

“Hidden in What Is Visible”

Deliteralizing the Gnostic Worldview

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Understand the inner meaning, for you are children of inner meaning.

—*Gospel of Truth* (Meyer 2007, 43)

Truth did not come into the world naked, but in symbols and images.

—*Gospel of Philip* (Meyer 2007, 173)

I am speaking that cannot be repressed.

—*Thunder* (Meyer 2007, 378)

Like gnosis itself, what Gnostic texts survive have revealed themselves piecemeal, reluctantly, and only after confusion and travail. Sold on the black market, hidden in drawers and briefcases, lost, found, and lost again, prevented from translation by vanished funding, inexpertly photographed, and even used for kindling, the ancient words handled by monks and murderers alike have only gradually emerged into public consciousness—like shards of image and dream slowly unearthed from the protective sands of the unconscious.

That these texts have lived out their own mythic discourse of burial and redemption struck me forcibly when, preparing to teach my graduate course in Archetypal Mythology at John F. Kennedy University, I reread commentaries by Jung, Segal, Edinger, Singer, Faivre, McKnight, Jonas, and other scholars who had plumbed the depths of Gnostic thought and heard an appreciation strongly mixed with dark echoes reminiscent of the heresiologists. The early church fathers too had criticized Gnostic elitism, Gnostic dualism, Gnostic cynicism, and regressive Gnostic hatred of embodied life. Were these persistent criticisms true, or did they more accurately reflect centuries of religiously sanctioned misinformation?

Because the Church’s long campaign against the free-thinking Gnostics had crumbled at Nag Hammadi, where the repressed voices of the “heretics” had returned in texts

recovered in 1945, and again in 1953 when the research of Gilles Quispel unearthed the Jung Codex before eager eyes, I decided to revisit what these misunderstood seekers had revealed about themselves through their sermons, tracts, and myths. To do this, I reread the entire Gnostic opus, including the Askew, Bruce, Akhmim (Berlin), and Tchacos Codices (including the recently rediscovered *Gospel of Judas*), and a 2007 retranslation of the complete Nag Hammadi library, edited by scholar of religion Marvin Meyer.¹

What I found suggested that, with a few exceptions, contemporary commentators had fallen into a trap the Gnostics themselves had warned about: taking their mystery teachings too literally and thereby succumbing to reification, materialism, and bewilderment in an unconscious and unfortunate replay of the Gnostic story of the fall of Sophia (Wisdom personified) into bewildering darkness.

Why should the mythic musings of this obscure sect concern us? Jung discovered that the psychospiritual promptings of the Gnostics well forth from the depths even now, a fact also demonstrated by his *Seven Sermons to the Dead* (1963, 378). To the degree we project dualism, misanthropy, and alienation onto Gnostic lore, we risk failing to account for their lingering remnants in ourselves. Is it possible that accusing the Gnostics of literally hating matter, the flesh, and the world betrays our own introverted discomfort with these psychically charged realms of being? Additionally, do we not lose a chance to hear without prejudice from the spiritual outsider who dares a radical rejection of conventional religion? Even Jung never went that far.

Before we reexamine how the Gnostics viewed the world, its creators, its matter, and the flesh inhabiting it, let us briefly consider who these mysterious contemplatives were and run an eye over their cosmology.

Those Who Know

With a few exceptions like Basilides, Valentinius, and the legendary Simon Magus, we do not know much about those who lived as Gnostics. They entered history in the first century to teach and write in Samaria, Syria, Alexandria, and eventually in Antioch and Rome. Although never constituting a unified movement, they shared a highly educated distaste for what Jesus too had criticized: taking as sacred doctrine the stiffened precepts of men.

Although no unified church had yet arisen, relentless Roman persecution made being a believer a dangerous undertaking. Nevertheless, the new teachings flourished. In the aftermath of the death of Jesus, study and prayer groups radiated outward from Palestine, their fervent scribes putting more than thirty gospels into circulation.

As Abraham Maslow noted, religious observance tends to stretch along a spectrum, with the esoterics perched at one end and the legalists holding down the other (1994). Legalists like Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus of Rome, and Tertullian of Carthage

found themselves confronted by two major worries. The first was that the busy Romans would stamp out Christian teachings altogether. The second was that competing sects of esoterics were making off with potential supporters and followers. Surviving letters penned by Irenaeus and Tertullian complain bitterly that groups calling themselves “Knowers” (Gnostics) were luring away women—including the wife of one of Irenaeus’s deacons—by soliciting their active participation in religious services (Irenaeus 2004). The women could even preach, lead rituals, and perform baptisms (Pagels 2005)! Something had to be done about all this.

One result was a two-pronged attack on the Gnostics, condemning them as “heretics” while also claiming a direct line of authority from Jesus through the apostle Peter. Calling themselves “orthodox,” these early church “fathers” also forbid women to lead religious services, even though equal rights, privileges, and education for women were expanding in Rome and Egypt (Pagels 2004). Fighting inevitable change as stubbornly as reactionary conservatives of our day do, the legalists promoted their extremism as a form of sensible centrism. It was others, not themselves, who were heretical and in need of aggressive denunciation.

By contrast, the Gnostics, their imaginations fertilized by Orphism, polytheism, and Platonism, took the Old Testament stories and did something other than either cling to them or discard them. The Gnostics *reinterpreted* them (Pearson 2007) in creative oral and literary acts of the kind that Jung would call dreaming the myth onward (Jung 1940/1959, CW 9i, ¶271). In this way, the deeper meanings of the old stories and texts could be revealed, pondered, and lived.

