

The Gnostic Tradition in Relation to Greek Philosophy

by
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The idea that there is an essential connection between gnosticism, on the one hand, and Greek philosophy, on the other hand, is rooted in the very sources that first made gnosticism a subject of modern study. Especially Hippolytus of Rome, writing around the year 230, constructed his main heresiological treatise, his *Refutation of All Heresies*, around the explicit claim that the heretics represented a direct continuation of the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers, that is, they were doing no more than putting old philosophy into new skins. For example, he claimed that "the entire system of [the Sethian] doctrine ... is (derived) from the ancient theologians [that is, philosophers] Musaeus, and Linus, and Orpheus" (*haer.* 5.20.4 Wendland);¹ and that Simon Magus and Marcion borrowed from Empedocles (6.11.1, 7.29.2), Basilides from Aristotle (7.14.1), Valentinus and his followers from Pythagoras and Plato (6.21.1, 6.29.1), and so on.

The first book of Hippolytus's *Refutation* is a compendium of philosophical doctrines, beginning with the teaching of Thales, prefaced by a clear statement of the author's purpose: "In the commencement, therefore," says Hippolytus (1.pref.11), "we shall declare who first, among the Greeks, pointed out (the principles of) natural philosophy. For from these especially have they furtively taken their views who have first propounded these heresies, as we shall subsequently prove when we come to compare them one with another. Assigning to each of those who take the lead among

philosophers their own peculiar tenets, we shall publicly exhibit these heresiarchs as naked and unseemly." Unfortunately for the history of scholarship, Hippolytus's book 1 was transmitted separately from the remaining books, as a kind of handbook on Greek philosophy (attributed not to Hippolytus, but to Origen).² Book 1 was first published in 1701, but it was not until 1851, when books 4-10 were published from the only surviving manuscript of them, that Hippolytus's working out of his purpose could be studied in detail.

Hippolytus might well have been inspired in the conception of his work by a passage in his predecessor Irenaeus's *Detection and Overthrow of What Is Falsely Called Knowledge*, written in the 170s or 180s. Irenaeus accused Valentinus and his followers of "bring[ing] together the things which have been said by all those who were ignorant of God, and who are termed philosophers; and sewing together, as it were, a motley garment out of a heap of miserable rags, they have, by their subtle manner of expression, furnished themselves with a cloak which is really not their own" (*haer.* 2.14.2). Irenaeus goes on (2.14.2-6) to provide a brief catalog of Greek philosophers, beginning with Thales and ending with "the Pythagoreans," comparing a small sample of philosophical tenets with specific features of Valentinian theology.

Irenaeus's work was printed very early, by Erasmus in 1526. Even without the author's own explicit suggestion concerning connections between Valentinianism and Greek philosophy, it is impossible for a reader who knows

the classical tradition to overlook the fact that at least Valentinus and his followers stood in some kind of continuity with that tradition, at least its Platonist component. Hence it is no surprise that the editor of what became the first standard edition of Irenaeus, René Massuet (1710), included with his edition an essay, “De Haereticis, Quos Libro Primo Recenset Irenaeus, Eorumque Actibus, Scriptis et Doctrina,” in which he demonstrated the connection between the gnostic doctrines and Platonism (Massuet 1734, 2:1-64, esp. pp. 1-41).³

A century later, Ferdinand Christian Baur, whom Kurt Rudolph (1987, 30) has called “the real founder of research into gnosis,” praised Massuet’s achievement, that is, “daß man an die Stelle einer verkehrten Richtung des Willens und eines absichtlichen Widerspruchs gegen die christliche Wahrheit, ... eine unselige Verirrung des Verstandes setzte [*sic*], und die Gnostiker wurden wenigstens als Fanatiker betrachtet, welchen auch andere Zeiten ähnliche Erscheinungen einer wahnsinnigen Schwärmerei zur Seite stellen” (Baur 1835, 2). But Baur also summed up concisely the criticism of the position represented by Massuet regarding Platonist connections, as follows (1835, 3): »Je weniger aber aus dieser Quelle allein [d.h. aus dem Platonismus] ... die ganze Erscheinung auf eine befriedigende Weise abgeleitet werden konnte, desto größer mußte noch immer das Uebermaas des Excentrischen und Abnormen bleiben, das nur auf Rechnung jenes fanatischen Aberwizes [*sic*] kommen konnte.” Baur himself was inclined to the increasingly common view that what was peculiar to gnosticism had its origin in the Orient, specifically »die orientalische Religionsphilosophie.” (See further Marksches 1994b, 62-64.)

