

THE GNOSTICS AND HISTORY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gnosticism was a dualistic heresy which proclaimed salvation through *gnosis* or esoteric knowledge. It was a heresy which flourished in the 2nd century A.D. Whether it was already in existence in the 1st century or even in the pre-Christian era is a matter of great controversy.¹

Until 1945 our major sources of information on the Gnostics were: the church fathers;² and the late Mandaic texts.³ Then in that year a spectacular cache of 13 Coptic Gnostic codices was found at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.⁴ These now give us a substantial corpus of early documents from the Gnostics themselves.

The leading Gnostic heretics, as we know them from the church fathers, were as follows: 1) *Simon Magus* (cf. Acts 8:4-25) of Samaria was considered to be the arch-Gnostic. The fathers report that he led about with him a Phoenician prostitute named Helen, whom he audaciously proclaimed as the Mother of All. 2) Simon's disciple was another Samaritan, *Menander*, who flourished c. A.D. 100. 3) Menander in turn influenced *Saturninus* (Saturnil) of Antioch, and probably 4) *Basilides*, who with his son *Isidore* taught in Alexandria in the first half of the 2nd century. 5) In Asia *Cerinthus* was a contemporary of the sainted Polycarp who was martyred c. A.D. 155. 6) The most outstanding Gnostic leader was Valentinus, who taught at Alexandria in the second half of the 2nd century. 7) *Marcion*, who taught at Rome at the same time as Valentinus in Egypt, was not a typical Gnostic. He stressed the need of faith rather than *gnosis*. But his attitude toward the Old Testament was typically Gnostic. 8) *Mani*, who flourished in the second half of the 3rd century, founded Manichaeism which was a highly syncretistic Gnostic sect.

It was in opposition to the false teachings of the Gnostics, including their perspective on history, that such church fathers as Irenaeus empha-

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1. In the summer of 1970 the writer gave a lecture at Cambridge, England, on "The Evidence for Pre-Christian Gnosticism." This will eventually be published by Tyndale Press.
2. A convenient handbook of patristic references to the Gnostics is Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism, a Sourcebook . . .* (N.Y.: Harper & Brothers, 1961).
3. On the Mandaic sources see Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Present Status of Mandaean Studies," *JNES*, XXV (1966), 88-96; and *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).
4. See Andrew K. Helmbold, *The Nag Hammadi Gnostic Texts and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967).

sized the importance of history for the Christian revelation.⁵ It is also probable that the Gnostics were in mind when the Apostles Creed, which was compiled at the end of the 2nd century, was written so as to include the phrase *crucifixus sub Pontio Pilato*.⁶

The Gnostics' attitude to time has been brilliantly sketched by Henri-Charles Puech, who has emphasized the centrality of this subject in differentiating the Gnostics from the orthodox church.⁷ H. I. Marrou has objected that the image of Gnosticism presented by Puech becomes inexact inasmuch as it is too synthetic, including materials from various materials spread over a considerable measure of time.⁸ This is a necessary stricture and must be kept in mind.⁹ Gnosticism was never a homogeneous phenomenon. Nonetheless Marrou goes too far in reaction in claiming that history had the same value for the Gnostics as for the Christians.

II. GNOSTIC THEOLOGY

The Gnostics distinguished between an ineffable High God, who was "wholly Other," and a Demiurge or debased deity who created the universe. In the words of Jonas' analysis:

Topologically, he is transmudane, dwelling in his own realm entirely outside the physical universe. . . ; ontologically, he is acosmic, even anticomic: to 'this world' and whatever belongs to it he is the essentially 'other' and 'alien' (Marcion), the 'alien Life' (Mandaeans), also called the 'depth' or 'abyss' (Valentinians), even the 'not-being' (Basilides); epistemologically, because of this transcendence and otherness of his being, and since nature neither reveals nor even indicates him, he is naturally unknown (*naturaliter ignotus*), ineffable, defying predication, surpassing comprehension, and strictly unknowable.¹⁰

From the divine Pleroma there is posited the fall of an emanation, either the female Sophia or the male Anthropos. Sophia gives birth to the Demiurge, who is a caricature of the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*. He is portrayed as an evil, ignorant creator who tries to imitate the perfect order of the Pleroma by creating the physical universe. The Demiurge is often considered to be the Old Testament Jehovah. Basilides

5. R. A. Markus, "Pleroma and Fulfillment," *Vigiliae Christianae* [hereafter abbreviated *VC*], VIII (1954), 224; Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), pp. 56-57.