As the church patriarchs continued to point their accusatory fingers as a means of promoting one Christian voice against all others, Irenaeus gathered together four gospels that he believed would avoid troublesome esotericism while providing clear and relatively simple behavioral guidance: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and eventually John. John possessed the additional advantage of discrediting the inwardly minded Thomaside Christians by smearing “Doubting Thomas” (Pagels 2005). John is also the only Gospel in which Jesus explicitly acknowledges his divinity. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*, by contrast, Jesus denies any connection to the disciples’ god, a tyrannical, sleep-inducing Demiurge in charge of this troubled world here below. (Some scholars have argued that Jesus was a Gnostic. His dancing and laughter and wisdom in Gnostic writings display soulful qualities left out of more orthodox renderings.)

Meanwhile the Gnostics went their own way, even among themselves, gathering into Sethians who revered Seth, a child of Adam and Eve, as a bringer of Light; Valentinians who followed Jesus; and various other groups who occasionally disagreed but never involved themselves in the kind of violence, intolerance, and missionary zeal that would stain orthodox Christianity. The very idea of a one-size-fits-all orthodoxy was antithetical to core Gnostic values, which is perhaps why the historical record reflects no Gnostics involved in any massacre.

For Jung, Gnosticism formed a historical counterpart to his psychology of the unconscious (1963, 205). It is evident that the Gnostics held many views similar to those of contemporary depth psychology. “One who does not stand in the darkness cannot see the light,” offers *The Dialogue of the Savior* (Meyer 2007, 306), recommending what we would now think of as an exploration of the shadow. According to the *Gospel of Philip*, light and darkness, life and death, and right and left are “siblings of one another, and inseparable” (162): in other words, reality is a play of opposites. “Truth did not come into the world naked, but in symbols and images . . . There is rebirth and an image of rebirth, and it is by means of this image that one must be reborn” (173): this sounds like what Jungians refer to as the transformation of archetypal images. “To speak of higher and lower is incorrect: one should speak instead of inner, outer, and outermost” (174): perhaps an early nod to typology. “The powers [ruling this world] cannot see those who have put on the perfect light, and they cannot seize them. One puts on the light in the mystery of union” (175): one of many Gnostic references to the redemptive value of *coniunctio*. “God created people that people might create God . . .” (176): projection onto the divine that, in turn, projects us. “If there had been no ark for a person to enter, the flood water would not have come” (296): the law of compensation. “The separation of male and female was the beginning of death” (175): splitting and *separatio*. “This is the first eternity. This is the ruler of the unassailable. This is he in whom the All is unconscious” (Schmidt and MacDermot 1978, 226): the unexplored Self, evoked here again in the same text: “There is again another place which is called: deep” (231). The *Tripartite Tractate* describes the Pleroma as a congregation of aeons (archetypal emanations from the hidden God into manifest being) that form semi-autonomous attributes of the divine (Meyer 2007), just as all archetypes reflect some aspect of the Self. Little wonder orthodox thinkers were frightened by all this.

Capping it all (complained Irenaeus again) was that these radical Gnostics practiced incantations, sang erotic hymns, concocted love potions, and even interpreted dreams . . . (Irenaeus 2004).

The Gnostics would not have been surprised that any set of insight-based teachings similar to theirs had never gone mainstream. The world, they believed, was after all ruled by dark powers, with the inner light of gnosis the only worthwhile defense against them.

Gnosis and the Gnostic Cosmos

Our world is one of many realms projected into being by a series of emanations, or *aeons*: cosmic templates radiating in pairs (*syzygies*) from an androgynously characterized but ultimately indescribable God. Aeons also imitate or image ultimate reality to help incarnated souls gradually evolve. Although personifications of eternal realms, the aeons (explains the *Valentinian Exposition*) remain paradoxically capable of greater illumination.

The first, the Barbelo Aeon, stands upon three primal powers—Existence, Vitality, and Mentality (or Blessedness)—and contains the archetypes of all things (*Zostrianos*). The name Barbelo (“bar-BEE-low”) links the words “God” and “four”—Gnostic imagery is often characterized by quaternities (Jung 1955-56/1963, CW 14, ¶123)—and refers to the feminine pole of the divine. “We are a shadow of you,” states an invocation to Her from *The Three Steles of Seth*, “even as you are already a shadow of the pre-existent one” (Meyer 2007, 532).

From heaven (called *Pleroma*, or “Fullness”) to earth, emanations of the feminine energies of God include *Protennoia* (“First Thought”), *Pronoia* (“Forethought”), *Epinnoia* (“Insight” or “Imagination”), *Zoe* (“Life”), *Eve* (“Living Being”), and her daughter *Norea* (“Fire” or “Light”). Eve was revered as the first Messenger of Light: one who reconnects humans with the divine, the first exiled on Earth and the second somewhere behind the cosmos. From *The Revelation of Adam*:

After God created me out of earth, along with your mother Eve, I went about with her in a glory that she had beheld in the eternal realm we had come from. She instructed me in the knowledge of the eternal God. We resembled the great eternal angels, for we were superior to the god who had created us and the powers with him, whom we did not know. (Meyer 2007, 347)

(As we will see, that creator god was not, for the Gnostics, the ultimate God.) As Eve says in the *Secret Book of John*, after calling out to Adam . . .

. . . A person [Adam] wept and shed tears. Bitter tears the person wiped away, and said, “Who is calling my name? From where has my hope come as I dwell in the bondage of prison?”

I said,

I am the Forethought of pure light,
I am the thought of the Virgin Spirit, who raises you to a place of honor.
Arise, remember that you have heard . . .
and beware of deep sleep . . .