During the century and a half since the appearance of Baur’s book, much has changed regarding our understanding of gnosticism, but not much has changed regarding our evaluation of its philosophical element. To

quote Einar Thomassen (1991, 69), who has recently published a series of valuable studies of the philosophical element in Valentinianism, “it has been recognized that there is an undeniable philosophical component in Valentinian Gnosticism. About the nature, extent and significance of this component, however, there is no common opinion.” I do not expect in this essay to make much of a contribution to the common opinion. The problems are too complex and as yet too little studied. My goal is to try to clarify from a methodological point of view what the main problems are, and I want to begin by posing the simple question: why is this topic interesting within the study of gnosticism? What does it mean that we can find traces of Greek philosophical ideas here and there in the gnostic sources? (Cf. the *Fragestellung* in Aland 1977, 34.)

One answer to these questions is that occasional traces of Greek philosophical ideas mean very little and are, in fact, of relatively little interest. I want to dispose immediately of this answer – which is not entirely incorrect – in order to clear the way for focusing on the answers that are more meaningful and interesting. It is well known that to a certain extent the Greek philosophical tradition became a part of the common stock of knowledge during the Hellenistic period. School children were taught that even Homer’s myths were but an ancient way of doing philosophy, and thereby they learned something about the philosophical tradition that Homer was supposedly teaching. In the sphere of religion too there is a marked coincidence of features from the philosophical tradition. It is not only in gnostic texts that we find traces of Greek philosophical influence, but also in Christian, Jewish, and pagan religious texts. To the extent that the occurrence of this kind of influence merely reflects the common thought-world of the Greco-Roman period, particularly of the period’s educated representatives, its appearance in the

gnostic sources is interesting and meaningful only because the entire phenomenon is an inherently important topic of the sociology of knowledge in the ancient world. And of course it is necessary to recognize this characteristic of the sources in order to interpret them correctly in their ancient context.⁴

What *are* we looking for then? In the case of specifically demonstrable influence, what we are looking for is *essential* influence; that is, influence that is not merely a matter of shared common knowledge, or of superficial or extraneous contact with the source of the influence. To put it more concretely, we are looking for evidence that people with professional philosophical training became engaged at some stage and in some manner – in the development of gnosticism. (See the survey of research by Rudolph 1973, 12-25.)

Such evidence would be interesting and meaningful in two principal respects. First and foremost is the possibility that the elusive origins of gnosticism might be found somewhere in the Greek philosophical tradition. I will return to the question of this possibility later. And second is the possibility that some gnostic groups, or some individuals within such groups, thought of themselves in some sense – perhaps even primarily – as philosophers, and used philosophy as a basic means of clarifying or extending their thinking about the cosmos and their place in it.

In several obvious ways, the latter possibility would in fact not be so far out of line with some of the information that we have about the gnostic movement. The picture that is given by our earliest heresiological source, Irenaeus, is one that is reminiscent of philosophical schools: individual teachers expounding their doctrines to a circle of disciples or students, some of whom carry on the tradition, perhaps with innovations of their own. It is worth recalling here that even the term “heresy,” Greek *hairesis*, which came to be so closely associated with the

gnostic tradition in Christian polemics against it, was formerly a neutral term that referred simply to differences of opinion that defined a school of thought within a larger professional movement. Heinrich von Staden (1982) has shown this clearly with respect to the Greek medical tradition, where the *haireseis iatrikai* were distinct groups or schools of thought within the tradition, distinguished by differences of doctrine and practice, but without any animosity toward one another. Although the neutral word “heresy” began, especially in second-century Christian usage, to take on an increasingly pejorative connotation (heresies are bad by definition, opposed to unity, which is good), even as late as the fourth century we find the term sometimes still used in its completely neutral sense, for example by Constantine the Great (see von Staden 1982, 96-97).⁵