6. D. Larrimore Holland, "The Fathers, the Gnostics, and the Creed," *McCormick Quarterly*, XVIII (1965), 11.

7. The article which first appeared in French in 1952 has been translated into English as "Gnosis and Time," in *Man and Time* [Papers from the Eranos Yearbook, Bollingen Series XXX.3] (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1957), pp. 38-84.

8. H. I. Marrou, "La théologie de l'histoire dans la gnose valentiniennne," in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. U. Bianchi, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), pp. 215-226. [This volume will be hereafter be abbreviated *OG*.]

9. The same criticism has been leveled at the otherwise brilliantly perceptive studies of Hans Jonas, e.g. *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

10. H. Jonas, "Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon—Typological and Historical," *OG*, p. 95.

taught that: "The angels who control the last heaven, which is visible to us, fashioned everything in the world. . . . Their chief is the one who is thought to be the God of the Jews."¹¹

III. GNOSTIC COSMOLOGY

The attitude of the Gnostics to the *cosmos*, the orderly universe, stands in contrast with the Greek admiration of the world. According to Puech, "The Greek says: 'God *and* the world,' linking the two terms indissolubly; the Gnostic says: 'God *or* the world,' dissociating the two terms, which for him represent two heterogeneous, independent, irreconcilable realities."¹²

The regularity of the celestial bodies and their influences upon men's lives impressed the Gnostics as *heimarmene*, the insufferable yoke of fate. The planets are considered to be the Archons who keep man imprisoned in matter and blind him so that he is ignorant of his celestial origins. Inasmuch as astrology was widely accepted in the Hellenistic world, "the Gnostic revolt against the world is indeed a revolt against the world of Greek science."¹³

The Gnostics also rebelled against the Greek notion of time and history as being cyclical.¹⁴ They were also opposed to the Christian view of time as rectilinear. In the words of Puech: "With its need for immediate salvation, it (Gnosis) rejects the servitude and repetition of Greek cyclical time as well as the organic continuity of Christian unilinear time; it shatters them both into bits (the figure is no exaggeration)."¹⁵ According to Irenaeus, time is the creation of the Demiurge who "had recourse to the expedient of spreading out its (the Ogdoad's) eternity into times, and seasons, and vast numbers of years, imagining, that by the multitude of such times he might imitate its immensity."¹⁶

Existence in this world is a futile illusion. The Epistle of Rheginos, one of the Nag-Hammadi (hereafter abbreviated N-H) documents, contrasts the world with the resurrection: "The rich have become poor and the kings have been overthrown, everything is wont to change. The world (*kosmos*) is an illusion (*phantasia*). . . ."¹⁷ In another N-H text, the Gospel of Philip, worldly existence is described as a treadmill leading nowhere:

11. Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 33.

12. Puech, p. 60.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 68. G. van Groningen, *First Century Gnosticism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967) goes too far, however, in arguing that Greek science played a major role in the origins of Gnosticism.

14. Aristotle, e.g., spoke of being in time both "after" and "before" the Trojan War. Of course, not all Greeks spoke of time in this fashion. See James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962), pp. 137-44.

15. Puech, p. 38.

16. Cited in Puech, fn. 56, p. 72.

17. M. L. Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginos* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 34.