(Meyer 2007, 131–32)

The Gnostics also admired Mary Magdalene, branded as a prostitute by Pope Gregory in 591 but called “the companion” (Greek *koinonos*: friend or partner) of Jesus in the *Gospel of Philip* and portrayed as the wise inheritor of the inner teachings in the *Gospel of Mary*, *The Dialogue of the Savior*, and *Pistis Sophia* (where she admits she fears Peter because he hates women). Jesus was one of several male figures, including Seth and the celestial Adam, who represented emanations of the sacred masculine.

Giovanni Filoramo at the University of Turin observes that Gnosticism, which preceded Christianity, unfolds a profound and far-reaching cultural transformation: for the first time in mythology, humanity takes center stage as the indifferent, favor-playing gods of polytheism stand revealed as fragments of a greater totality.

The Gnostics' is a conscious and reflected mythology. Using pre-existing materials, the Gnostic shuffles them round and gives them a new task and a purpose both profound and original: by penetrating the divine mystery to circumscribe and to clarify the same mystery of humankind. (1990, 53)

The “deep sleep” referred to by Eve furnished a recurring image for Gnostics wary of the slumber-inducing powers ruling this world. *Archons* are shadows cast by aeons (Meyer 2007, 74–75); operating as inferior gods, they were originally named after the municipal magistrates of ancient Greece (Singer 1995, 67). Filled with a primal urge to possess and self-concretize, these negatively archetypal “Authorities of Darkness” exemplify the power principle that enslaves leaders and followers alike. Edinger interprets them as “collective complexes” (1999, 64). The archons work unceasingly to keep us unaware of our connection to higher realms. Knowing this, Forethought/Barbelo strives to awaken souls from the slumber imposed by the archons (*Secret Book of John*). Because the archons fight against the inner person, they are to be fought with spiritual weapons (*The Letter of Peter to Philip*). Not all archons are evil, however. Sabaoth (“SAW-buy-ought”) turns away from his sleep-inducing brethren to become an ally of Sophia’s.

As the keen depth psychologists Jung knew them to be, the Gnostics observed two common misuses of consciousness that would grow in frequency as the centuries rolled on. *Psychism* refers to an endless intellectual theorizing, a self-indulgent and often competitive playing with abstractions. Psychism came about through the masturbation of one of the winds, as *Allogenes the Stranger* colorfully tells it, and usually results in spiritual and psychological “dissipation” (Meyer 2007, 699). Psychism is latent in the double meaning of the English word “academic” and is frequently on display in intellectualist hair-splitting and philosophical debate.

Hylicism refers to what are known today as reductionism, reification, and materialism. Similar to Whitehead’s Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness, the hylic habit of mind takes surface for essence, abstract for tangible, symbolic for literal. Gnostics shook their heads at legalist believers for waiting for a physical Resurrection when the real Resurrection could happen right now within, and *The Testimony of Truth* makes fun of the hylic orthodox requirement for believers to procreate even while their god required literalized human sacrifice (martyrdom). Although some scholars maintain that the *Gospel of Thomas* might not be a Gnostic text, it was written early, perhaps earlier than any of the New Testament gospels, and its influence and inwardness extended into Gnostic thought. Toward the beginning appears a sharp criticism of hylicism coupled with a move toward a non-dualistic perspective:

Jesus said, “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside you and outside you.” (Meyer 2007, 139)

In the *Gospel of Mary*, Jesus says there is no such *thing* as sin: rather, we produce sin. It is relational, not a substance or its lack. This joins up with the Gnostic idea that we do not need salvation from sin so much as *liberation from unconsciousness*. Liberation includes *apolytrosis*, or release from worship of the Demiurge (Pagels 2004). In psychological language, release involves disidentification with fixed ideas about God on the one hand and with possessive power archetypes on the other.

The alternative to psychism and hylicism awaits in the pneumaticism (spirituality) of *gnosis*, a Greek word meaning “knowledge” but modified by the Gnostics to mean

- Awakening from collective slumber
- Deep transformation of consciousness
- Insight into the powerful daimonic processes of the cosmos
- Disidentification from them (Edinger 1999, 64)
- Transrational self-knowledge connected to the divine

Within that last characteristic of gnosis, Gilles Quispel includes an understanding that “world and man are a projection of God” (1995, 24).

Valentinus, an influential Christian Gnostic who referred to the sacred as *Bylos* (“Depth”), also wrote of *gnosis kardias*, “knowledge of the heart.” For the Gnostics, the intellectual, empirical, and literal knowledge given such authority in our era of modernity was considered preliminary to a deeper, myth-informed consciousness turning back (and forward) toward its archetypal roots. Jung described this gnosis as knowledge derived from the collective unconscious (1951/1959, CW 9ii, ¶350). One can learn science and remain untransformed; the same is never true of genuine gnosis, which challenges the total personality while putting it into dualism-subverting dialog with an archetypal Other. More than a millennium before Descartes, the Gnostics were already passing beyond the threshold of the subject-object split.

As *The Paraphrase of Shem* and other Gnostic texts explain, hylicism, psychism, and pneumaticism arose from three different states of passion emanating from Sophia, who knew alienation, then loss, and then joy as her exile from the Fullness gave way to reunification with it. Along the way (per *The Nature of the Rulers*, formerly titled *The Hypostasis of the Archons*), she establishes creatures, lands, and realities by modeling them after the pattern of the eternal realms, “for the visible originated from the invisible” (Meyer 2007, 191). Sequestered within the *Ogdoad* or “Midst,” a celestial threshold positioned halfway between the cosmos and the Pleroma, she inserts a spiritual component secretly into Adam in order to disrupt the archontic sway of unconsciousness. In Christian texts, her *coniunctio* with the Savior reconciles oneness, duality, and plurality in the *Apokatastasis*, the final restoration of all with God (Thomassen, in Meyer 2007, 790).