It is also worth recalling here that neither the use of myth nor the adoption of religious practice, such as characterize the gnostic sources, necessarily would have excluded the gnostics from being perceived by others as being philosophers. Plato, in the *Timaeus*, legitimized the use of myth as a vehicle of philosophizing (if albeit a difficult one), and it was common knowledge that the great sage Homer used myths to pass on eternal truths. I trust that the association of philosophy and religious practice from the classical period down through Late Antiquity needs no special elaboration here.

Finally in this list of more or less obvious ways in which it might be possible to characterize the gnostics as a part of the ancient philosophical tradition, there is at least the undeniable banal philosophical component that is discernible throughout our sources. And we may recall that Plotinus saw the gnostics with whom he had contact in the third century as being in some sense philosophers, although he criticized their philosophical views severely, as “perverted Platonism” (Mansfeld 1981, 314).

Obviously, none of these data is sufficient to warrant the conclusion that the gnostics understood themselves to be philosophers or were understood by others to be philosophers. At most, these observations could – if developed and corroborated – be used to make a characterization of the gnostics as philosophers possible and reasonable.

But we are now at the crux of the problem: definition. What would it mean to speak of “the gnostics as philosophers,” or to say that “the gnostics understood themselves to be philosophers or were understood by others to be philosophers”? In fact we have two problematic terms to deal with here, “gnostics” and “philosophers.” And we have three different perspectives to sort out: first, the ancient self-understanding or self-definition of the individuals involved, that is, how those individuals thought about themselves, what groups and traditions they identified themselves with, and so on; second, the ancient outsider’s understanding of the individuals involved, that is, how those individuals were recognized by others; and third, the modern scholar’s understanding of the individuals involved, which will entail the first two perspectives, but perhaps also other perspectives besides. Of course this issue of perspective in defining groups of individuals in antiquity is not peculiar to the study of gnostics and philosophers.

Concerning the gnostics, it is all too well known that we are in a particularly poor position with regard to group definition from *any* perspective, insider, outsider, or modern. I will return to this issue later, along with the question of the origins of gnosticism. Concerning philosophy, we are in a much better position (Hahn 1989, with extensive bibliography). Here we have clear evidence, from both inside and outside, that groups recognized themselves as different from one another and understood clearly the reasons why they differed. This consciousness included an awareness of

being part of a tradition of thought, passed on from teacher to pupil. This tradition was such a genuine phenomenon of the sociology of knowledge, that we moderns, looking from a historically distant perspective, can sometimes see how a philosophical tradition was transformed over time, even as its adherents considered themselves to be passing it on faithfully, only modernizing it. “In most periods of intellectual development until quite modern times,” John Dillon has written (1977, xv), “one is influenced primarily by the doctrine of one’s own teacher, and one sees the development of philosophy up to one’s own time through his eyes. One may indeed read the original texts, but one reads them initially under the guidance of one’s teacher, who read them under *his* teacher, and so on. Only if this process is borne in mind does the curious distortion of Platonic doctrine which we find in our surviving authorities become comprehensible. To talk of Plotinus, then, being influenced by the Stoics or by Posidonius [first century BCE], or Albinus being influenced by Antiochus [second century BCE], or Plutarch by Xenocrates [fourth century BCE] is ... grossly to oversimplify the situation. Plutarch is principally influenced by [his teacher] Ammonius, Albinus by [his teacher] Gaius, Plotinus by [his teacher] Ammonius Saccas.”