An ass which turns a mill-stone did a hundred miles walking. When it was loosed, it found that it was still at the same place. There are men who make many journeys, but make no progress anywhere. When evening came for them, they saw neither city nor village, neither creation nor nature, power and angel. In vain did the wretches labour.¹⁸

The N-H Gospel of Thomas in Logion 56 reads: "Jesus said: Whoever has known the world (*kosmos*) has found a corpse (*ptōma*), and whoever has found a corpse (*ptōma*), of him the world (*kosmos*) is not worthy."¹⁹

Marcion spoke disparagingly of human existence as engendered in obscenity and brought forth in impurity. He described the body as a sack of excrements which death will turn into a stinking cadaver.²⁰ According to Grant, "For any Gnostic the world is really hell."²¹ This point of view is most poignantly expressed in a Manichaean fragment found in Turkestan:

Never, never is salvation found here;
 All is full of darkness . . .
 All is full of prisons; there is no issue,
 And those who arrive here are struck with blows.
 Parched with drought, burned by torrid wind,
 And no green . . . is ever found here.
 Who will deliver me hence, and from all that wounds,
 And who will save me from infernal anguish?
 And I weep for myself: "Let me be delivered hence,
 And from the creatures who devour one another!
 And the bodies of humans, the birds of space,
 And the fishes of the seas, the beasts, the demons,
 Who will remove me from them and free me
 From the destroying hells, without detour(?) or issue?"²²

IV. THE Gnostics AND THE PAST

For the Gnostics history is useless. It represents a time from which the true God is absent. Time is a tainting process during which procreation but increases the number of souls in bondage to the Demiurge.

18. R. McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 39. The Gospel of Philip also describes life here as "winter": "The winter is the world, the summer the other aeon." *Ibid.*, p. 28.
19. A. Guillaumont, *et al.*, *The Gospel according to Thomas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), p. 31.
20. Erich Dinkler, "Earliest Christianity," in *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1955), p. 224, notes that even Origen, who was closest to the Gnostics, did not vilify life in the body in this fashion. Kurt Schubert, "Judischer Hellenismus und jüdische Gnosis," *Wort und Wahrheit*, XVIII (1963), 456, points out that though Gnosticism and the Apocalyptic tradition both maintained a negative attitude toward the world, there was a difference. The Gnostic wished to flee the world; the *Apokalyptiker* hoped for a renewed world.
21. Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 150.
22. Quoted in Puech, p. 69.

It is true that the Gnostics did make use of Old Testament materials for their own purposes. Irenaeus mentioned that numerous Old Testament figures, such as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, etc. were prominent in the teachings of the Sethian-Ophites. Valentinus argued that the prophets foretold the coming of the Gnostic savior. Two of the N-H treatises are named after Old Testament figures: the Apocalypse of Adam and the Paraphrase of Shem. The Gnostics were especially fond of the first six chapters of Genesis.²³ The Gospel of Thomas betrays many allusions to the Old Testament. However, Quispel argues that the Gospel of Thomas was not originally a Gnostic document, but was rather a product of the Encratite Syrian church which was later used by Gnostics.²⁴

These Old Testament allusions and other "Jewish" elements in the Gnostic texts have recently convinced many scholars of an ultimate Jewish origin of Gnosticism.²⁵ Wisse, for example, noting the presence of Old Testament allusions and the lack of Christian references in the unpublished N-H Paraphrase of Shem has argued for a pre-Christian origin for this document.²⁶ On the other hand, van Unnik has argued that the Jewish elements in Gnosticism are limited and probably indirect.²⁷

Nor should it be forgotten that more often than not the Old Testament references are used in an entirely perverse sense. In the Paraphrase of Shem Sodom is mentioned in a favorable sense. Other Gnostics perversely honored the villains of the Old Testament as heroes: the Serpent, Cain, Korah, and Esau.