At first glance, Gnostic parallels with Far Eastern spirituality are arresting. The Gnostics believed in their own version of reincarnation, assembled books of the dead

to guide souls past waiting archons, wrote about an energetic subtle body, chanted “IAO” instead of “AUM,” and practiced meditation and vision questing. Many of their descriptions of the divine sound Taoistic, like these, taken from the *Secret Book of John* and *Three Forms of First Thought*:

The One is not corporeal and it is not incorporeal.
 The One is not large and it is not small.
 It is impossible to say,
 How much is it?
 What kind is it?
 For no one can understand it.

(Meyer 2007, 109)

Although the hypothesis of Asiatic influences on Gnostic traditions has seen its day and faded, the parallels remain striking, if only because importers of Westernized versions of yoga, Vedanta, Buddhism, and other originally Eastern pathways and methods have convinced so many that what is deep, wise, mysterious, or spiritual must come from some exoticized elsewhere. But the rich Western spiritual heritage never limited itself to orthodox forms of Christianity, and much of it is far older.

The Dialogue of the Savior sums up the Gnostic worldview in a sentence: “You are from fullness, and you are in a place of deficiency” (Meyer 2007, 308), the opposite of potential fulfillment and maturity.

Because depth psychology welcomes what has been banished to the borders of consciousness and culture, its tools and lenses should prove useful in gaining a deeper look into Gnostic attitudes toward the gods, the body, and the world of matter.

Demiurge as Trickster

According to the early Church and many later commentators, the Gnostics believed the world to be created by an evil being widely known since Plato’s *Timaeus* as the Demiurge (“Half-Artisan”). From an evil creator arose an evil creation. The Fall did not happen with Adam and Eve, but came into being with everything else.

Not all the Gnostics thought this way. Valentinius, for example, accepted the Demiurge as necessary, and the Valentinian *Tripartite Tractate* declares that the Word (Logos) made good use of his creative talents. In terms of comparative mythology, who might the Demiurge have been?

In many creation mythologies, Trickster made the world, human beings, and sometimes both, with Coyote and Prometheus being two of numerous examples. The story of Genesis stands out from other creation myths in its lack of a convincing trickster. The serpent in Eden might qualify, but his role as a catalyst of expulsion from Paradise claims little space in the story. We know, however, that the Bible we read today derived from heavily edited tellings, written (the Gnostics believed) under archontic auspices.

The Gnostic Demiurge was known by names that meant “Fool” (*Sakla*), “Blind God” (*Samael*), “Rebel” (*Nebro*), and, most interestingly, “Maker of Chaos” (*Yaldabaoth*—“yawl-DAW-buy-ought”), the last as apt a description of a Trickster as any. *On the Origin of the World* calls him a troublemaker. He blunders onto the stage, takes himself for all-sufficient, begins to bring things into being—“he mated with the mindlessness [*Aponoia*: lack of sense] in him” (Meyer 2007, 115), possibly a euphemism for masturbation—and is admonished for his foolishness, as is Coyote in so many Native American tales. He even brings sex into the world.

Trickster is also a fire-bringer. In *Pistis Sophia* his eyes emit flame. The *Secret Book of John* relates that the Demiurge creates for himself an entire aeon of fire in which to live and then sets up powers to oversee the five underworld realms and seven spheres of heaven. He shares his fire with them but not his light, “for he is ignorant darkness” (Meyer 2007, 116).

Trickster so rarely grasps the full consequences of his actions that more often than not he gets caught in them, like the Cheyenne Wihio opening a huge sack full of onrushing bison. The Demiurge expels his mighty breath into his newly formed human beings, only to realize he has spent the divine influx of spirit loaned to him by crafty Sophia. Without knowing it, he has served as a tool for higher powers. His further accomplishments include the Flood, the invention of Fate, the introduction of death (a common Trickster motif), and the copulation of angels with women. When he declares himself the God of all, Zoe, a personification of Life, breathes forth a fiery angel that casts boastful Yaldabaoth down into Tartarus.

Nevertheless, his influence remains as potent as that of the imprisoned Norse trickster Loki. The mishaps that imperiled publication of all the reemerging Gnostic scriptures could be taken as being imprinted with Trickster’s signature: Trickster, underhanded god of commerce, thresholds, travel, information, misinformation, knavery, thievery—and conflagration, like the one that burned down the Hollywood parish of the Ecclesia Gnostica in 2004.

That some of the Gnostic writers framed the Creator as an evil being should not be taken too literally. What happens in a myth unfolds with dramatic necessity. Forgetting this is similar to falling into identification with the dream-ego when it complains of being assailed at night by angry powers who desire to be heard. Despite ego-level categorizations about what is evil or imperfect, the Logos, Sophia, the Savior *had* to fall into materiality. To accuse the Gnostics of regarding all of existence as a great mistake is like judging as antisocial a bearer of violent fantasies—or like declaring a nightmare unproductive merely because it is unpleasant.

It would be well to remember the conscious mind’s customary moral categories do not necessarily apply to the unconscious and its productions. As *Pistis Sophia* explains, “The second space, which is within, possesseth no answers nor apologies nor tokens nor ciphers nor seals; but it possesseth only types and figures” (Mead 1974, 205).

The real danger is falling into identification with these “types and figures.” With this, the Promethean technologies of arrogant Yaldabaoth inflict catastrophic costs and sufferings (Stein 1995, 40).