I have given this long quotation from the preface to Dillon’s book, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, because I think this work is the best existing treatment of the philosophical tradition that by general consensus is most relevant to the study of gnosticism: Middle Platonism, that is, the Platonist tradition as it developed from roughly the end of the so-called Old Academy, up to Plotinus; this period of the Platonist tradition is represented, for example, by Antiochus of Ascalon, Eudorus of Alexandria, Philo, Plutarch, Albinus, Numenius, and Ammonius Saccas, to name just the better known figures. According to Dillon (1977, 8),

the *Timaeus*, in which Plato used myth as his vehicle for describing the creation of the cosmos and the world, "remained the most important single dialogue during the Middle Platonic period." This fundamental work on cosmogony left a number of issues unresolved, however, and I will use Dillon's list of the principal problems as a means of characterizing briefly some of the Middle Platonic cosmogonic concerns that are most relevant to the issue of gnosticism. It should be noted that Middle Platonism did have wider concerns in the sphere of physics, as well as concerns in ethics, and logic (see Dillon 1977, 43-51).

Of the following six problems left unsolved by the *Timaeus*, the first four should resonate especially with students of gnosticism. Dillon writes (1977, 6-7): "The principal problems left by the *Timaeus*, problems which Plato himself must have declined to solve, seem to be the following: (1) Whether the cosmogonic process described is to be thought of as taking place at any point in Time; (2) the identity of the Demiurge; (3) the identity of the Young Gods to whom the Demiurge delegates the creation of the lower part of the human soul; (4) the nature of the activity that may properly be assigned to the Receptacle; (5) the manner in which any combination of immaterial triangles can create solid substance; (6) what relation these basic triangles can have to the Ideas in their traditional form."

Someone who is not familiar with Plato's later works, including the *Timaeus*, might be surprised by the appearance here of immaterial triangles as related to the Platonic forms and serving as the basis of solid substance. But there is good evidence that in his later years Plato tended to think about the Ideas more and more in mathematical terms, and this Pythagorean influence on Platonist thought is one of the characteristics of the Middle Platonic period. As Dillon puts it (1977, 51), "The view that Plato is essentially a pupil, creative or

otherwise, of Pythagoras grows in strength and elaboration among all classes of Platonist, attaining its extreme form among those who unequivocally declared themselves to be Pythagoreans." The closeness of the link between Platonism and these first and second-century "Neopythagoreans" is such that Dillon felt required to devote a chapter to them (1977, 341-383), thereby demonstrating that they are in some sense a part of the phenomenon of Middle Platonism, and certainly, in his view, the main inspiration for Plotinus, founder of Neoplatonism, the next phase in the history of Platonism.

In his valuable studies of Valentinianism, Einar Thomassen (1980, 1989, 1991, 1993; Thomassen & Painchaud 1989) has drawn resourcefully on Middle Platonic and Neopythagorean sources to illuminate aspects of Valentinian cosmogony and cosmology. In a 1991 study especially, he has taken the particular topic of the origin of matter as a case study, to attempt "to show that the Valentinian systems contain a theory of physics adopted from Pythagorean sources" (1991, 78). He maintains that "this theory is applied consistently and deliberately; it belongs to the essence of what the Valentinian systems are intended to say and does not merely provide accidental vocabulary. In a sense, therefore, Valentinianism is a variant of Neopythagoreanism."

We might quibble over whether it is over-precise to speak here of Neopythagoreanism specifically, rather than Middle Platonism generally, but that is an issue that can be best pursued only on the basis of additional case studies such as Thomassen has provided.⁶ For his study consists of twelve specific points of comparison between the Valentinian doctrine of matter and Neopythagorean theory that have to do not just with "functional similarities of the kind which can be shown to exist between monistic systems of derivation and emanation everywhere, regardless of cultural and histori-

cal context,” but rather with “specific technical terms which demonstrate a direct historical connection between the systems we compare” (Thomassen 1991, 70-71). His twelve points of comparison are admittedly not all of equal value, but in sum I, for my part, find his argument convincing. And to me one implication of his study is that somewhere along the way of development of Valentinianism, some Valentinian thinker or thinkers were at least as much professional philosophers as they were Valentinians, or perhaps even were professional philosophers who became Valentinians. That is, here we have evidence of gnostics, in this case Valentinian gnostics, who may have thought of themselves in some sense – perhaps even primarily – as philosophers, and used philosophy as a basic means of clarifying or extending their thinking about the cosmos and their place in it.

