite of this, Philo did not abandon the basic Old Testament position in which the 'Supreme God' is also the creator of this world.

This is not to say, however, that Philo's ideas are of little importance in the history of Gnosticism for, as Wilson points out,²⁵ several similarities can be traced between the two:

1. Both are dualistic, though Gnosticism more so than Philo.

2. Both connect the human soul with the divine, spiritual world, and see matter as a 'prison'.

3. In the attempt to reconcile the transcendence of God and the evil of the material world, both Gnostics and Philo postulate a series of intermediaries, although with Philo they are often but lip-service to the ideals of his Gentile readers, since he never actually says that the material world is evil.

4. The account of the creation of men in Philo is similar to that given by the Gnostic Saturninus.

5. The Gnostic division of humanity according to its capacity for receiving *gnōsis* can also be paralleled from Philo.

To these we may add another basic similarity of approach:

6. Both Philo and the Gnostics were embarrassed by the problem of *Heilsgeschichte* as the basis of the biblical story, and both failed to see how God, who is, in absolute existence, could participate in the

²¹ Cf. R. Haardt in *Wort und Wahrheit* 16 (1961), pp. 848-852.

²² H. Jonas in *OG*, p. 102.

²³ Cf. G. W. MacRae in *CBQ* 28 (1966), p. 329.

²⁴ Wilson, *Gnostic Problem*, pp. 34f.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 72f.

'becomingness' of ordinary history. While Philo sought to remove the idea of God entering history by an allegorization of the redemptive events of the Old Testament so that they became illustrations of timeless eternal truths, the Gnostics did the same thing by declaring that the centre of divine revelation was to be found not in certain historical events, but in an immediate and personal *gnōsis* of God, which was to be gained through mystical and ritual procedures.

The fact that there are so many similarities of belief²⁶ suggests that Philo may have some significance in the development of Gnostic ideas, but the real question here, as in relation to the New Testament, is not whether the same terms and ideas occur, but whether they are used in the same ways, and whether they meant the same thing for both Philo and the Gnostics. The general consensus of opinion seems to be that they do not, and that while Plato may display certain Gnosticizing tendencies, he was still firmly embedded in the Jewish soil from which he sprang.

A third area of Jewish religious thought which has been linked with Gnosticism is the kind of Judaism represented by the Qumran Scrolls. At first sight, there are many similarities between the Scrolls and Gnostic ideas. The idea of knowledge and knowing as a prerequisite for salvation is prominent in the Qumran documents, particularly in the Thanksgiving Hymns, and this, taken together with a dualistic doctrine, has suggested to some that it is here we must look for the origins of Gnosticism. R. M. Grant has noted that both the Qumran community and the early Gnostics laid great stress on calendrical ideas. The Dead Sea community followed their own calendar in opposition to the Jerusalem one, while it was also to calendrical calculations that the Gnostics owed their elaborate system of fours, sevens and thirties. When the Jewish rituals were discontinued after AD 70, the calendar ceased to have any practical application, and so the way was open for the Gnostics to give this data an esoteric application to the eternal truths of the unseen world.²⁷ This is an unlikely suggestion. There is little doubt that the prominence of the numbers four, seven and thirty in Gnostic mythology can be traced back to some form of calendrical or astrological calculation, but there is absolutely no evidence at all that the calendar upon which this was based was that of the Qumran community. Such evidence as we have suggests the opposite. The Qumran calendar was a solar system, in opposition to the lunar calculations of the Pharisees, but the thirty *aeons* of Valentinian speculation appear to be related to the number of days in the ideal *lunar* month.²⁸

²⁶ There are also, of course, many significant differences.

²⁷ *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, pp. 40ff. For a balanced assessment of the whole subject, see B. Reicke in *NTS* 1 (1954/55), pp. 137-141; also M. Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (London, 1956), pp. 252ff.

²⁸ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.16.1 reports a completely different explanation in mythological terms for the existence of the thirty *aeons*, but this complicated mythology was

On other grounds, most scholars reject the suggestion that there is any direct connection between the Qumran Scrolls and Gnosticism. There are at least six fundamental differences between the beliefs of the men of Qumran and Gnostic thought:

1. The Qumran God is the Old Testament Creator. There is no suggestion of any inferior Demiurge.

2. In Qumran, God is Creator of both good and evil, and matter is not considered evil in itself. There is therefore no need for *aeōns* to span the gulf between the spiritual and material worlds.