Transformation of the Divine

Although Robert Segal argues that, few, if any, Gnostic myths feature any change in the divine (1992), it really depends on which aspects of the divine concern us. Jung, for example, did not believe or write that the divine itself, ineffable and unknowable, underwent any change. God-*images* are another matter.

In many Gnostic stories, the goddess Sophia, having plunged into darkness, undergoes profound transformations before rejoining the Pleroma and, according to the *Zostrianos*, becoming perfect. In the *Secret Book of John*, insight is hidden within Adam to serve as a “bright shadow” in order “to restore what the Mother lacked” at the proper time (Meyer 2007, 125). She, in turn, transforms the ignorant Demiurge by informing him of her presence at just the moment he takes himself for the sole creative principle of the universe. In one telling, Sabaoth, his son, changes by turning against his archon father to help Sophia.

Sophia is called *Pistis*, usually translated as “faith” or “fidelity,” because she believed in the Light of God and longed for it (for consciousness) (Mead 1974, 82). Furthermore, she is crowned with light and “purified and refined” by her contact with matter (97); she educates the twenty-four Invisibles after her descent and salvation; and she attains a “new mystery of the Light” which is not that of her former aeon, but from above it (138–139).

In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the Savior himself falls and needs redeeming from forgetfulness. He owes his existence to his father Logos, the youngest aeon, who fell into passion and gave rise to a Son/Savior who brings joy, remembrance, and a vision of the totality of the Pleroma.

The aeons too lacked understanding of “the Depth himself” (the Father):

... They existed with the Father but did not exist for themselves. Rather, the kind of existence they had was like that of a seed, or it may be compared with that of an embryo. ... For that reason the Father had also thought in advance that they should exist not only for himself, but should exist for themselves as well. ... (Meyer 2007, 66)

“For the Father produced the All like a little child, like a drop from a spring, like a blossom from a vine . . .” (66), but he concealed the perfection of the Whole for a time from those who came forth so the aeons would appreciate it more instead of thinking they had birthed it themselves. For they too procreate, emitting image-waves of “glorification” as an expression of their primal yearning to find Him completely. “For the Father gave the aeons a starting point and a root, so that they are stations on the alm road leading to him . . .” . . . reminiscent of archetypes orbiting the Self (71).

In some Gnostic tales, the Pleroma and all its denizens undergo transformation. The *Secret Book of John* insists that we are here “that the entire realm of Fullness may be holy and lack nothing” (Meyer 2007, 128). In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the perfect part of Nous (Mind) reascends, his salvation serving as “a reminder” (74). In *The Wisdom (Sophia) of Jesus Christ*, of the creator and his angels, the Savior says, “I have come to eradicate their blindness, that I might tell everyone about the God who is above all” (296).

Beyond human self-realization, some among the alchemists worked for the consciousness of all things, of the fabric of being itself. These adepts were preceded by their Gnostic counterparts, whose spacious imaginings only now come to light:

For not only earthly humans need the redemption, but the angels need the redemption as well, and the images, and even the Fullnesses of the Aeons and those marvelous luminous powers needed it—so as to leave no doubt with regard to anyone. And even the Son, who constitutes the type of redemption of the All, [needed] the redemption. . . . (Meyer 2007, 96)

The Matter of a Fallen World

Contrary to popular belief, only a handful of Gnostic texts excoriate matter as evil. Two Christian Gnostic documents furnish ready examples of this. *The Testimony of Truth*, probably written by Julius Cassianus, an ex-Valentinian of Alexandria, summons up all the zeal of a convert to recommend forsaking this world and renouncing it, subduing one’s desires and returning to oneself. *The Interpretation of Knowledge*, an Eastern Valentinian tract originating with a Christian community apparently suffering inner splits and dissension, advises shunning the world, for it does not belong to us; its delights are a punishment, a pit to fall into.

For the most part, however, such texts also reveal underlying ambivalence about material being. *The Paraphrase of Shem*, an extremist production of Christian and Manichaean origin, remains the most overtly antimaterialist of Gnostic writings, with its images of darkness-defiled, “noxious” Nature, whose light is drawn forth and kept under control by Spirit and Faith. Yet even this text admits that “it was in the place of Darkness and fire, of the power of Mind and Light, that human beings came into existence” (Meyer 2007, 461). *Pistis Sophia* describes matter as fallen and evil, but also regards its existence as a necessary part of the divine plan.

The *Zostrianos* begins with an inflated ascent, its words reminiscent of a beginner to the demanding arts of inner work:

After I mentally abandoned my inner corporeal darkness, psychical chaos, and dark, lustful femininity with which I was unconcerned, and after I had discovered the boundlessness of my materialism and reproved the dead creation within me as well as the perceptible divine world ruler, I powerfully proclaimed wholeness to those with unrelated parts. (Meyer 2007, 545)

Matter here is a dark and corrupt product. With so much emphasis on ascension, hierarchy, mentality, perfection, purity, unity, and eternity, a Platonist's paradise unfolds like a sterilized ladder gleaming skyward. However, "Then I came down to the perceptible world and put on my image [the body]. Because it was uninstructed, I empowered it . . ." (582). The material creation and flesh are necessary and valuable after all.

The *Gospel of Philip*, too, talks of leaving the world behind and moving beyond desire, but the "world" described is that of the "great grasping powers" (Meyer 2007, 172): the archons who rule over all. In the *Valentinian Exposition*, the earth is a kind of school to provide all beings with instruction and form. The *Untitled Apocalypse* distinguishes between that-which-is separated from that-which-is-not, "the evil which has manifested itself in matter" (Mead 1906, 558), yet eight paragraphs later, the Savior is said to be "poured" over matter, like a hen which spreads her wings over her chickens. The world of matter is not a sin or mistake, but a needful step in rebirth and reordering of the cosmos (Lamplugh 1918).