Before turning to the question of *where* along the way of development of Valentinianism some thinker or thinkers used professional philosophizing to work out certain cosmological details, I want to look at another feature of Valentinian myth that Thomassen (1993) has examined in this connection, namely, the figure of the demiurge, perhaps the most obviously Platonic feature in all of Valentinianism. But despite its obviously Platonic derivation, the result of Thomassen’s study of the demiurge in the Valentinian myth as a whole is “the conclusion that in Valentinianism, ... where Platonist influence can be demonstrated, the Demiurge is in fact the least Platonic component of the system” (Thomassen 1993, 243). The cosmogonic *role* of the Platonic demiurge is played out in Valentinian myth by the pleromatic Jesus and especially by Sophia, who creates the demiurge and then uses him as a mere tool in her work. Thus the demiurge’s “position in the Valentinian system is ... redundant from the point of view of a Platonist physics,” and Thomassen asks what, then, *is* the significance of this figure, and why is it termed “Demiurge” at all (1993, 242-243)?

The answers to these questions are implied already in the view of the general history of Valentinianism that Thomassen presupposes (1993, 240-243), the view that Valentinianism is – historically and systematically – a revision of an older gnostic mythic system. This view takes seriously Irenaeus’s observation that “Valentinus adapted the fundamental principles of the so-called gnostic school of thought [*haireisis*] to his own kind of system” (*haer.* 1.11.1).⁷ “Apparently,” Thomassen suggests of the Valentinians (1993, 242-243), “they felt a need to incorporate into their theology a version of the common Gnostic depreciated creator and world ruler mainly, though not exclusively, associated with the Jewish Scriptures ... They needed to retain such a figure in their system although a function for him could not be derived from the philosophical premises of that system.” But I would like to ask, why not assume that the Valentinians took their Platonist tradition equally seriously and therefore felt a need, perhaps even a philosophical necessity, to incorporate into their cosmology a version of the Platonic demiurge? One could argue that the retention of the concept and the use of the technical term “demiurge” itself indicate the Valentinian indebtedness to the Platonist tradition, within which, it may be recalled, the identity of the demiurge was philosophically problematic. In that case, the Valentinian solution was to identify the Platonic demiurge, accepted as a given, with the creator god of pre-Valentinian gnostic myth.

Let us pause a moment here with the demiurge. Thomassen begins his essay on this topic (1993, 226) with the observation that “the term ‘demiurge’ is in common use [among scholars] as a designation for the creator figure in Gnostic mythologies.” Indeed – if I may borrow the title of an essay by Michael A. Williams – “the demonizing of the demiurge” has typically been taken as the hallmark of gnosticism, “*the* innovation of Gnostic myth” (Williams 1992,

73, emphasis added). For his contribution to the Quispel Festschrift in 1981, Jaap Mansfeld had undertaken a search for "Greek antecedents of Gnosticism" by examining Greek philosophical literature from the classical and Hellenistic periods for traces of what he called "bad world and demiurge: a 'gnostic' motif from Parmenides and Empedocles to Lucretius and Philo" (Mansfeld 1981, 261). Theoretically, the world can be held to be either good or bad, while the demiurge too can be either good or bad, or he can be held not to exist at all. Of the six possible permutations that result schematically from these possibilities, Mansfeld found evidence for only one that posited a bad world: starting from this premise, the Epicurean view was that there is no demiurge. The belief that the world is not good and therefore the demiurge is evil, Mansfeld stated (1981, 313), the "position ... of the Gnostics, is not that of any Greek school of thought."