3. Qumran man was completely corrupt and sinful, and there is no suggestion that he had a divine spark in the Gnostic sense.

4. Although the terms 'knowledge', 'knowing', *etc.* are prominent in Qumran literature, there is no frequent mention of other important Gnostic terms ('sleep', 'awakening', *etc.*).

5. Qumran predestination was emphatically different from the Gnostic *heimarmenē*. Gnostic fatalism was negative, whereas Qumran predestination was positive, with its origin in the will of God.

6. There is no known mention of any person either corresponding to or resembling the Gnostic divine redeemer.

Yet despite these apparently clear-cut differences, scholars still find difficulty in defining the precise nature of the Qumran documents *vis-à-vis* Gnosticism. Wilson calls them 'pre-Gnostic', but not fully Gnostic in the proper sense of the word.²⁹ H. Ringgren is content to suggest that 'The Qumran sect could represent an early Jewish variation of the general tendency that manifested itself as Gnosticism. . . . But of course nothing can be proved. . . .'³⁰ In a study already referred to, M. Mansoor reached broadly similar conclusions, that the Qumran men were not Gnostics in the strict sense.³¹

It seems clear that at many points there was some kind of contact, however indirect, between Judaism and Gnosticism. Three possibilities suggest themselves as viable explanations:

1. Judaism itself may have exercised a direct influence, though this seems to be unlikely. Even those scholars who support this general position are inclined to see such Jewish influence more through apocalyptic and heterodox forms than through the normative faith.³²

2. Judaism may have been simply a clearing-house for ideas originating elsewhere, so that whatever Jewish colouring these ideas now seem to have is a purely secondary development.

probably concocted to explain a result reached on other premises, related to calendrical calculations.

²⁹ *Gnostic Problem*, p. 75.

³⁰ H. Ringgren in *OG*, pp. 383f.

³¹ *Loc. cit.* in n. 2 above. Bultmann maintains that the Dead Sea Scrolls prove his own theory of a pre-Christian Gnosticism, and Schmithals agrees that they 'presuppose a fully developed Gnosticism in their environment' (*Gnosticism in Corinth*, ET Nashville/New York, 1971, p. 76, n. 191).

³² Cf. G. Quispel in *Evan. Theol.* 14 (1954), pp. 1-11.

3. Jewish ideas may have been picked up by Gnostic teachers from their Hellenistic environment, in which there was a fairly general interest in Judaism as a religion. Thus it would be Judaism with a pagan flavour that the Gnostics knew and adapted for their own ends.

2. The Greek world

Classical Greek religion and culture was based on the existence of a particular form of government. A man had greater awareness of his position within the *polis* and his relationship to its gods than of his status as a man within the *kosmos*. From the time of Alexander the Great, this concept of existence had been gradually widened, and by the Hellenistic age the prevailing pagan religious thought placed man quite firmly in the context of the *kosmos* as a whole. Under the influence of Stoic idealism, the old philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and the others were fused into a new blend of universal philosophy, in which man held his place in the *kosmos* by virtue of his possession of *logos*, or reason, the creative principle emanating from Zeus which pervaded both the divine and the natural worlds.

In the prevailing syncretistic mood of the time, it is often difficult to isolate the specifically Greek elements, for in the composite theology which developed, considerable influence was felt from the East as its ideas became more widespread following the conquests of Alexander. The fact that Gnosticism grew up in this atmosphere makes it all the more difficult to decide whether the ostensibly 'Greek' elements of Gnostic thought did actually derive from classical Greek religiosity, or whether their true origin is to be sought in the interpretation of oriental concepts by the use of Greek terms and ideas. There was a strong tendency, especially in Alexandria, for Judaism to be reinterpreted according to Hellenistic ideas, and what Philo was doing for Judaism, others were no doubt doing for their own religions. In addition, it was coming to be recognized that many contemporary religious systems not only had similar beliefs, but actually had a common religious basis, for Babylonian and Persian influences had contributed to both Jewish and Greek thinking.

Bearing in mind these reservations as to the *ultimate* origin of any given principle, we may trace in the Greek world five major concepts which appear to have formed something of a basis for Hellenistic religious thought:

1. The natural outcome of Greek philosophical speculation was that *logos*, or reason, came to be accepted as the ultimate reality. The Stoics went so far as to put *logos* in the place of God, affirming that divine reality was simply the *logos* within man. Because 'God' was thus hailed as the supreme intelligence, the way to live aright was through knowledge, *gnōsis*, which for the classical Greek mind was a rational knowledge of ultimate realities. In this particular form, it could not be the source of the Gnostic doctrine of *gnōsis*, but it is easy to see how the im-

manent *logos* of the Stoics could become the magic *gnōsis* of Gnosticism.