In many Gnostic myths, it is Sophia's attempt to form a world on her own or to approach God more directly that leads to the birth of the Demiurge and to the formation of material existence. This is sometimes described as an "error" or "mistake" or even an "indiscretion." But the Valentinians regard it as part of God's plan. The Sethians use a word that means "to hire" (as in *The Second Discourse of the Great Seth*), suggesting Sophia's role in a divine scheme, and *The Nature of the Rulers* declares that what Sophia produced was actually "from above" (Meyer 2007, 196). Two other descriptors, "disobedient" and "unlawful" (*The Letter of Peter to Philip*), hint at sacred revolt, recalling the reply of the Oracle in *The Matrix Revolutions*, a film pregnant with Gnostic motifs, when asked by Neo how her purpose differs from that of the Architect (Demiurge) who created the Matrix:

Oracle [a Sophia figure]: "That's his purpose, to balance the equation."

Neo: "What's your purpose?"

Oracle: "To unbalance it"

(Wachowski and Wachowski 2003).

"And because of the invincible power which is in her," notes the *Secret Book of John*, "her thought did not remain idle and a thing came out of her which is imperfect and different from her appearance, because she had created it without her consort" (Filoramo 1990, 68). Filoramo's opinion that Sophia's fault exhibits the sin of hubris is a common moralistic interpretation, but *Pistis* and other texts insist that Sophia's act was ordained and inevitable so that Creation could properly unfold and its souls achieve liberation.

Filoramo moves to a deeper level in imagining Sophia making a meaningful self-sacrifice of her heavenly station (reflected by that of Jesus, as the Gnostics noted) in service to the Pleroma, which has reached a crisis point in its yearning for reconfiguration.

Gnostic nostalgia for origins is not satisfied by the simple return to the original Paradise. What would have been the point of the exile of the Gnostic Church? Was it not perhaps aiming at the elimination of that potential deficiency and congenital incontinence in the very life of the Pleroma, expressed in the sin of Sophia? (1990, 135)

The *Gospel of Truth*, a Valentinian text, warns against seeing the “deficiency” of matter as an error of God, whose “depth is profound” (Meyer 2007, 44). For followers of Valentinus, a Christian Gnostic who nearly became Pope, the world is an illusion, but one that fulfills redemptive purposes:

Now, the whole establishment and organization of the images, likenesses, and imitations [the projections and emanations that compose the visible creation] has come into being for the sake of those who need nourishment, instruction, and form, so that their smallness may gradually grow, as through the instruction provided by the image of a mirror. (86)

In this *Tripartite Tractate*, the most complete surviving Valentinian scripture, the cosmos represents a vast and wondrous congregation, the aeons that populate it attributes of God. “For each of the aeons is a name corresponding to each of the Father’s qualities and powers” (Meyer 2007, 71). In fact, the Creation allows the heavenly powers to evolve from a seed-like unconsciousness into existing “for themselves,” growing into fuller knowledge of their roots in the divine. As a result, they produce a prototypical human who “brought forth living images” (80).

What makes for “sickness” and “deficiency” in the world is, therefore, not the world itself, but ignorance of the human connection to the divine. This ignorance is a form of captivity in need of the freedom found through the cultivation of gnosis. With final liberation and reconnection, “. . . the All obtains its redemption” (Meyer 2007, 96).

Understood psychologically, what the Gnostics complained about—ignorance, forgetfulness, alienation, and entanglement in matter—comes down to enslavement in a world ruled by dark powers. They would have recognized our latter-day world-eating regimes, multinationals, and megachurches as archontic manifestations as readily as Jung recognized them as giants like those smashed by the lightning hammer of Thor. Centuries ahead of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of scientism, Gnostics were sounding a warning against imprisonment by creeds, clichés, and empire-era constructs. In *The Revelation of Peter*, “of this world” means “who is completely dead” (Meyer 2007, 497).

Therefore Lamplugh (1918) makes an absolutely crucial observation when remarking that *hyle* (“matter”) isn’t always to be taken at face value in Gnostic writings. “It is hard for me to understand,” wrote June Singer, “how a people who conceived their Highest God to be all-encompassing, otherworldly, and yet present in every aspect of existence, could consider dualism more fundamental to their view of the universe as an undivided and indivisible whole” (1990, 97). The difficulty vanishes upon realizing that for the Gnostics, “matter” and “world” symbolize a fallen state of consciousness. When they

speak of spirit dispersed in matter, they mean it is lost in unconsciousness, like Sophia herself, who was saved from the archons by receiving a wreath of light to wear about her head. Crowned by a higher consciousness, she moved to a higher realm of being.

The Flesh of Ignorance

The Gnostic scriptures contain an abundance of derogatory remarks about “the flesh,” which is called corrupt, lustful, “feminine,” and evil. Most, but not all, of these scriptures exhibit a strong Christian influence. The image of flesh as prison also betrays a Platonic influence.

Did the Gnostics truly hate the body?

The church fathers thought so, but they also accused the Gnostics of indulging in sexual rituals and erotic hymns. Whether this was true or mere projection, both the Sethians and the Valentinians showed a strong ceremonial turn, implying that for gnosis to be effective and lasting it must be embodied. Some scholars believe that baptism and communion originated as Gnostic practices.