As useful as Mansfeld's survey is for showing, as Roelof van den Broek summed it up a few years later (1983, 66), that "the spirit of Gnosticism cannot be explained from Platonism nor from any other Greek school of thought," there is an inherent problem with focusing on "the demiurge" in this context. In addition to suggesting that in Valentinianism the Platonic demiurge finds his systematic place only through assimilation to a pre-Valentinian gnostic creator figure, such as Ialdabaoth, for example, Thomassen has also demonstrated that "there is no certain attestation of the word *δημιουργός* used of the Gnostic creator *before* Valentinianism," and, as he goes on to point out, "this [non-attestation] constitutes one argument against seeing the demiurge of the *Timaieus* as a source for the early Gnostic creator figure" (Thomassen 1993, 228, emphasis added).

For his contribution to the Jonas Festschrift in 1978, Arthur Hilary Armstrong had undertaken a survey of Greek philosophy somewhat

similar to Mansfeld's, but wider and more general in scope. His overriding belief at the time was that "we are dealing here [in 'alienated Gnosticism'] with a distinct way of feeling and thinking about God, man and the world which has little in common with any way of feeling and thinking to be found among Greek philosophers" (Armstrong 1978, 99). But his first conclusion was that "the whole question of the relationship of Gnosis and Greek philosophy should be approached very cautiously, with a clear definition of what is meant by Gnosis and a precise and detailed study of individual systems and thinkers on both sides in their historical context" (1978, 123).

We are now ready to return to several issues that were deliberately postponed earlier. First, the question of where along the development of Valentinianism some thinker or thinkers used professional philosophizing to work out certain cosmological details of their myth. Reconstructing anything like a history of Valentinianism is a notoriously difficult task. The Nag Hammadi codices have added extremely valuable new primary source material to the equation,⁸ but they thereby also make the solution that much more complex. The crux of the matter, of course, is to determine how much of what we know of Valentinianism is to be attributed to Valentinus himself, and how much to his followers. The question is all the more interesting if what we are asking is, in effect, whether Valentinus was the one who brought to bear on the gnostic myth a professional philosophical concern with cosmological matters (and probably other matters as well). If so, it would be of crucial importance to know whether Valentinus was schooled first in philosophy or first in gnostic myth and whatever else went along with it.⁹ Since it is clear from what little we do know about Valentinus that he was also a Christian, while the gnostics with whom he had contact might not have been, the Christian tradition too must be added to the mix-

ture, and the same biographical question applies. Of course, it is most likely that we will never know the answers to these questions, whether they are applied to Valentinus himself or to one or more of his followers, but that sad fact does not absolve us from having to make the effort to imagine concretely the various implications of the likely historical reality of which our extant sources are the result.

This brief musing on the quest for the historical Valentinus as the Middle Platonist (or Neopythagorean) reformer of the gnostic tradition leads to the two remaining issues that were postponed, namely, the questions of gnostic origins and the definition of gnosticism. So far in this essay, I have been using the terms “gnostic” and “gnosticism” mostly in a rather broad way that I myself am no longer comfortable with. I am uncomfortable because I am not always certain what I mean by these terms, and even more so because I am not certain what others might understand me to mean by them. This discomfort was brought on primarily because of the work of Bentley Layton, who has just recently published an essay that has had a long period of gestation, his “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism” (1995).¹⁰ Following up mainly on the work of Hans-Martin Schenke (1974; 1981) and Morton Smith (1981), Layton’s aim is, in his own words (1995, 334 [§ 1]), “to propose a means of identifying the data that can be used to write a history of the Gnostics, and thus to define the term Gnosticism.”