The Gnostics had no use for the historical books of the Old Testament and little use for the prophets. In general the prophets were considered to be the servants of the Archons.²⁸ As opposed to the view of the Epistle to the Hebrews that revelation occurred progressively, the N-H Gospel of Truth has God speaking only once through His Son.²⁹ Gnosis arrives unannounced. Holland notes: "According to Marcion Christ had no real birth (instead he suddenly appeared in the fifteenth year of Tiberius at Capernaum!)."³⁰

23. S. Giversen, "The Apocryphon of John and Genesis," *Studia Theologica*, XVII (1963), 60-76.
24. G. Quispel, "Das Thomasevangelium und das Alte Testament," *Neotestamentica et Patristica*, ed. W. C. van Unnik, *Supplement to Novum Testamentum*, VI (1962), 243-48.
25. See, for example, numerous article in Bianchi, *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*.
26. Frederik Wisse, "The Redeemer Figure in the Paraphrase of Shem," *Novum Testamentum*, XII (1970), 137.
27. W. C. van Unnik, "Die judische Komponente in der Entstehung der Gnosis," *VC*, XV (1961), 65-82. The writer has also argued that the so-called Jewish elements in Mandaeanism prove only contiguity and not consanguinity. See Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins*.
28. According to Basilides "The prophecies were spoken by the world-making principalities and the law by their chief, the one who led the people out of the land of Egypt." Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 34.
29. Kendrick Grobel, *The Gospel of Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), pp. 37-43; S. Giversen, "Evangelium Veritatis and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Studia Theologica*, XIII (1959), 87-96.
30. Holland, p. 14.

V. THE GNOSTICS AND THE PRESENT

For the Gnostics man was not a transgressor but a victim. The Fall was not man's but rather Sophia's. Man was alienated from a true knowledge of himself and fettered to earth by malevolent ignorance, which is described as sleep, drunkenness, forgetfulness. Man experiences a nostalgia, a homesickness for a lost paradise.

Salvation for the elect *pneumatics* consisted of a recognition of their true celestial origin. As Puech describes it:

To be sure, Salvation takes place in time, but the act on which it is founded is intrinsically atemporal. It is an interior and individual illumination, a revelation of oneself to oneself, a sudden, gratuitous act which is accomplished by a predestined individual and which presupposes no previous condition or preparation in time. . . . The "spiritual," the "perfect" man merely recovers an indestructible acquisition, an ontological state given once and for all, his true being which time has not affected, which existence in time has veiled but has not impaired or dissipated.³¹

The illumined Gnostic therefore tended to emphasize his present possession of salvation, the "already" of realized eschatology. Menander taught that his disciples could receive the resurrection through their baptism into him. In Logion 51 of the Gospel of Thomas we read:

His disciples said to Him: "When will the repose of the dead come about and when will the new world come?" He said to them: "What you expect has come, but you know it not."³²

According to the Gospel of Philip: "Those who say 'They will die first and rise again' are in error. If they do not first receive the resurrection while they live, when they die they will receive nothing."³³ In the Epistle of Rheginos we find such phrases as "already you have the resurrection" and "why not consider yourself as risen." In the as yet unpublished N-H Dialogue of the Saviour the following appears: "Already the time has come, O brothers, that we should leave behind us our sufferings and stand in the Rest, for he who stands in the Rest will rest himself forever."³⁴

VI. THE GNOSTICS AND THE FUTURE

Gnostics differed in their views of the afterlife. Some such as the Carpocratians and the Ophites believed in the transmigration of imperfect souls. Many taught that immortality was reserved for the *pneuma* alone and not for the corruptible body. Basilides taught that "there is

31. Puech, p. 76.

32. Guillaumont, p. 29.

33. Wilson, p. 49.

34. Malcolm L. Peel, "Gnostic Eschatology and the New Testament," *Novum Testamentum*, XII (1970), 153. Professor Peel, as a member of the Claremont committee assigned to the publication of the N-H treatises has access to the unpublished materials.

salvation for the soul alone, since the body is by nature perishable." In the Gospel of Philip we read:

Some are afraid lest they rise naked. Because of this they wish to rise in the flesh, and they do not know that those who bear the flesh (it is they who are) naked. . . .³⁵

In the unpublished N-H Dialogue of the Saviour the disciples are told: "But I say to you that you will be blessed when you shall be naked, for this (i.e., the possession of a fleshly garment) is not a great thing."³⁶

There are, however, a number of Gnostic texts which assume that after death Gnostics will maintain their identity and will even be clothed with a kind of "spiritual" flesh. In the Epistle to Rheginos we read: "For if you remember reading in the Gospel that Elijah appeared and Moses with him, do not think the resurrection is an illusion."³⁷ Unlike Paul, however, the author of the Epistle to Rheginos never uses *sōma* "body" to describe the resurrected state, nor does he associate the resurrection of the individual with other believers.