Gnostic writings show ambivalence toward the body similar to that held toward matter. “Do not fear the flesh and do not love it,” warns the *Gospel of Philip*, for the first leads to domination, the second to suffocation (Meyer 2007, 172). Elsewhere this gospel calls the body “rags” but affirms that “the holy person is completely holy, including the person’s body” (180). *The Interpretation of Knowledge* speaks of “chains of flesh” and describes the body as an inn inhabited by powers, with the inner person locked up inside (656). According to the *Valentinian Exposition*, Jesus took up the seeds of Creation, placed the better passions into spirit, induced the bad ones into carnal things, and then inscribed the All with “imitations, images, and shadows” (671). The *Treatise on Resurrection* calls the body “inferior” but also a vessel of grace. When Yaldabaoth breathed the life essence Sophia gave him into Adam, “the body moved and became powerful,” states the *Secret Book of John*. “And it was enlightened” (125).

The conclusion that Gnostics hated the body depends squarely on how literally we take their tracts and myths. For example, in the *First Book of Jeu*, Jesus explains that for understanding to cease being “earthly,” it must rise above the sway of the rulers and wicked powers of this world. “I do not speak of the flesh in which you dwell, but the flesh of ignorance and non-understanding . . .” he says to the disciples (Schmidt and MacDermot 1978, 43). In the *Second Book of Jeu*, he adds that even the archons will rejoice one day that the disciples received illumination while still in the body. The *Secret Book of James* records the Savior arguing that the body does not sin apart from the soul.

For the *Authoritative Discourse*, a Christian text, the body comes from lust, and lust from materiality. Being “blind” means “one is in complete darkness and is a material being” (Meyer 2007, 385)—in other words, a hylic (a materialist). Examples include

pride in clothing, love of money, vanity, rivalry, obsession with physical beauty, and ignorance of the fact that the soul wears an invisible spiritual body. The *Untitled Apocalypse* poetically names it the “Body of Stars” and speaks of spiritualizing the flesh from the inside out and of the arising of what is pure in matter (Lamplugh 1918, 14).

Moving from “flesh” to transcendence means transformation from lower to higher consciousness or, more precisely, changing one’s focus from surface to depth. In the *Book of the Great Logos According to the Mystery*, the disciples despair of having been born into the flesh. But the Master explains that he does not mean the flesh of their bodies: he means “the flesh of unrighteousness and ignorance” (Mead 1906, 520). Speaking about awakened souls, Jesus remarks that such souls have already inherited the Kingdom of God while still on earth. They have their share in the “Light Treasure” of heaven and are akin to immortal Gods (523).

It should be clear by now that the Gnostics had more in mind than departing the body and returning to the Source. In a world written off as irredeemably evil, one stroke of the sword would have proved mightier than so many of the pen. In *Pistis Sophia*, the enraptured apostles’ longing to leave the body and return to heaven is countered by Jesus, who tells them to bear witness in the world. A similar exchange occurs in *The Dialogue of the Savior*. The point of undergoing arduous training to achieve gnosis is to pierce the fallen state of exile—a state more apparent than real, for taking it as final was part of the illusion—by locating the exiled God within-and-between, alone and in company, an endeavor possible only to embodied beings occupying the earthly vale of wonder and tears.

“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood,” concludes *The Nature of the Rulers*, “but against the authorities of the world and the spirits of wickedness” (Meyer 2007, 191). How to undertake that struggle? “I know that the doctors of this world heal what is of the world,” confirms *The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, “but the doctors of souls heal the heart” (365).

A Nature-Loving Gnosis?

The language used by dominant institutions can be psychologically revealing. In 325 CE, bishops (literally “overseers”) of the first Council of Nicaea convened in Asia Minor to implement measures of religious standardization long demanded by sectarians like Bishop Irenaeus. Watched by the gold- and purple-robed Emperor Constantine, who had made Christianity the state religion of Rome and ordered Christmas celebrated on December 25, the Council confirmed Jesus as of the same divine substance as the Father, set a celebration date for Easter as well, and established the Nicene Creed and a supportive bulwark of orthodox (“straight-thinking”) dogma (“opinion”). By edict of the Emperor, those refusing to take the Creed were excommunicated (“cursed”). In a year he would explicitly outlaw the Gnostics.

Back in Rome, St. Peter's, a cathedral ("throne") ordered built by Constantine, rose atop a gravesite in eyeshot of the Field of Mars. Surrounded by the Vatican ("soothsayer"), financed by a form of spiritual extortion known as indulgences, St. Peter's fabulous wealth stood enclosed by a well-guarded fortress. Where pontiffs ("bridge-makers") had collected fees to weave magic to strengthen the wooden walkways of Latium, popes clutched scepters ("props") of authority and held forth gold rings to be kissed by kneeling supplicants ("to plead").

In Alexandria, one Council attendee, young Athanasius, would write the first list of books to be included as a New Testament joined to the Old. The list included the four gospels approved as canonical by Irenaeus. In 367 CE, Athanasius decreed that all heretical ("to choose") scriptures be removed from the monastery libraries and destroyed. Monks near Nag Hammadi stored their precious codices in an earthenware jar and buried it in the sands of Egypt, an action oddly foreshadowed by the image of a sealed jar in the hidden *Gospel of Truth*.

The hylics had won.