The word “gnostic,” *gnōstikos*, seems to have been coined by Plato, in the dialog *Statesman* (258e), to serve as an opposite to *praktikos* (“practical”) in the context of a discussion of different kinds of *epistēmē* (“science”). Meaning roughly “furnishing the act of knowing,” “knowledge-supplying,” “leading to knowledge,” or “capable of knowledge,” *gnōstikos* is attested after Plato only as a more or less technical term in the Platonist tradition, where it

was applied “only to mental endeavors, faculties, or components of personality ... never ... to the human person as a whole” (Layton 1995, 337 [§ 8]; cf. 1987, 8). Hence the Christian anti-heretical authors’ use of the word to refer to people – *hoi gnōstikoi*, “the Gnostics” – stands out as something new and strange in the lexical history of this word. The phrase *hē gnōstikē hairesis*, “the Gnostic school of thought” to which Irenaeus refers at the beginning of his account of Valentinus (*haer.* 1.11.1), might provide an intermediate step in this lexical development. If a group of like-minded people came to be called, or called themselves, *hē gnōstikē hairesis*, it would be a short step for the members of that group to be called, or to call themselves, *hoi gnōstikoi*. Layton’s claim, supported by a careful collection of evidence, is that, as the term was applied to people, “Gnostic” was primarily “a self-designating proper name referring to a hairesis,” meaning “belonging to the ‘Knowledge-Supplying’ school of thought” (1995, 338 [§ 9]), that is, a school of thought in the neutral professional sense that I referred to near the beginning of this essay. The characteristic doctrine of this group is described by Irenaeus in his first book, chapter 29, which very closely resembles the early portion of the *Apocryphon of John*, and which he introduces with the words (*haer.* 1.29.1): “I now proceed to describe the principal opinions held by ... a multitude of Gnostics [who] have sprung up.”

One result of Layton’s analysis is that the ancient Gnostics, the only group that can properly be designated by this term, are to be identified with the Sethians as they were delineated by Hans-Martin Schenke (1974; 1981; cf. 1983, and 1987, 7-11 [“Die Entdeckung des Sethianismus”]). And hence most of what we know about the Gnostic tradition comes from the corpus of “Sethian Gnostic” (or “Gnostic Sethian”) writings known mainly from the Nag Hammadi codices (Layton 1995, 342-343 [§

19]). Strictly speaking, then, the term “Gnosticism” should be used only to describe the general characteristics of the Gnostics thus defined (1995, 343 [§ 23]). In my remaining remarks I will refrain from using the word “gnosticism” at all, and I will use the word “Gnostic” only in the more or less precisely defined way that Layton has proposed in his “Prolegomena,” that is, to refer only to what students of the relevant literature are probably all already used to referring to as the “Sethian Gnostic” tradition.¹¹

Accepting all that has been said, the testimony of Irenaeus that “Valentinus adapted the fundamental principles of the so-called Gnostic school to his own kind of system” proves that the Gnostics predated Valentinus. We do not know whether Valentinus came into contact with Gnostics already in Egypt or not until he moved to Rome (Layton 1987, 217-221), but in either case this contact is evidence for the existence of the Gnostics already in the early second century. The question that is of prime interest here is whether or not it is possible to imagine these Gnostics as a philosophical school, or as having originated from a philosophical school. This is no simple question to answer, since our earliest datable source for the Gnostic tradition is Irenaeus, who wrote around 180. We have no way of being sure what the Gnostics were about in the early second century, let alone before that (cf. Layton 1987, 5-8).

Certainly the picture of the Gnostics that we obtain from the extant sources that are most closely related to Irenaeus’s account, especially

the *Apocryphon of John*, does not give an impression of being essentially philosophical.¹² The Gnostic works that might more easily give such an impression, especially the *Three Steles of Seth*, *Zostrianos*, *Marsanes*, and *Allogenes*, seem clearly to belong to a much later period, the third century, with the development of Neoplatonism (see, e.g., Pearson 1984). On the other hand, the common judgement that the second-century Gnostics by contrast had very little in common with the philosophical tradition is based largely on an estimation of the creation myth that is a parody of Genesis, as well as on a difference in “spirit” between the two traditions, mainly having to do with the valuation of the world and its creator. But if one looks away from the biblical traditions featuring a demiurge-like figure and looks rather at the part of the Gnostic myth that precedes the events of Genesis, the part concerned with the generation and structure of the supercelestial realm, one finds more that is akin to the cosmological interests of Middle Platonism. There might be an issue of “optics” here (Jonas 1963, 320): different aspects of the Gnostic texts tend to stand out as more essential or less essential depending on whether the reader is steeped in Middle Platonism or in biblical literature, or in the phenomenology of the early Heidegger.