Although the Gnostics did not maintain a realistic eschatology which involved any future events on the earth, they did have an eschatology which involved the final *apokatastasis* or Restoration. This involves the reintegration of the dissipated parts of the Pneuma back into the Pleroma. This has led Robert Haardt to speak of the Gnostics' view of time as "linear," and Jan Zandee to speak of the same view as "cyclical." It is more helpful to view the Gnostics' perspective as parabolic, as proposed by Peel:

The parabola permits us to indicate that the "Restoration" ends with the restored Pleroma and thus essentially on the same plane as the "Beginning." Nevertheless, the "Restoration" differs from the "Beginning" in that in the former the Elect have identifiable resurrection bodies (at least as far as the Epistle to Rheginos is concerned) which they did not have before. . . .³⁸

The Valentinians taught that the pneumatics would be united with their male angels and would then enter the Pleroma. The differences between men and women would be abolished. The Gnostics believed that the separation of the sexes was the source of evil, and generally regarded women with suspicion or contempt. This concept led many Gnostics to an asceticism which eschewed marriage.³⁹ The Valentinians, however, did value marriage as a symbol of the original and the escha-

35. Wilson, p. 32.

36. Peel, "Gnostic Eschatology," p. 154.

37. Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginos*, p. 147. Peel in his article on "Gnostic Eschatology," p. 162, cites a number of passages which speak of the Savior and other souls as clothed in heavenly garments, etc.

38. Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginos*, pp. 154-55.

39. On the varying attitudes of the Gnostics toward women and marriage, see Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins*.

tological union between the sexes. The last logion of the Gospel of Thomas is revealing.

Simon Peter said to them: "Let Mary go out from among us, because women are not worthy of the Life." Jesus said: "See, I shall lead her, so that I will make her male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven."⁴⁰

That some of these false teachings of the Gnostics were still live issues in the 5th century may be seen from the writings of Shenoute, a monk who lived 50 miles north of Nag-Hammadi. He flourished from A.D. 388 to some time after the Council at Chalcedon (A.D. 451). Shenoute argues with a man who maintains "This body will not rise." He also asks, "Is the kingdom of heaven prepared for males alone? Is it not prepared for women that they may enter it?" In contrast to the view of the Gospel of Thomas, Shenoute declares: "The male as male and the woman as woman are all together in the kingdom of Christ." And against the deprecation of the procreation of children, which even the Valentinians maintained, the monk warns: "How will those who despise the worthy character of marriage escape rebuke? Observe those who have truly pleased God by uniting in marital intercourse, not condemning having children."⁴¹

VII. RESULTING LOSSES

The Gnostics' attitude toward the past, the present, and the future resulted in an amputated and truncated Christianity, to use Laeuchli's suggestive phrasing it led to several significant "losses."

A. *The Loss of Historical Perspective*

According to Puech: "Gnostic thinking is fundamentally mythical. . . . It is incapable of considering the particular persons and events of history rationally in concepts or concretely by apprehension."⁴² As Laeuchli has pointed out this led to the loss of the Old Testament and to the loss of the Creator, opening the floodgates of syncretism.⁴³

Even when the Gnostics used the Old Testament they understood it in an allegorical sense. For example, the N-H Apocryphon of John makes reference to Noah and the Flood. But those who are saved are not saved from literal water but from darkness.⁴⁴ Gnostic texts may also be contrasted with the writings of the Jewish apocalypses and of Qumran. As Jonas observes, "Contrary to Jewish apocalypses, kingdoms and nations have no place in it, only souls."⁴⁵ The contrast in style between the

40. Guillaumont, p. 57.

41. D. W. Young, "The Milieu of Nag Hammadi: Some Historical Considerations," *VC*, XXIV (1970), 130, 135-36.

42. Puech, p. 82.

43. S. Laeuchli, *The Language of Faith* (N.Y.: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 83-85.

44. S. Giversen, *Apocryphon Johannis* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), pp. 103, 269.

45. Jonas in *OG*, p. 98.

Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag-Hammadi Codices, even when they are dealing with similar themes may be seen in the following passages:

Damascus Document

But when "He remembered the covenant of the forefathers," "He caused a remnant to remain of Israel and gave them not up to be consumed."...And they considered their trespass and they knew that they were guilty men; but they "were like the blind and like them that grope their way" for twenty years. And God "considered their works," for "with a perfect heart" did they seek Him; and He raised for them "a teacher of righteousness" to lead them in "the way of His heart" and to make known to the last generation, the congregation of the faithless.⁴⁶

Gospel of Thomas

For indeed the Totality (of creatures) have been searching after that (or Him) from which they emerged—and (all along) the Totality were within Him, the unthinkably Incomprehensible One, who is choicer than any thought!—whilst this not-knowing-the-Father became an anguish and a terror; and the anguish condensed like a fog so that none could see. . . . The Forgetting did not arise under the hand of the Father. . . but what arises in Him is Gnosis, which made its appearance in order that Forgetting might be destroyed and the Father be known.⁴⁷

The Gnostic antagonism to the material world resulted in the Gnostic concept of a Docetic Christ. There could be no incarnation. One text speaks of the psychic Christ passing through Many like water through a tube so that he did not assume real flesh.⁴⁸ Before the crucifixion the pneuma of Christ was taken from Jesus. As described by Laeuchli:

This Christ has no terrestrial reality of flesh and blood. He is Savior and Redeemer but he does not live as real person (sic). . . . Abstraction—yes; hypostasis—indeed. History—never.⁴⁹

Neither the cross nor the empty tomb have any redemptive significance. As Christ had only the semblance of a body the sufferings on the cross were apparent not real. According to Basilides it was not Christ who died on the cross but a substitute.

Therefore (because he was Mind) he did not suffer, but a certain Simon of Cyrene was impressed to carry his cross for him, and because of ignorance and error he was crucified, transfigured by him so that he might be thought to be Jesus: and Jesus himself assumed the form of Simon and, standing by, laughed at them.⁵⁰

Even when the Gnostics used the New Testament, they did not attempt to understand its historical setting but rather reinterpreted it

46. Chaim Rabin, *The Zadokite Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 2, 4.

47. Grobel, p. 3.

48. J. Zandee, "Gnostic Ideas on the Fall and Salvation," *Numen*, XI (1964), 64.

49. Laeuchli, p. 74.

50. Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 34. It is interesting that Muhammad maintained this same tradition in the Qur'an 4:157.

allegorically in dualistic terms. The first extant commentary that we have on the Gospel of John comes from the Valentinian Heracleon. It is instructive to observe his comments on some of the verses in the first two chapters of John:

John 1:27 "*he comes after me, and I am not worthy to loose the thong of his sandal.*" . . . The world is the sandal. (John the Baptist represents the Demiurge.) The Demiurge of the world, who is inferior to Christ, acknowledges the fact through these expressions.

John 2:12 "*after this he descended to Capernaum.*" Capernaum means on the one hand the ends of the world, on the other the material things to which he descended.

John 2:13-14 "*and Jesus ascended to Jerusalem, and he found in the temple those who sold oxen. . . .*" The ascent to Jerusalem signifies the ascent of the Lord from material things to the psychic place, which is an image of Jerusalem.⁵¹

Finally, one is struck by the fact that such N-H writings as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Truth are solely interested in the sayings or symbolical acts of Christ; there is almost no historical setting. Laeuchli concludes:

When Bach wrote his *Passion According to St. John*, he found enough dramatic and realistic material in this Gospel to create his baroque masterpiece. He could not have done this even in a most sketchy fashion with the historical evidence of the *Gospel of Truth*.⁵²

B. *The Loss of Community*

The Gnostics use the word *Ekklesia* and the metaphor of the "body" and its members (The Gospel of Truth 18:40), but these have no concrete reality. The *Ekklesia* was for the Valentinians a pre-existent acon. The metaphor of the "member" in the Gospel of Truth is projected on a cosmological scale.