With the transfer of religious allegiance from the *polis* to the *kosmos*, the Greek world underwent what has been called a 'failure of nerve',³³ as man considered himself in relation to the vastness of the universe. He realized that rational apprehension of its structure was not enough: what he needed was a personal salvation. As a panacea for this ailment the Mystery-cults and other exclusive brotherhoods arose, promising a subjective, individual, other-worldly salvation. Gnosticism was one of the most successful of these new religions, precisely because it took as its starting-point those terms and concepts which were hallowed in Hellenistic usage by a long and illustrious ancestry — although in the process, the ultimate significance of the terms was radically altered. The immanent *logos* or reason, which had been the possession of all men and the creative principle of the universe, was replaced for the Gnostic by a mysterious *gnōsis*, the prerogative of the chosen few, who were thus destined to escape the clutches of the hostile powers who ruled the material world.

2. Gentile religion had always involved a dualism of some kind, and the characteristic Greek dualism was one of two worlds, the visible and the invisible, the real and the ideal. A man could belong to both by reason of his being body and soul, but he could know the ultimate reality only by controlling his body so that his mind was free to contemplate the deity. Ultimately there could be no deliverance for him unless the substance of his being could somehow be changed. How Gnosticism took up and explained these desires for transformation is too obvious to require explanation.

3. The basic motive of Hellenistic religion was not so much faith in some divine reality, as an awareness of the Ideal, and a conviction that the visible world was only a shadow of the real one. This was the classical doctrine of Plato, and it has been argued that it is also the basis of certain parts of the New Testament, notably the Epistle to the Hebrews.³⁴ The idea that the world was but a shadow of the true reality was certainly different from the Old Testament view, in which the world was the creation of an almighty God and a direct testimony to his own character. But this conception of the visible and the ideal world was only a short step from the Gnostic idea of material and spiritual worlds and this, when combined with the idea of matter as evil, could be a natural starting-point for the Gnostic idea of a strict antithesis between the two worlds. Whether this Greek concept was the actual source of the Gnostic development we cannot say. But it is easy to understand how the latter could be seen as a logical development of the

³³ The expression of G. Murray, *The Five Stages of Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1925²), p. 155.

³⁴ Cf. J. Hering, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Neuchâtel, 1954; Commentaire du N.T. XII), p. 10.

Greek view by those who had become disenchanted with it.

4. As a corollary to the belief in a higher, ideal world, Hellenistic religion had a strong inclination towards sacramentalism, for it was soon assumed that the ideal world could be actualized in this world by the performance of certain rites and in the presence of particular objects, so that men could feel themselves to be in direct contact with it. This aspect of contemporary belief was adopted most enthusiastically by the Mystery-cults, which based their initiatory ceremonies on all manner of weird performances. But for the Gnostic belief *per se*, sacramentalism was unnecessary. By his possession of the secret *gnōsis* a man could be in permanent and close contact with the spiritual world. Nor was this merely a theoretical position, for many Gnostics were also antinomians, believing that by virtue of their real destiny as parts of the world of *pneuma* they were exempted from the laws normally governing mankind. Indeed, it was their positive duty to overthrow these laws, which had been given by the Demiurge to keep men in permanent subjection to material forces.

5. Also inherent in Hellenistic religious thought was a sense of mysticism, for in his possession of the *logos* a man was somehow united with the divine principle itself. This mystical strain was developed in the Mysteries, according to which a man became fully divine when fully initiated, thus acquiring the ability to escape from the present evil world. The Gnostics built more on the Stoic idea that the *logos* was immanent in man from the start. Every elect man actually possessed a divine spark or *pneuma* from the beginning, though until he was enlightened by *gnōsis* he may not be aware of its existence.

From this brief analysis of some of the major elements of contemporary Hellenistic religious thought it is clear that Gnosticism owed much to the Greek religions. This is not surprising, for it was in a predominantly Greek world that Gnosticism acquired its classical form. But there must always remain the possibility that the Gnostics, like Philo and, to a large extent the early Christians, used Greek language and forms of expression to expound ideas that were not in themselves Hellenistic.

To be continued