Or had they? For depth psychology, there is no such thing as a successful repression. In Jung's opinion, Gnosticism flowed underground for a time, eventually to resurface as alchemy (1951/1959, CW 9ii, ¶267). If Jung was right about this, then some among the Gnostics evidently followed the lead of Sophia's descent down into matter. Perhaps they shared what could have been the alchemists' mostly unconscious but powerful desire to get back in touch with the Earth's forgotten intelligence (Chalquist 2007). In any case, Gnostic manuscripts continue to surface from the literal ground, rising like the Phoenix known both to alchemy and to the recovered text *On the Origins of the World*. What such texts tell us has broken forever the chokehold of archontic powers that would constrict and control the vital breath of spiritual imagination.

Scholar Karen King concludes that Gnosticism consisted of a loose, many-sided movement, sometimes dualistic and sometimes not, sometimes ascetic and sometimes not, sometimes rebellious, at other times pious (2003). Those Gnostic enclaves huddling closer to the extremist-legalist-orthodox end of the religious spectrum might indeed have been literal dualists, world-haters, and body-despisers, but surviving documents warn us over and over against taking any such teachings too literally. By definition, gnosis remains unrealized unless it sees through the categories of the visible to what resides behind them.

Gnosticism developed in urban settings: settings not only of cosmopolitan infusions of culture and knowledge but also of violence and alienation. The Gnostic impulse tends to form when old ways fail (Lindley 1995, 172). With most of the human population now enclosed by urban sprawl, a Gnostic of today would be faced with a task never before confronted in all of human history: that of taking Earth's side against the regressive, ecocidal empire psychology turning the wheels of the "dark satanic mills" now grinding this planet to a pulp.

Despite the centuries-old stereotyping of Gnostics as misanthropic dualists, is there a precedent in Gnostic lore for a rekindling of the repressed love of nature and matter?

Adam came from two virgins, the Spirit and the virgin earth.

—*Gospel of Philip* (Meyer 2007, 176)

From that time on all the authorities have honored the blood of the virgin, and the earth was purified because of the blood of the virgin. Further, the water was purified by the reflection of Pistis Sophia, who had appeared to the chief creator in the waters. Since the holy water gives life to all, it purifies all.

—*On the Origin of the World* (Meyer 2007, 209)

So he [the Word] sent from himself fountains of milk, fountains of honey, oil, wine, and fine fruit and delicious flavors and sound roots, that the earth might not be deficient from generation to generation and from age to age.

—*The Dialogue of the Savior* (Meyer 2007, 305)

For I am in all sovereignties and powers/and in angels and every movement in all matter . . .

—*Three Forms of First Thought* (Meyer 2007, 732)

For what is within you is outside you,
and the one who fashions you on the outside
has formed you within.
What you see outside you, you see within you.
It is visible, and it is your garment.

—*Thunder* (Meyer 2007, 377–378)

. . . In every respect the sense-perceptible world is worthy of being saved entirely . . .

—*Marsanes*² (Filoramo 1990, 86)

The *Secret Book of John* reveals Epinoia working on all of Creation, patiently fashioning it into a temple, and the *Untitled Apocalypse* stories matter as “prepared”: when it had grown warm, “it set free the multitude of powers which are His; and they sprang up like herbs, and were separated according to kinds and species. . . .” (Mead 1906, 560).

Perhaps such hints, if dreamed onward, can help the contemporary Gnostic do what his or her kindred of the past were not called upon to do: find a way to feel fully at home, at last, in a healing world animated by its own kind of consciousness linked, like ours, to the divine.

In *The Book of Allogenes* (“Of Another Kind”), the very last tractate in Codex Tchacos, a wandering Stranger who has endured Satan’s wiles sees a bright light, from which a voice calls to tell him that his prayer, uttered from a lengthy state of desolation and estrangement, has been heard and good news is coming. Exactly here the text breaks off—“Before you depart from this place, in order to . . .” (Meyer 2007, 775)—forming an incomplete tale of departure, crisis, and homecoming: a tale like that of Gnosticism itself, a project still unfinished.

ENDNOTES

1. A brief summary of the extant Gnostic documents and their discovery:

Askew Codex surfaced in a private collection in 1785. It contains fragments of the *Book of the Savior* and a version of the *Pistis Sophia*.

Bruce Codex surfaced in 1769. It contains numerous untitled fragments in poor shape, *The Book of the Great Logos According to the Mystery*, and fragments of the *Books of Jeu*.

Akhmim Codex (also known as the *Berlin Codex*) was discovered 1896. It contains fragments of the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Act of Peter*, the *Apocryphon of John*, and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*.

Tchacos Codex surfaced during the 1970s but was not translated until 2001. It contains the *First Apocalypse of James*, the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, and the *Gospel of Judas*.

Nag Hammadi was discovered in 1945 and included the *Jung Codex* published in 1953. It contains a large number of Gnostic gospels as well as some Hermetic writings.

2. *Marsanes* also speaks of a celestial soul surrounding the world and of forms assigned to the elements and even to the voices of animals (Filoramo 1990, 86).

NOTE

References to *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* are cited in the text as CW, volume number, and paragraph number. *The Collected Works* are published in English by Routledge (UK) and Princeton University Press (USA).

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ABSTRACT

With the Nag Hammadi writings retranslated and updated as of 2007, now is the time for a fresh look at a wisdom tradition widely believed to be dominated by dualism and hatred of material being. A close inspection of the extant Gnostic opus reveals that this view needs significant modification, including reimagining the world-creating Demiurge as a possible Trickster figure, making room for the transformation of the divine, and asking: is a nature-loving Gnosticism possible?

KEY WORDS

aeons, archetypes, Christianity, The Church, depth psychology, Gnostic, Gnosticism, hylism, Irenaeus, C. G. Jung, Jung Codex, Nag Hammadi, psychism, Simon Magus, Tertullian, Valentinus, Wisdom