The Valentinians divided mankind into three classes: 1) the *pneumatikoi*, 2) the *psychikoi*, and 3) the *hylikoi*. The first group are the true Gnostics who make up the *Ekklesia*. They are the "spiritual" ones who are saved by nature. The *psychikoi* are the ordinary church members for whom faith and good works are necessary. The *hylikoi* are without hope.

But even among the *pneumatikoi* there is no community of fellowship with a mission of evangelism. One pneumatic simply associated with another until their number was complete.

Van Unnik asks the question as to why we have so few references to the Church in Gnostic writings. He replies:

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 197-98.

52. Laeuchli, p. 75.

They were simply not interested. They were concerned with God the unknown and not with the One who has revealed his will. The Gnostics stressed anthropology and not ecclesiology. This was the price they paid for abandoning the Old Testament and allegorizing the New.⁵³

VIII. BULTMANN AND GNOSTICISM

A number of writers have noted that Rudolf Bultmann, who has so strongly argued for Proto-Gnosticism in the New Testament, offers parallels to Gnostic attitudes in his own writings. Oscar Cullmann has compared the rejection of salvation-as-history by Bultmann with the similar rejection of the Gnostics.⁵⁴

Like the Gnostics Bultmann shows very little appreciation for the Old Testament. As Rordorf observes:

The Old Testament exhibits for him (Bultmann) more the type of the pre-Christian man who fails in his "boasting" and therefore is only a foil to the true faith decisions. The history of the people of Israel, as it is presented in the Old Testament, has consequently no positive *heilsgeschichtlich* sense and is in no sense an anticipating preparation and way leading to the salvation in Christ, but at best a derived secondary "prophecy" of this salvation.⁵⁵

Like the ancient Gnostics Bultmann has no place in his theology for realistic eschatology. Again in Rordorf's words:

Because Christ, for Bultmann, is the end not only of the law, but also of salvation history, because the essence of faith, according to Bultmann, rests in the "dehistoricizing" of the believer, it is evident that futuristic, realistic eschatology has lost any literal meaning for Bultmann, for example, pronouncements of the New Testament on future resurrection of the dead, future judgment, the new creation at the end, or even the millennium. All these things are Jewish apocalyptic "remnants" which the New Testament still drags along.⁵⁶

Like the Gnostics Bultmann attaches very little importance to the account of the earthly life of Jesus in the Gospels. Borchert speculates, "Accordingly, if one were to write a Gospel according to Bultmann one suspects that it might not differ widely from that of the Gnostic Gospel according to Thomas."⁵⁷

53. W. C. van Unnik, "The Ideas of the Gnostics Concerning the Church," in *The Birth of the Church*, ed. J. Gibley (Staten Island: Alba House, 1968), pp. 240-41. For the loss of ethics or its degeneration into either antinomianism or asceticism, see Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins*.

54. Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation as History* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1967).

55. W. Rordorf, "The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann and Second Century Gnosis," *New Testament Studies*, XIII (1966-67), 354-55; John E. Burkhart, "Gnosis and Contemporary Theology," *McCormick Quarterly*, XVIII (1965), 47.

56. Rordorf, p. 359.

57. Gerald L. Borchert, "Is Bultmann's Theology a New Gnosticism?" *The Evangelical Quarterly*, XXXVI (1964), 225.

We should not, of course, overlook the many differences between Bultmann and the Gnostics in the areas of anthropology, theology, and Christology. But we should be aware of the striking similarities between the Gnostics and Bultmann in their attitudes toward history, and the dangers to the Christian faith which these viewpoints contain. As Robert Grant concludes:

The significance of the rejection of gnosis by church and synagogue alike lies partly in the Western and Hebrew-Christian recognition of the reality of time and space, but most of all, I believe, in the continuing worship of God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. Against all Gnostic attacks the Church retained the Old Testament and insisted that the story of Jesus could not be understood in purely symbolical terms.⁵⁸

58. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, p. 200.