As for the incompatibility of spirit between the Gnostic and the philosophical traditions, I must confess that personally I would find it no *more* surprising if the Gnostic tradition sprang (at least in part) from Middle Platonism than if it sprang from Judaism or from Christianity.

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Notes

1. Except where noted otherwise, English translations of Hippolytus and Irenaeus are by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vols. 1 and 5.
2. On the manuscript tradition and attribution, see Marcovich 1986, 1-17.
3. Cf. Baur 1835, 3. I do not have access to a copy of Maset's 1710 edition, only that of 1734.
4. Böhlig 1975, esp. pp. 13-15 and 32-36 (= 1989, 254-256 and 271-274). Cf. van den Broek 1983, 66: "It would have been strange if the situation had been otherwise and the gnostics had not made use of the cosmological and anthropological speculations of their environment." Earlier Barbara Aland, after a case study of the *Apophysis megale* (1977, 73): "Wenn philosophische Formelemente in gnostische Texte übernommen werden, so geschieht das entweder in bloß additiver Übernahme und ohne wirkliche Einsicht in die Konsequenz dieses Tuns – das ist der Fall im Apophysisbericht – oder das philosophische System wird bewußt benutzt, aber an entscheidender Stelle durchbrochen und dadurch in sein Gegenteil verkehrt – das ist der Fall im Valentinianismus" (cf. Marksches 1994b, 107).
5. Von Staden (p. 97 with n. 116) quotes Eus. *h.e.* 10.5.21 (where Eusebius quotes Constantine as referring to the true Christian church as "the universal *hairesis*"), but he refers (p. 206 n. 116) only to 8.17.6 (which is, however, also a relevant example). Modern research on the understanding of "heresy" in the early Christian period is concisely surveyed by Desjardins (1991).
6. Cf. Armstrong 1978, 101-103; Stead 1969.
7. Trans. Layton 1987, 225; cf. pp. 217-222 and 267-275.
8. Especially the *Tripartite Tractate*, *A Valentinian Exposition*, and the *Gospel of Truth* (especially if the latter work is correctly attributed to Valentinus).
9. Cf. Armstrong 1978, 100, on the issue of influence. Different reconstructions of Valentinus's intellectual and theological development, of the relationship between him and his "school," are of course also possible: see now esp. Marksches 1992, 1994a, 1994b; earlier Orbe 1955-1966, 2:268-273.
10. Previously announced as "The History of the Gnostics," intended originally for publication in *Journal of Biblical Literature* ca. 1989 (Layton 1989, 149-150 n. 17). His book *The Gnostic Scriptures* (1987) already presupposed to a certain extent the method and conclusions of his prolegomena, without discussing them explicitly.
11. I do not mean to gloss over the difficulties associated with the delimitation of a religious group or movement such as Schenke has proposed. He himself never really carried his investigations in this area forward substantively after 1974, thus leaving it largely to others to test his proposed hypothesis (Layton [1995, 342 (§ 19)] ac-

cepts the results of Schenke's method as "merely provisional"), or simply to accept it as many have done. Perhaps the best example of a further elaboration of Schenke's hypothesis, without questioning his method, is Turner 1986; see also Sevrin 1986.

12. But Layton (1987, 5-8) has written of "the philosophi-

cal character of classic gnostic scripture within the context of Greek philosophy ... The formulation of the gnostic myth ultimately drew on Platonist interpretations of the myth of creation in Plato's *Timaeus*, as combined with the book of Genesis." Cf. 1995, 337-339 (§§ 9-11) and 347-348 (§ 29); Turner 1986, 59.